

LOVE LINGERS HERE: INTIMATE ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS

XIV. PLATE ONE: BUILDING A NEST (ESTABLISHING A HOME TOGETHER)

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In studying the life of an individual, one attends to all the events, historical forces and internal characteristics that impact on this person. While this is a major task, it seems small when compared to the task of describing and understanding the life of a couple. When studying couples, one must examine all of these factors as they impact on both of the individuals in the relationship, as well as the couple itself. It's not easy to formulate a simple, descriptive model that will account for the dynamics and complex development of even one-couple let alone many couples.

The Plate Theory

Adult development theorists borrow the concepts of stage and phase from biology in their description of the systematic changes that occur in the individual lives of men and women. When speaking of the predictable stages through which adults move, they use, an analogy, the seasons of biological life. We will appropriate a model from another field, geology, when describing the complexities of couple development.

Geologists have discovered that the continents and other major land masses on Earth are actually mobile "tectonic plates" that move slowly toward or away from, one another to form new continental configurations, new oceans, new mountain ranges (where the plates collide) and new valleys or rifts (where the plates separate). Similarly, the relationship between two members of a couple might be considered a single, unified entity (like our planet) on which floats a set of developmental plates that sometimes exist in isolation from one another and at other times in combination with one another. These moving plates yield a dynamic, changing configuration called the "couple". Just as tectonic plates collide to form the majestic mountains of this world and in doing so produce earthquakes and other geological disturbances, so it might be said that

developmental plates collide and produce the majestic elements of a couple's relationship, while also producing disruptive (and at times destructive) interpersonal earthquake

What specifically are these developmental plates for couples and how do they interact? From our research, we propose there are five that are applicable to most couples: (1) establishing a home, (2) producing socio-economic viability, (3) selecting values, (4) preparing for loss of partner and (5) raising children. Any one of these plates may be prevalent at any one point in the life of a couple, though the first and second plates generally tend to be foremost early in a relationship, while the fourth plate tends to be foremost at a later point. Each plate can exist in close interaction with one or more of the other plates, and strongly influences the other four plates as well as the individual developmental stages of each member of the couple.

Typically, a couple will experience a period of stress when things aren't going well with one or more of the developmental plates. The stress may be exacerbated when there is trouble simultaneously with several plates or when three or four of the plates are simultaneously colliding with one another, as when partners are confronted with a new child, while also establishing a first home and starting new jobs.

Each developmental plate has its own phases of development in the life of each couple,. The four phases we described in the second section of this book (forming, storming, norming and performing) are played out in each plate. These four phases interact in an infinite variety of ways, as members of a couple confront the developmental tasks associated with each of the plates in various relationships to other tasks and plates, and at various points in each member's own individual stage of development. The way in which each task is engaged by a couple will vary widely from couple to couple, and even within the same couple from year to year. Despite these complexities and variations, we can identify several major features in each of the five developmental plates.

I will describe each plate in the following five essays, mapping out the terrain that typically traverse as couple on each plate. We begin this journey, in this essay, with a description of the first plate: establishing a home.

Establishing a Home

In his Pulitzer prize winning novel, *Angle of Repose*, Wallace Stegner describes the way in which one couple remained together, through a series of disappointments and losses in their lives as pioneers in the early American West. Stegner described a couple that remained together by sharing small things and simple moments of joy. They savored small things and events that allowed them to lean against each other, to find meaning (however small) in their sacrifices and their mutual commitments. This is the "vernacular" life that we identified when describing a couple's establishment of norms and forging a covenant.

This domain of daily living and the common place is no more plainly evident than in the small decisions made by and actions taken by men and women as they establish a home together.

Moore (1994, p. 236) suggests that the vernacular "is located in some place -- in one person's life, in a neighborhood or a region, in a specific culture or community." The couples we interviewed often located it in their home. As a result, the decisions they made about the nature and character of their home, the objects that they placed in their home, and the special activities that they engaged in while living in their home (ranging from cooking meals to hosting birthday parties to raking and burning the leaves each fall) often provided an unrecognized but stable foundation for their relationship.

This plate usually is prevalent early in a couple's life. It typically begins after the couple has moved through a state of infatuation, commonly known as the honeymoon period. The couple is often most clearly and tangibly defining its own unique character or "soul" in these early decisions about the way they choose to live together. Many couples build their covenant around these daily matters. It is, in the words of Stephen Sondheim, "the little things we do together" that makes relationships work and define their unique and sustaining character.

