

Intimacy and Autonomy

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Love tends to join and hate to separate, but joining is not the same as love, and separation is not hatred. Sometimes the most loving thing a person can do is take a step back: that's distance in the service of attachment. And it's not loving to join in invasive or smothering ways. Most people want *both* closeness and independence. Intimacy and autonomy in all their forms: your course in life is shaped by how well you regulate their dance in your mind, and their expression in your relationships.

Intimacy and Autonomy at Odds

Harms can be done to yourself and others in the name of each, so it's important to bring their dynamics into the sphere of your virtue. For example, Martin Buber described three types of relationships:

- I-Thou – When I relate to you with respect as an independent being (like a dear friend)
- I-It – When I treat you as a means to my ends (like, perhaps, an operator you're calling for a phone number)
- It-It – When you and I are just bodies in space (like strangers in an elevator)

We mistreat others by making them an "It" to our "I." You know what that feels like on the receiving end: like you are being seduced, pitched, or used. Not good. It's not uncommon to treat people as "Its" in order to feel close to them, such as by compelling their attention, making them feel bad for wanting their own space, manipulating their affection, not respecting their boundaries, or in the extreme, some kinds of sexual abuse. And certainly common to treat people as "Its" to make it easier to act freely: examples include dumping negative emotions without caring about the impacts, trampling on people to get ahead, or simply cutting in line.

Intimacy and Autonomy Working Together

On the other hand, intimacy and autonomy are channels for expressing your natural goodness. For example, being kind toward someone naturally involves both an affinity with that person and a certain autonomy for the kindness to be genuine. Besides its obvious rewards in everyday life, intimacy supports personal growth and spiritual practice through bringing you into *relationship* with things. Into relationship with your innermost experience and that of the people around you: the joys and sorrows, the suffering and its causes and what leads to its ending. Into compassion, kindness, and service: Love thy neighbor as thyself. Into relationship with a

supportive community. And – if it’s meaningful to you – into relationship with God. Autonomy, too, supports personal growth and spiritual practice. For example, in Buddhism, you are supposed to “see for yourself” and make your own decisions about what makes sense to you. It is up to you, and no one else, to engage the path of awakening. It is you who will inherit the results of your actions, good or bad.

Intimacy and autonomy are often seen as opposite ends of the same continuum, so that as one increases the other diminishes (see Figure 1). The classic example is, “Getting married means giving up my independence.” Less dramatically, people have understandable fears that if they express their deepest truth, others will leave them – or if they get really close emotionally, they’ll lose some of their own identity.

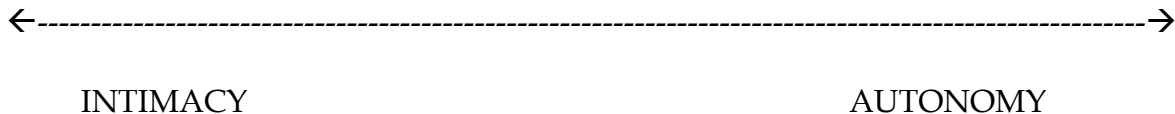


Figure 1

But intimacy need not undermine autonomy, and vice versa; in fact, they support each other. Intimacy fosters autonomy since repeated experiences of caring connection, particularly in childhood, are critical for the development of normal ego functions, personal worth, and confidence; healthy relationships provide the “secure base” from which we engage the world as an individual. Autonomy – both yours and the other person’s – nurtures intimacy in many ways, including its reassurance that you can still protect yourself when you’re wide open to another person, and by giving an extra oomph to relatedness: it makes such a difference when you know that the other person really *wants* to be with you.

Patterns of Closeness and Independence

Actually, intimacy and autonomy are independent dimensions, and it is their *combination* that counts, as you can see in Figure 2.

