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**Why do we
stay in those
gut-wrenching,
bone-crushing,
heart-rending**

IMPOSSIBLE LOVE

The editor who asked me to write this article looked at me over lunch one day and, after asking where she could call me, said: "Your telephone numbers always have great emotional significance." It was true enough; I'd been involved in an often blissful and just as often gut-wrenching relationship that had taken up most of my time, energy — indeed, sanity — for the entire two years the editor had known me. She could always tell by the phone number I gave whether the affair was off again or on again at any particular moment. She could also be pretty sure, from the aura of romantic turbulence that usually surrounded me like a martyr's halo, that writing about difficult relationships would be right up my labyrinth.

I've always assumed, when it came to love, that everyone else was having an easier time of it than I was. It seemed I was forever tearing my hair and rending my garments over my own romantic entanglements — more entanglements, surely, than relationships — while other people apparently sailed through the turbulent sea of romance as if it were a kiddie pool.

But after talking to a lot of women who are or have been in what they term "difficult" relationships, I've modified my opinion. I've also spoken to therapists who work with troubled couples, and I now think it can be successfully argued that *all* romantic love relationships are difficult. Nowadays, men and women expect and need so much more from each other than they did in the days when a couple was more of an economic unit than a "relationship." Couples today also have so much less incentive to stay together when the going, the *growing*, gets rough, and less acceptance of the idea — America's happily-ever-after myth being what it is — that it has any right to *get* rough in the first place.

However, if all relationships are difficult, then some are more difficult than others. These are the bone-crushers, the relationships, like mine, that seesaw between delirious happiness and just as delirious misery; where communication often seems to be taking place between two people who don't speak the same language — not the same emotional language, anyway; where nothing is ever on an even keel and rage is felt as often as love.

Why do we get into such apparently doomed-from-the-start couplings? Was Freud right: Do we love pain? I don't think so. I'm not talking about those of us who inevita-

bly fall in love with married men, alcoholics, crazies or gays. No doubt there are some women — and some men — who for one reason or another pick the very worst situations, like my one-time roommate who always had someone else's commuter husband sleeping it off on our sofa, or the divorced woman who confided to me that she had a "thing" for gay men and was in the middle of an unconsummated affair with a fellow whom she had hopes of turning into a practicing heterosexual. Such people have special difficulties with intimacy and loving; they are not the subject of my attention here.

No, I'm talking about us well-meaning souls who go around looking for love among the living possibilities of this earth — men who at first glance appear to offer the chance for close, rewarding contact, shared lives, families even. I'm talking about those of us who fall in love fair and square with potential Mr. Rights, and then wake up in bed one morning to realize we're with Trouble-Is-My-Middle-Name.



MOVIE STAR NEWS

AFFAIRS?

The thing is, the news isn't necessarily all bad. I'm here to tell you, difficult, even painful relationships can actually be worth the asking price. And whether they have a happily-ever-after, or any kind of ever-after, is beside the point. Such involvements aren't necessarily destructive to our happiness in the long run, and they can even contribute to our growth as loving, secure and tolerant human beings.

Furthermore, in the scheme of things, they are quite normal. No matter what we see at the movies, intimacy — caring, seeing-each-other-day-in-and-day-out intimacy — isn't easy. It requires patience and understanding, and a willingness to stretch ourselves in uneasy ways for somebody else. For most of us, this is no snap. Truly difficult relationships have the same problems that are inherent in all intimate love relationships — only more so.

According to Janet Bachant, Ph.D., a New York psychologist, the most potent reason things are difficult between two people who supposedly love each other is the inability of each to see the other as he or she really is. And the chief reason that some relationships are *more* difficult than others is that it's more difficult for some people to see their partners as separate and different people, rather than as fantasy extensions of themselves.

Although none of us seems adequately prepared for the fact that the people we love may be quite different from ourselves, may want different things from a relationship, may express their needs differently, may use words and behave in ways foreign to us, some of us seem less prepared than others. We tend to forget, more than others, that we're all products of our early learning about the meaning of love — and what constitutes an expression of it — as much as about any other aspect of living. We saw how our parents acted together, and that gave us a vocabulary for loving; we find it hard to accept the fact that that image may be very different from the one held by the person with whom we eventually fall in love.

According to psychotherapist Nancy Purcell, in especially difficult relationships, these differences of style and attitude often are not understood as such and are instead seen as statements of how one partner feels about the other. As a result, the partners are constantly taking each (Continued on page 206)

by Bette-Jane Raphael

other's behavior personally, disappointing each other, enraging each other.