A couple that we know well (Peggy and David) has candlelight dinners together each night, despite the busy lives that they both live. This ritual was first established when Peggy was -living in New York and David was living with his children in Oregon. David would prepare dinner for his children, light the candles and then call Peggy. Peggy got to know the children (and David) in

a very special way while they were eating their candlelight dinner each night. This ritual continued after Peggy decided to move to Oregon with David and his children. Even after Peggy moved in and while David's children were still young, candlelight dinners each night were a given.

Issues regarding this plate often become prevalent again later in the life of a couple, if the couple has significantly shifted their living arrangements. This is the case, for instance, when two partners have decided to work in two different cities or when they must disrupt their regular patterns of daily living because of the intrusion of another development plate, such as the birth of a baby, one or both partners re-entering the work force, children leaving home, or the start or end of a major project in which both partners participate. Peggy and David, for instance, went through some soul searching about their candlelight dinners after their children left home with just the two of them, would the dinners still be special?

While it would have been easy to fall into a pattern of hurried meals and even separate meals, given their busy schedule as a dual career couple, David and Peggy decided to keep intact, despite occasional lapses this part of their relationship in when both of them are particularly harried. In retrospect, David and Peggy recognize that these dinners made an important statement about the importance of sharing a few celebrative minutes together each day as a couple. During earlier years, these dinners symbolized Peggy's inclusion in David's family. In continuing this tradition, David and Peggy repeatedly honor their relationship.

In establishing their home, a couple may not actually have selected a specific place (apartment, house, room in parent's home) where they will live. A "home" can be as much a state of mind as a physical location. In the case of couples during wartime, for instance, a relationship may have barely been established when one or both partners are given an overseas assignment. In these instances, a "home" can be established by means of letters, phone calls, emails, tweets or other rituals (e.g. keeping a picture of the loved one in one's pocket). For David and Peggy, a shared "home" was established for both of them (and David's children) through the symbol of the candle, lit at the point that David and his children were not only eating dinner, but also talking with Peggy by phone.

The primary task in this first developmental plate is the establishment of a sense of identity (the "home") for the couple as a distinct entity. A couple has established a "home" when both members feel that the other person offers the most (or at least one of the most) secure and supportive environments in which he or she can live and work. The "home" must be a safe place, where one can relax and not have to defend oneself. It is a place where one can be intimate. The objects that are selected for the home are equally as important. We come to "cherish" special things that we own, for these things represent something safe (usually associated with continuity) as well as something intimate (usually representing an experience associated with the couple that is very private).

These "cherished" objects are part of the vernacular life that enriches the soulful aspects of intimate relationships and that give this relationship its unique character. As in the case of the couple's covenant, the cherished objects in a relation are assumed to be permanent parts of the relationship. These cherished objects are often stored and presented on a family alter. This alter is usually a vertical structure or visual display. It may be a tall bookshelf filled with memorabilia, a wall full of family pictures or a stack of electronic toys. Whatever is to be found on this alter, it usually offers abundant manifestations of the values and history of the couple and often rivals the founding story as a source of rich insight about the couple and its covenant.

More than five decades ago, a famous psychiatrist, Jurgen Ruesch and a poet and film producer, Weldon Kees, joined forces to write about the messages that are conveyed through these visual displays that are often found in the homes of people who care deeply about their physical surroundings. (Ruesch and Kees, 1969) They describe "altarlike assemblies" that are points of central focus of interest in these homes. Secular objects of value replace the traditional religious artifacts on these contemporary altars: "Pictures of deities are usually replaced . . . by framed oil paintings or reproductions of a secular nature." (p. 143). These secular alters often contain books, recordings (CDs, DVDs, etc.), plates, souvenirs and so forth. Ruesch and Kees also observe that lamps or candles are frequently present or the altar is located adjacent to a fireplace. They suggest that the presence of these sources of light replicates the role of candles on most religious altars and "attests to the perhaps unconscious wishes of their owners to suggest an altar."

For a younger couple, the establishment of a home usually means disengaging in some manner from the homes of their parents. This process of "breaking away" from parental influence is and vividly portrayed in many movies and plays. For the older couple and partners who were previously involved with other people, but are now divorced or separated, the process of establishing a home usually means breaking away from some other home that has already been established by one partner alone or with somebody else. Or it means consolidation of two separate homes. Both breaking away and consolidation are difficult. If children are involved in a "blended" family then consolidation may be particularly difficult.

