

REVIEWS IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS

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Review of Kirsten Seidenfaden and Piet Draiby, *The Couple. Keeping the Spark Alive. From Conflict to Closeness*, forlaget TV2, 2007.

By Psychologist Karan Bering

Only rarely does a book fall into your hands that is so inviting and so beautifully illustrated that you feel like giving it to your friends for aesthetic reasons. The back cover informs us that the master is no other than the internationally recognized artist, Viktor IV. So congratulations to Kirsten Seidenfaden and Piet Draiby for their book's design concept. Fortunately, I can also congratulate the co-authors on their own efforts in collaboration with the journalist, Mette-Marie Davidsen. The subject matter and substance of *The Couple. Keeping the Spark Alive* also make it a book I would like to give to family, friends and acquaintances who need inspiration to tackle the difficult and taxing challenges of couplehood. Never before have I felt the desire to urge a book of this kind on anyone, but this time I have no qualms because the book is so educational in the best sense of the word that it can be used for teaching purposes as well as to enlighten and encourage ordinary people in their everyday lives.

As everyone knows, when people meet and connect on other levels than that of the cliché or the anecdote their differences easily become conflicts, which is why calling one of the book's first chapters "No Easy Solutions" is an excellent idea.

We are all existentially alone and yet, at the same time, connecting with other people is just as important as eating and drinking (Bowlby). It is in the encounter with others that we encounter ourselves. Separation anxiety and the fear of death are of the same nature and for this reason reminding ourselves that there is always a method to the madness is a really constructive idea when people have difficulty communicating with each other and start talking at cross purposes. Conflicts escalate into problems that develop into attachment and separation anxieties instead of developing closeness and intimacy together.

Or, as the late Walter Kempler put it, "Problems are conflicts that are not negotiated. Conflicts solve problems and create a space for love – and new conflicts. And there are no easy solutions since here and now it is always easier to hope that the other will change."

The book's strength is that it describes and teaches us these basic principles of developmental psychology and interpersonal relations in a way that makes it easy to understand why personal development and growth within the couple are connected. Thus

we are given general knowledge about interpersonal relations while at the same time being presented with meaningful listening exercises which most people will find have their own entertainment value. You don't merely gain a better understanding of "the other" but also of yourself, your past and the survival strategies that this gives rise to. In other words you realize that you have to make allowances for the more common types of domestic disputes.

It is a matter of course for the trained psychotherapist that one has to work with separation in order to be able to be together empathically. The book's strength is that it imparts this insight to the general reader, an insight that many people need. To put it differently: We have to find a way out of the relationship's dramatic triangle where all too often we are each other's victims, persecutors and rescuers if we are to avoid feeling existential angst at our loss of control, our sense of being abandoned and the responsibility we bear for our own lives. We must learn to master the difficult art of being able to listen to each other and thereby understand who it is we are actually dealing with when the conflicts of couplehood threaten us.

Change comes at a price and so there are no easy solutions. Thus it is important to understand that destructive communication protects us against the "urangst", the primary anxiety, of disappearing and keeps alive our longing for paradise. For this reason the authors do well to teach us the primitive and impulsive defence mechanisms, fight, flight, freeze, when conflicts threaten us. Particularly in close relationships, destructive survival strategies are allowed to flourish as a matter of course because this is where the fear of losing or of being swallowed up is greatest. Change does not take place until we have the will to understand what we are doing to each other in Strindbergh's sticky Dance of Death. This is where Seidenfaden and Draiby are extremely educational for the layman in what they call the Dialogue of Acknowledgment: a creative method to encourage the necessary attachment and separation behaviours that are the basis of being able to keep the spark alive as a couple.