[drawing of 2 x 2 matrix

High I and High A - Integrated

High I and Low A - Engulfed

Low I and High A - Isolated

Low I and low A - Adrift]

Figure 2

The qualities in each quadrant, imperfectly summarized by the single word inside, characterize both *types of individuals* and, more importantly, *states of mind* we all transit:

- Integrated – Comfortable and skillful with both closeness and agency; able both to carry others in her heart while pursuing her own aims, and to be completely authentic in the most intimate moments; symbolically, “you” and “I” are about the same size.
- Engulfed – Highly connected, but not free to act or express himself fully; giving up “me” is price to be “we;” unnecessarily dependent; clutching, beseeching, placating; could resist encouragement to be more independent; “you” are big and “I” am small.
- Isolated – Strong sense of personal desires but weak connections with others; a solitary captain with a firm hand on the rudder; could be prickly about bids for closeness or seeming infringements on her prerogatives; “you” are small and “I” am big.
- Adrift – Dissociated from both others and oneself; unresponsive and passive ; alone in a boat with no direction; “you” are small and “I” am small.

Of these four, the Integrated mode of being clearly brings the most benefits to you and to others, it is the best foundation for personal growth and spiritual practice, and it involves the most complex forms of neural regulation. To feel safe in the deep end of the pool of intimacy, a person needs to be able to speak her own truth and be comfortable with closeness – so let’s start there.

Authentic Self-Expression

Imagine telling someone in an important relationship that you feel let down, or need to apologize, or feel angry, or want to get emotionally or physically closer.

Did you have any reactions inside when you imagined saying those things?

In the mind, there is a typical sequence:

- Expression – An emotion, desire, opinion, action
- Concern – It will be unwanted; it will lead to criticism, anger, punishment, abandonment; “I’ll look bad”
- Defense – Silence, suppression, denial, vagueness, intellectualization (e.g., describing an emotion in a very detached way), distraction, compromise (e.g., bickering as a way to connect and distance at the same time), changing the subject

Much of the time, the Concern and Defense reactions happen so quickly – often in less than a second – that they’re hardly noticed. Yet they routinely filter, twist, or suppress a person’s expression of his or her true self. The result is a polite mask, a *persona*, that is not a lie but is far from the full truth. When two people communicate this way, it becomes a relatively distant relationship: it could have consideration and good behavior, but not much emotional intimacy.

In many real-world situations, concerns about full expression are warranted; most business meetings are not places to spill your guts, certain people will mis-use what you tell them, and sometimes we know there’s no point in disturbing the peace with a parent or other relative. But even when the manner and content of what you have to say are truly fine, inhibitions from previous life experiences, particularly in childhood, create bottlenecks for self-expression.

The Impact of Experiences

Children express what they feel and what they want through their actions, emotions, signals, and, by their second birthday, words. Then people respond, including their parents, teachers, and other children; responses can be active or passive, verbal or nonverbal, positive or negative. These interactive episodes are usually brief, so there are a lot of them each day. For example, from multiple studies, a reasonable estimate is that a typical toddler has his or her wants thwarted about twenty times an hour, or an average of once every three minutes. Whether it’s called for or not, each thwarting is a communication, a message, to the child: “No.” Then there are other messages: parents who come to a fussing baby in the middle of the night, children at school who let a new kid into their group, people who listen when you’re upset: “Yes.” Added to your personal experiences are the ones you *witnessed*: what happened when your siblings (if you had any) expressed themselves, and other children, and adults – and characters, real or fictional, in books, movies, and other media.

This learning about self-expression continues into adulthood and to this day. Throughout it, your brain’s negativity bias has highlighted episodes when self-expression led to painful feelings. The pain could be quite subtle, like mild dismay when a person’s eyes wander away while you’re speaking, or quite intense, like being spanked for mouthing off at a parent. In neural networks, the types of self-expression that led to pain became quickly associated with fear, and then with rewards like relief when you learned to inhibit them.

Inhibition Profiles

The inhibition profile of a particular person can be quite nuanced. For example, in terms of attachment theory, a person raised by a “dismissing” parent could worry about asking too much of others, and someone with an “inconsistent” parent –

alternately intrusive and rejecting – could feel ashamed or guilty about desires that differ from those of her partner. Or, as a generalization, boys are socialized not to show fear, girls not to show anger; since what people do not express tends to build up inside, I’ve counseled relationships in which the man is anxious about the woman, and she’s irritated with him. I’ve also worked with people who:

- Can express “armored” emotions like anger but not more vulnerable ones like hurt or sadness.
- Cannot say “no,” so their “yes” doesn’t mean much.
- Think they are not allowed to say what they really want.
- Feel tongue-tied around authority figures.
- Get really upset with themselves at the least anger toward their spouse.
- Feel that acknowledging problems with a spiritual teacher would be disloyal.