For some couples, the primary marker event for this developmental plate appears to be the marriage ceremony. For many others, however, the event is something else: moving in together, making a first major purchase (furniture, car or house), or moving to another city. One of the first couples we interviewed for this study spoke of becoming a couple when they traveled to New England from California in order for one member of the couple to attend a particular graduate school. This event, which required both members to physically separate themselves from their parents' homes for the first time, was apparently more important to them than was the marriage ceremony (Which preceded the move by several weeks).

The major stress point in this development plate is often associated with the disillusionment that sets in as the couple moves out of a honeymoon period into more mundane day-to-day living. The disillusionment that accompanies the loss of one's dreams about career advancement or parental expertise usually occurs slowly. The disillusionment concerning "marital bliss" or the happiness that is supposed to be associated with any long-term intimate relationship, however, will often set in very fast, forcing members of a young relationship to accommodate to their lost dream at a very early age. This disillusionment often is particularly difficult for young women who are raised in traditional settings. They have traditionally been encouraged more than young men to invest considerable energy and expectation in the marital dream.

Forming: When Do We Make Joint Commitments Regarding Important Possessions?

This was a second marriage for both James and Hillary.. Hillary is 47 years old and was married at age 20 for 8 years. She has three sons from her previous marriage, aged 23, 25 and 26. James is 41 years old, was married briefly at age 25 and has no children. They were living together for several years and initially were both very happy with this arrangement. Hillary, however, began to worry about the relationship. According to James "it involved a lot of crying, talking about what we've been through." Eventually, they decided to get married, and about a year later they bought a house together. This was definitely a marker event for this couple -- as Hillary observed during their interview:

I needed a feeling of roots. The place was related to it. We wanted a place where we could have things the way we wanted, an investment. I wanted to decorate it and be done with it, so that I could do something else. I'm not quite done three years later. More settled though, just finishing touches. I may never finish.

For James, buying the house and fixing it up was a way of getting closer to Hillary. It was not just an investment, as Hillary suggested (though she may have been speaking of their mutual "investment" in their relationship):

I've been able to get a better idea of where she comes from, how she feels, what's important to her. As long as things are comfy and functional, I'm as happy as a clam. She needs pretty colors and patterns. Buying a house with my brother was an investment. This home is a whole different thing.

For Hillary:

... it's made a big difference, because it's something we did together. We had to interact and come to agreements. Sometimes it was very hard. We were tired and crabby. It was stressful, but our relationship has started to feel more solid.

James agreed and added: "I have a better understanding of Hillary." Like many couples we interviewed, James and Hillary used the experience of buying and repairing a house together as a vehicle for solidifying their own relationship and learning more about one another. While this forging of a new relationship in a "homebuilding" crucible can be risky, given that it may reveal

different tastes, different levels of commitment and different notions about what a "home" is after all, it can serve as an enduring base for a couple that is newly creating their relationship.

Storming: How Do We Resolve Our Conflicts Regarding Possessions?

Many of the couples we interviewed spoke of conflicts associated with identifying "our" things and "your" things and "my" things. This task is particularly difficult when one of the two partners is moving into the "turf" of the other partner, rather than establishing a new home together from scratch. Obviously, this is often the case when two people come together later in life. They can decide either to begin anew, by selling all of most of the possessions they accumulated in previous relationships or they can move into the home that one of the partners has already established, then attempt to introduce some (or all) of the possessions of the other partner as well as begin to buy some things together that represent their shared tastes and portray their shared values.

Luke and Conrad decided to find a new home when they moved in together. They combined many of their possessions from previous homes and put left over items in storage. In the back of Luke's mind, he still wanted to hold on to some of his things: "underneath, you still want to save your stuff just in case things don't work out and you have to move back on your own." After three years of living together, Luke realized that they didn't need to keep all that extra furniture in storage anymore. Their individual things have melted together and instead of "yours and mine," it has become "ours." This marked a symbolic turning point for Luke. He felt more secure in the relationship, knowing that they now possess essentially everything in common.