"It's never too late for a loving relationship" is the optimistic title of the first section of the book, to which is appended an excellent quotation from Marcel Proust that "the genuine voyage of discovery does not consist in seeking new landscapes but in seeing with new eyes". We are encouraged to "see with new eyes" by the insights of developmental psychology, information on recent advances in neuroscience and easy to understand, educational exercises that will enable us to master the kind of active listening that makes separation possible. It made me personally very happy that old Carl Rogers was honoured and given his rightful place as the "father" of active listening, that the hideous term "validation" was replaced with the term "acknowledgment" and that the language is generally kept simple and easy to understand making it accessible to all those who would like to try to improve their mutual communications, thereby turning conflict into closeness.

The Imago people are thanked on the last page of the book for having got Imago Relationship Therapy started in Denmark where Harville Hendrix's excellent book, *Getting the Love You Want*, 1988, (translated in 1990) had been collecting dust on the shelves. But then the psychologists Kirsten Seidenfaden and Jette Simon took charge of developing the concept in Denmark, organized courses and seminars, provided further training and founded *Det Danske Imago Institut* for which many of us are profoundly grateful.

Thanks to their efforts, couples therapy was given an inspiring boost and people who had never before dreamed of taking courses in communication or seminars in couple therapy were given the opportunity to develop in new ways under new conditions. Their approach proved to be not merely a flash in the pan in the huge therapy market, but remains a solid offer for those who need to find each other again and, as the book says, keep the spark alive.

What makes the Imago concept different from other types of couple therapy is that the essence of the method is the idea that one must be separate in order to be together. The Dialogue of Acknowledgment is consequently a disciplined, interpersonal training in being able to mirror, acknowledge and feel empathy with another human being. The fact that there are people whose personality structure prevents them from meeting this challenge is another story and does not lie within the scope of this book, whose subtitle is from conflict to closeness.

Marianne Davidsen- Nielsen, Dec. 2007

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Review of Kirsten Seidenfaden and Piet Draiby, *The Couple. Keeping the Spark Alive. From conflict to closeness*, forlaget TV2, 2007.

Keeping the spark alive as a couple is one of the greatest challenges we may have to face as we go through life. But when we do succeed, it is the source of a truly deep and lasting happiness. With these words the authors begin their book on the Dialogue of Acknowledgment. Writing a book about love and dialogue between human beings for professionals yet writing it so that anyone can understand it and use it is an equal challenge.

In this I think Kirsten Seidenfaden and Piet Draiby have been entirely successful.

Kirsten Seidenfaden is a psychologist who has worked for many years developing Imago Relationship Therapy in Denmark. Piet Draiby is a former child and adolescent psychiatrist, now in private practice, and together they founded the *Center for Relations Fokuseret terapi*. Although their main focus is on the love life of adults, the idea that the children live in the “space between”, in the atmosphere created by the relationship, is never very far away. It appears that helping to create a more loving, flexible and vital space for children is a driving force in the authors’ work.

They write about extremely complex matters in a style that is concentrated and simple. The book is addressed to ordinary couples interested in developing their relationship, therapists seeking inspiration as well as students who will find difficult theories discussed here in a way that is clear and easy to understand.

Our modern society’s demand for happiness receives a sober appraisal. To feel successful, present-day men and women need to show the world they have achieved a loving relationship. This is a tough requirement which is clearly more easily said than done, witness the high divorce rates and the fact that more and more people are choosing to live alone. The authors clearly describe how the modern family lives in a world without norms. The old, fixed framework is no longer necessary and modern times create new rules, which have to make sense! You are judged on your performance, on whether you “can do the happiness thing”. Reports of stress and stimulant and substance abuse bear witness to the fact that living in this richest of all possible worlds, faced with alternatives and choices at every turn, is not that easy. There is a modern quest for ways to achieve more life-giving relationships, which is one of the reasons couple therapy has been claiming increasing attention in recent years.

The authors’ many years of therapeutic experience, filtered through long term, sensitive theoretical understanding, finds expression in this book. The broad theoretical basis ranges from Carl Roger’s client centered methods to Harville Hendrix’s and Helen Lakell Hunt’s Imago Relationship Therapy. Rogers contributes the basic optimistic view of human development that man will always seek the most vital, social and creative option available at a given time.