These are completely normal inhibitions. For example, I sweated for about half an hour before I finally told a girl – for the first time in my life – that I loved her.

What about you? What’s your own history, related to self-expression? What do you find easy to say – or hard?

Helping Yourself Speak Your Truth

Normal as they are, these inhibitions limit your autonomy, and consequently, your intimacy. Their regulation is excessive and thus unskillful. And they harm others by denying them important information about how you are feeling and what you really care about. Here are some ways to deal with them:

1. Draw on the slow but powerful prefrontal cortex to keep reminding yourself that you are entitled to the pursuit of your own happiness, to your own experience, and your own view – and that you will communicate in a virtuous manner. It could help to write out a kind of manifesto – usually for your eyes alone – declaring what is fair and just for you in your relationships. In actual conversations, particularly if they are over the phone or via email or texting, you could set your manifesto, or even just a few jotted notes, in front of yourself. The clarity in explicit language is a kind of secure base that establishes the moral, principled rationale for your self-expression.
2. Similarly, remind yourself that you are responsible for conducting *yourself* in an honorable way, but not for all the other things affecting a person’s reactions to you.

There are 10,000 causes upstream of this moment in that person's life that are not wearing your nametag. Fundamentally, each of us is responsible to our reactions to stimuli – including the person with whom you're communicating. Just because he or she feels bad does not in itself mean that you did anything wrong. In fact, you could be helping a person by bringing something to light that, unfortunately, also makes him or her uncomfortable.

3. Keep exploring your experience. Think of it as a multi-track song, the major tracks being perceptions, body sensations, emotions, thoughts, images, and wants. Particularly sense into the tracks you're least aware of. Even if you feel out of touch with yourself at first, continuing to gently investigate your inner world and treating what you find with curiosity and kindness, will forge neural connections and increasingly bring unconscious material into awareness. I once did a stint of Jungian dream therapy with a wonderful analyst who had this saying: "When your unconscious knows you're listening to it, it'll start talking to you." (The important exception to this general advice is for people with a trauma history, who are advised to steer clear of painful material until they're really ready to go there.)

4. Consider how your upbringing, gender, culture, and life experiences have shaped your communication style. Sense their impact in your body, in body sensations, constriction of breath, posture, shoulders hunched forward protectively, etc. For example, for a long time my feelings were blocked by a kind of valve in my throat; I knew what they were but just couldn't get them through that choke point. Awareness alone often slowly dissolves these patterns. Additionally, there are formal methods for opening up self-expression, such as bioenergetics, psychodrama, counseling, and somatic experiencing.

5. Off-line, not in the moment with the other person, practice expressing the things that you usually avoid. Write and say sentences out loud (by yourself) that would be tough to express directly, such as "I feel really needy" or "I'm very angry with you." Yes, it's artificial and theatrical, but you could also act out certain strong feelings just to break the logjam around them – what body-oriented therapists refer to as "armoring" – such as by venting loudly in suitable situations. Until I did an "anger release" workshop in my 20's, it was nearly impossible for me to express that emotion, but just one day of role-playing and a fair amount of yelling cracked open that capability.

It's not just the "negative" emotions that are locked up; often the biggest undelivered communication is "I love you." Here's another quick story from my 20's. I was getting Rolfed, a form of deep-tissue bodywork that back then was routinely painful, and in the hands of my particular no-mercy Rolfer sometimes actually led to

rising screams coming from her office as I fidgeted in the waiting room: “Stop, Myra, please stop, oh God, please stop!” So I anticipated the fifth session in the series with dread, since it plunged into the abdomen, where I figured buckets of tears were buried. But when she got in there, an incredible wave of love poured out, which had been suppressed for many years.

In your mind or on paper, make a list of your major undelivered communications, past and present. Be sure to include *positive* emotions and statements which haven't been expressed. Then decide what you want to do with this list. It will be too late or inappropriate to deliver some communications directly, though you can still experience a lot of benefit from saying them out loud or writing them in a letter that does not get sent. For the rest, it could be good to get them off your chest!

Methods like these can really help you communicate autonomously - and thus help you connect intimately.