Added to all this is the fact that lovers in particularly difficult relationships often feel that they are not getting from their partners what they perceive they bargained for, even when there wasn't any actual bargaining beforehand. This perception can cause them to feel disappointed and angry and betrayed. So many of us take it for granted that our lovers know what we want from a relationship that we never even bother to tell them. The reasoning often goes, "If you love me, then you should know what I want—and be able to give it to me. If you can't give me what I want, if you can't be what I want, then you don't love me—or not enough, anyway." We find ourselves doing just what Nancy Purcell cautions against: interpreting our lovers' attitudes and behavior, when they differ from our expectations, as a statement of how they feel about us.

Finally and simply, some relationships are more difficult than others because the people involved in them are themselves, or in combination with one another, more difficult: less elastic or more volatile, less confident about their own lovability, less tolerant or more conflicted about intimacy in the first place.

All of which brings me to John, a man who puts a high priority on his sexual freedom, and Janice, who believes that if two people love each other they get married and stay faithful for at least forty-nine years (her parents' next wedding anniversary). John and Janice love each other a lot. They give each other a great deal of pleasure. They also give each other a great deal of what my mother would call *tsoris*.

"I knew fairly early that John felt a need to have other women," Janice says now, "but by that time we were in love, and in the midst of a wonderfully passionate affair. I don't think I wanted to face the issue squarely at first. I thought, I guess, that it would go away, that John would change. Of course, that's part of what makes me so angry, the fact that he doesn't change, that his feelings for me aren't enough to make him be different. It's not as if I don't know that his feelings are deep and genuine, because I do. But when he tries to explain to me that his desire for sexual freedom has nothing to do with his love for me, well, I have terrible trouble accepting it way down in my guts, where it counts."

When Janice knows John has been with another woman, she goes mad with rage, because to her it means John doesn't love her, not simply that John has a different attitude about sexual fidelity. She feels he has broken a bargain that was, in reality, never struck. And when she feels like that, sparks fly (along with occasional bits of food and the odd ashtray) and Janice finds herself slamming out of their apartment at various hours of the day and night.

Focusing on our partner's behavior, as Janice does when she thinks about John's being with another woman, and responding to what we fantasize it means, leads to the kind of obsession that

is often the hallmark of difficult relationships and part and parcel of their real danger: the danger of getting lost in them. When we become so obsessed with another person that our own thoughts and feelings are merely derivatives of our perception of his thoughts and feelings, then we may be in danger of being so involved in the relationship, of having so much at stake in it, that we are willing to give up too much of ourselves in order to make it work. It may, in fact, survive under those circumstances, but at the expense of one or both of the individuals in it.

That's why Dr. Bachant finds it suspect when people describe their relationships as easy. Often, she believes, seemingly easygoing relationships mean that one or the other partner is denying too much. And very often, things being what they are, the person doing the denying, the accommodating, the sacrificing of self, is the woman. Nancy Purcell suggests that the woman in a troubled relationship pay attention to herself, using the everyday experiences of the relationship to help her focus that attention. "If you aren't getting anything," she says, "you'll know as soon as you focus on yourself."

That's one reason, an important one, why difficult, even painful relationships can be such worthwhile experiences: They can force us to pay attention to ourselves, to define ourselves and our priorities. And when that is the operating principle, the decision to stay in a difficult relationship can be a very positive choice (as can the decision to leave), even though it may look to the outside world rather like a reenactment of the Civil War. It may be the toughest choice any of us ever has to make, but most of us know what's good for us in the long run. Which could be why we get involved with difficult relationships in the first place: Because, in their own way, they're good for us. They push us outward to our own perimeters, which may astound us.

Kathy looked at least astonished as she told me she and Richard had been living together for nearly three years: "I think back to the times right after we started going together, when it seemed to me every day had to be our last, and I can't believe we're still together. Almost from the beginning it was clear that we had major differences, chief among them that I wanted to get married and Richard didn't. That's what commitment meant to me. But Richard had been married before and had had a really messy divorce and he was horrified by the thought of being legally tied to anyone again. This, of course, made me crazy with anger and affected a lot of my interaction with him in seemingly unrelated areas. I was very insecure about us and, as a result, I felt very easily slighted. If Richard was late for an appointment with me, I got furious, because I saw it as just another piece of proof that he didn't love me. Then he would get furious with me in return, and say I only wanted to own him and that I didn't trust him. Our fights were horrendous, sometimes loud and angry, sometimes silent and deadly. Days would go by when we didn't talk to or touch each other. We broke up more

Continued

often than Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

"It took me a long time to accept the fact that he did love me and that he was committed to me, just not in the way I'd always expected a man to be committed, which to me meant married. Now I'm amazed at how comfortable and secure I feel simply living with Richard. I never thought I could do that and it makes me feel good about myself to know I can, and that the security I feel now comes from inside myself."

There's more good news. This from a woman named Annette: "Frank seemed schizophrenic. Half the time he wanted a settled relationship with me; the other half he wanted to be a carefree bachelor. He was forever either pulling me to him or pushing me away, and our life was a series of violent separations and passionate reconciliations. He tried to deny the depth of our relationship, to himself and to others, in various ways. For instance, he always introduced me as his 'friend,' which was the one thing we definitely were not. It would make my teeth curl.