The Imago school focuses on the psychodynamic experience that in our close relationships we are marked by our earliest experiences of interaction with our care givers. Here too we develop the survival strategies that work in these relationships. The partner we later choose to fall in love with will represent features that remind us of our early care givers and our old survival patterns will be mobilized when we feel threatened. In the couple this is often counter productive. Difficulties arise in close relationships between adults when old images (the imago) take over and block the view, “falling over each other’s baggage”, in a manner of speaking. The mission of Imago Therapy is to encourage awareness of these inappropriate patterns by means of a tightly structured dialogue procedure with the partner. The point is that the drama can be addressed as it is

being enacted by means of communication training consisting of three steps: mirroring, acknowledgment and empathy.

The book takes us further into “the biochemistry of being in love”, mirror neurons, to the brain’s fear response by neuroscientist, Joseph LeDoux whose work over the past 20 years is described in glowing terms. The physical basis for the repeated blind reactions in conflicts within couples is made especially clear. According to the authors, we can choose to react by activating “the small sprocket- quick and dirty” when the amygdala controls the response, or shift to the “large sprocket “, i.e. the slower, more thoughtful way of the neocortex. We’re given a delightful, easy to understand image from the world of cycling as a memory aid here, easy to understand even for a woman like me who knows nothing whatever about cycling! I must say, however, that I find it a bit difficult to follow the use of the notion of choice in relation to the amygdala response, which was developed precisely to ensure our lightning quick reaction and survival when threatened.

On the other hand I do understand that we can learn that not all of our partner’s behaviour which previously triggered off a panic reaction needs to maintain its negative force when once space has been made for reflection and our partner’s personal background becomes known to us. This is where Fornagy’s emphasis on mentalization becomes crucial and his thinking is made wonderfully clear in the text.

Stern’s attachment theories are discussed as well, their relevance to the Dialogue of Acknowledgment is made clear and excellent points are made about Axel Honneth’s work on the significance of recognition. Recognition or acknowledgment is not the same as manipulative praise nor one-sided focusing on some positive aspect, but rather a necessity of life, the need to be seen by another as precisely the person we are right now. “Acknowledgment means a willingness to see the world through someone else’s eyes for a while so the other can experience that his view of the world makes sense.” Only in meeting the different other in a spirit of acknowledgment can we learn something new about ourselves. Invisibility is life threatening to our mental health. The dialogue of acknowledgment is thereby brought into a much broader perspective than that of the couple as it becomes a universal mission in the sense that in encountering each other we hold each other’s destinies in our hands (Løgstrup).

The book is extremely reader friendly. Fine, quirky illustrations by Viktor IV of logbook transcripts, sketches pointing towards new horizons and new opportunities harmonize with the book’s optimism and eager interest in new possibilities. The clear and airy layout is effective in making the book the practical guide it aims to be. Pages in different colours quickly help readers get their bearings: grey means theory, red means exercises and blue means personal accounts by the authors and their clients. A subject index would have been helpful.

The last half of the book is mainly practical with lots of suggestions for exercises. The potential for development that is latent in conflicts is elaborated on and the significance of closeness and communication is made clear. The exercises are very detailed and, I imagine, useful for couples who would like to work on improving their communication and for less trained therapists.

One angle that I would have liked to hear about is the authors' reflections on the method's limits. Throughout my many years of experience as a couple therapist I have not infrequently encountered couples who were quite incapable of mirroring much less hearing merely approximately what their partner said because they were so blinded and deafened by their own themes. Not until they had worked with a therapist's patience for some time could they develop this ability. Others needed to go into individual therapy for long periods before they were so balanced that it made any sense to go into couple therapy.

But regardless of this objection it is with the greatest pleasure that I highly recommend this book, which I find not only easy to read but also deep and wise.