



Living an Intimate Life

By Ed Merck

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If you're looking for more intimacy, forget self-help books with gimmicky suggestions. Instead, practice mindfulness. Why? Because mindfulness is all about building awareness, and awareness and intimacy are inextricably linked.

Intimacy helps us feel connected to ourselves and to everything else. It is the gateway through which we develop a sense of belonging to the human tribe, and to life generally. Without intimacy, life feels incomplete — it is an essential element of how we find meaning and purpose.

If intimacy is our goal, awareness is what gets us there. It's about our capacity to dwell in the consciousness of, well, everything — events, thoughts, energy, emotions and even consciousness itself. Awareness is the facility to be rooted in the present moment; always staying close to right here, right now. Without it, intimacy is an elusive muse; we may be inspired, but we can't engage what we're not aware of.

An Example in Music

Chamber music is arguably the most intimate of all musical venues. What makes us come to the end of a concert thinking that we now *know* Beethoven, or Schubert, more intimately than we did upon arrival? I suggest there are three enabling "awareness criteria" for great music to be present: *each* player needs to fully actualize his or her own potential with graceful ease and confidence while honoring the importance and integrity of each *other* player's contribution and in a manner that is tuned to the virtual entity we call the *ensemble*.

Most important is that these three elements of awareness remain in exquisite balance every second of the performance. The instant a single player's virtuosity eclipses that of another, and/or of the ensemble, we experience the collapse of musical integrity. Put another way, musical intimacy emerges when each of the players is actively engaged in balancing his or her own musical offering with that of the other, while maintaining an acute awareness of the ensemble as a whole.



Creating Healthy Relationships

We can apply this music-making model to the art of creating healthy relationship intimacy. In essence, it all hinges on our capacity to hold and effectively balance three awareness dimensions at once: one's own truth, our partner's truth and what is best for the relationship. If we overly focus on the 'I,' or if each 'I' is not sufficiently well formed, or if we momentarily lose track of the "ensemble" — what Robert Bly so aptly calls the "third body" — then intimacy diminishes. Think of a three-legged stool. It only stands upright if each of its legs is present and strong.

Even sexual intimacy requires that we show up fully, pay attention and remain conscious of ourselves, our partner and what we are creating together; that is, the "sexual ensemble." That's why porn feels so devoid of intimacy — there's no other, and no ensemble, just a lonely I.

Other Considerations

In addition to awareness, there are three other factors that support intimacy:

- Transparency — we are available and fully honest
- Vulnerability — we allow access to the deepest parts of ourselves
- Reciprocity — we freely, without conditions, give as well as take

Adding to this complex recipe, all four requirements are moving targets — each one more a process than a destination. Nothing static; always changing.

Intimacy in the Garden

Our gardens are great places to practice the weave of these elements of intimacy.

Every summer I set aside a chunk of vacation time to sit quietly in my garden, mostly with eyes closed, and often for upwards of a few hours. At first I'm usually quite distracted with who said what at the office, or what the next business move should be to keep ahead of the competition. But gradually the stillness takes over, pulling me deeper into the rich experience. Out of the increasing fullness emerges a vibrant connection to the plants, the insects, the birds and to myself. Time itself transforms as I become fully available in the present moment, open my senses to receive the wonder around me, give freely of myself as the boundaries between us become blurred and all within the context of heightened awareness.

I've tried this exercise in mindfulness with other natural venues such as sailing blindfolded while using my sense of wind direction to stay on track, or sitting with the spring peepers at dusk as they intensify their nocturnal symphony. The result is the same — a feeling of completeness that makes me wonder why I do anything else.



What's the Practice?

Transparency, vulnerability, reciprocity and awareness are all capacities, and thus require practice to enhance, even maintain. The “how to” is simultaneously simple and profoundly difficult: just show up, and notice. Start with observing the sensations in your body as stimulated by your inner vision and in the natural world around you; follow attentively this growing awareness wherever it wants to go, and whatever it has to teach you; and remain the witness of your own experience, all of which leads to a feeling of intimacy with ourselves and to everything else.

Putting It All Together

Mindfulness is the art of awakening to what is, and that is the only place from which we can nurture awareness. Quoting one acknowledged guru, Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose, without judgment.” Thus, the overarching causal sequence of my proposition: mindfulness leads to awareness, and that leads to more satisfying intimacy. Or, more functionally, mindfulness is the tool, awareness the capacity and intimacy the result.

If you're looking for a measure of progress to feel good about, you'll know that your IQ — “intimacy quotient” — is growing when you observe yourself minimizing the overuse of your strategic mind, and instead rely more on just being here now. Alternatively, take note when your partner exclaims, “Gee, what happened to you? Lately you've been so available, vulnerable, giving and oh so deliciously aware.”

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