"It wasn't until I became clear about what I would and wouldn't settle for in the relationship, how I could and couldn't live, that things settled down. Frank had to understand where I stood and then make his own choice. Now we live together and every once in a while Frank spends an evening out being a carefree bachelor. Maybe it's not perfect for either of us, but it gives us enough of what we want to make it okay. So much else in the relationship is wonderful that it's worth it."

There it was, the bottom line: Difficult, painful, even periodically unhinging relationships can be worth the time and the effort and the hurt it takes to maintain them, whether they're till death do us part or till next week. I can say that unreservedly, having talked to Annette and Kathy and several other terrific and together women who have been in difficult relationships, as well as having lived in the midst of one myself for the last several years—or is it decades? Not one of the women I spoke with was sorry she had loved, even when the loving wasn't easy, even when it hurt. A couple of those who had ended the relationships regretted that they had stayed in them as long as they had. One woman said, "It took me too long to learn everything it had to teach me," but to a woman, they did not regret the *experience*.

"I learned so much in those two years with Ted," said a briefly married woman named Susan. "I found out that I'm more generous than I thought I was, that I really like sharing my life with someone else. That's something I wasn't sure of before Ted; I'd always been a little skittish about commitment and intimacy and had maintained a fairly solitary existence. It couldn't work with Ted, though, because he had too many conflicts about, as he expressed it, being 'tied down,' and he did too many hurtful things as a result of that ambivalence. For example, he wouldn't tell me until the last minute that he was going away on a business trip, and then he'd refuse to let

me know where I could reach him. He wouldn't invite me to join him when he had to entertain clients, and he never wanted to visit my parents. Rotten things like that.

"But he also taught me some really practical things, like how to handle my money better and how to enjoy it more. He opened up my life for me in a lot of ways. I do more things now than I did before I met Ted, and I know more about what I want. One of the things I want is another intimate relationship, with someone who's not like Ted in some ways, but is like him in others. . . . Isn't that the acid test of how you feel about something, whether or not you want to do it again? I think it is."

I do, too. Right now my lover and I are exploring the territory, trying to find out if we can stake out enough common ground to stand on together comfortably. But there was a time when we split because that possibility looked bleak. I remember quite clearly the feeling I had then, that given the opportunity and knowing what I knew, I'd choose the experience again. I remember the certainty I possessed—poking itself up through the pain, both validating and alleviating it—that the relationship had been a positive episode in my life, and that I had come out of it with more than I had going in. I could enumerate on my fingers and toes all the things I had learned to do, practical things like cooking and planting tomatoes and driving a shift car, as well as subtler things like what kind of life I wanted to live, what kind of a man I wanted to share it with, and how good I could be at taking care of myself and not settling for what I didn't want.

I'd also had, by the way, a terrific time much of the time, and enjoyed some of the most glorious feelings of my life. This was true of the other women I spoke to, which is why, I suppose, we bother with love at all. "Nobody has ever been able to make me feel as bad as Richard makes me feel," said Kathy, "but then again nobody has ever made me feel as good." Annette had this to say: "I'm at my best with Frank—my most loving, my funniest, my wisest, most alert and alive. Anyone who affects me like that, I can forgive anything."

None of us, if we are healthy, goes out looking for difficulty. I know I didn't. Yet I also know that a lot of us are bored by things that come easily to us, including men. The nice, steady man my mother urged me to marry when I had the chance, the one she promised would treat me like a queen—him I wasn't interested in. I had to fall for someone my mother calls "Good Time Charlie." It's evident that I don't want to be treated like a queen, that being a queen looks boring and static and lifeless to me. I want to grow and learn—both active verbs, like the verb to love—and, unfortunately, neither of those things seem achievable without some discomfort.

Relating to other people is the primary way we humans grow. Relating intimately to one other person gives another dimension to living. Nancy Purcell goes so far as to say that we only gain our meaning through relationships, and I agree. They keep us alive. The in and out and give and take of intimacy—that's the

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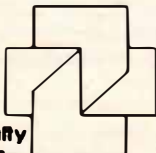
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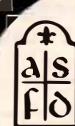
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basic principle of any life process. It's regenerative, life-giving and life-sustaining. As Dr. Bachant puts it, "To have intimate contact with another world view is like being twice as alive." That goes for troubled and trying intimacy, too.

I'm not saying that difficult relationships are better than their smoother-running counterparts (I've never subscribed to the notion that suffering ennobles people). Certainly, they have their price,

often a high one. But they also have their rewards, and these, too, can be considerable. What I am saying is that each of us carries around our own internal scale when it comes to weighing such matters, and that in my own case I know, quite clearly, which way the scale is tipped.

Editor's note: Bette-Jane Raphael is working on a book about women's relationships with one another.