Another symbol of change and deepening trust for Luke occurred when he no longer felt the need to be consulted about every little item purchased for their house. They always went to a large hardware and lumber store together on weekends to buy things for their home, but now Luke doesn't feel as strong a need to be involved. However, when there are large purchases or home remodeling projects, Conrad still consults Luke. Luke and Conrad have learned how to manage their differences in most matters regarding joint purchases. Several years ago, for instance, they decided to buy a car together. Conrad did the research. He read consumer magazines, looked up base prices for specific models, and even found out that they could get a

special fleet rate (as teachers). This new car was to be Conrad's baby!

The evening before they were to begin car shopping, Conrad's old car started to make loud noises and they barely got home. The following day, Conrad decided to go to the dealer and order the car they had decided upon for exactly the price they wanted. The dealer, however, could not locate the exact car they wanted anywhere in the vicinity or even in any neighboring states. Apparently, most of these cars come loaded with many extras that Conrad did not want.

In the middle of this frustrating process of Conrad and the dealer locating another car, Luke calmly walked up to the dealer and asked him what kind of deal could he give them "right now" on a fancy display car in the window. Luke's actions made Conrad furious, since he had done all the research and was determined to have it pay off. After a few minutes, Luke and Conrad started haggling together with the dealer over price and options on the display car. Conrad found that his anger dissipated as the dealer kept throwing in options at no cost. What started out as Conrad's anger and the need to see his project completed in his own way, turned into a fun game between the two of them. As they worked through pricing and options with the salesman, Luke would ask Conrad if he could "live with and pay for" a particular option. Conrad would respond with an emphatic "no, I don't want it," and the dealer would throw in the option at no cost.

As Conrad noted, "the more storms we've weathered together, the stronger the relationship has become." In recent years, Luke and Conrad have also combined both of their incomes as well as their checking and savings accounts. Monetary and material things aren't as important to them now as they were when Luke and Conrad first met. They now trust each other's choices, decisions and aesthetic tastes.

At the time of their meeting, Bev had recently ended a four-year relationship and Teresa was gearing up to leave one of just about the same duration. Bev had a house and Teresa moved in. "She had to move into my life," Bev said, describing how the terms of their relationship were established. Teresa nods: "yeah, your friends, your home Bev: "you acquiesced a lot." Teresa, laughing: "you weren't charging me rent!"

Commenting on her own insistence on creating the physical environment of their home, Bev indicated: "I didn't know whether it would be OK with you that I was so controlling." Teresa laughed again: "I don't think I knew just how controlling you would be." This interchange reflected the central dynamics of their relationship both inside and outside their home. Teresa is apparently willing to let Bev set the tone and the terms of their relationship, as well as control the nature and tone of the home they establish together.

Teresa, however, also steps in at appropriate times to change the direction of their relationship (and their home) when appropriate. According to Teresa: "I always feel like Bev's the Rock of Gibraltar, but she has her black moods too, and sometimes it's nice for me to be the floating Rock of Gibraltar." Bev, in turn, recognizes and appreciates Teresa's easy-going acceptance and her role as the "floating rock" in their relationship. Above all, Bev and Teresa have discovered the saving grace of humor and the related understanding of one another, their relationship together, and their common bond.

Their home (like most homes) reflects their relationship and their common bond. These women are very proud of their residence, even though Bev makes most of the initial decisions regarding interior and exterior decoration (as the solid rock). Furthermore, both of them find their home (and their relationship) to be very comfortable and comforting, often building on Teresa's more intuitive sense of home and relationship (as the floating rock). They speak of companionship as being at the heart of their relationship and identify their residence as a sanctuary where they can come together and not feel so lonely. Bev puts it this way: "We're both kind of loners in a weird kind of way in the rest of the world, and you just want to have one other person that's going to be around 'cause you don't want to be lonely."

Their home, however, is also designed to provide each of them with their own personal space. As part-time artists, each woman has her own studio. "It's really important to have your total own space," Bev explains. "The great thing about pretending to be artists [as both Bev and Teresa do] is you get to have a studio." Teresa's previous partner "thought art took me away from her. I wasn't allowed to go into my own world and spend any time and I certainly couldn't get any help on a critique [laughter]. But Bev's a really great cheerleader. At the same time, she's really honest

about my work -- that's why I need the pep talk sometimes." Both women laughed. Bev responded: "I couldn't like you if I didn't like your work. I can't imagine I could like you if here was a whole area I didn't want to talk about or see."

Once again, we see that physical space and possessions are not always important in and of themselves. However, they are often critical as tangible, practical symbols of commitments that each partner has made to one another. In the case of Teresa and Bev, personal space (what Virginia Wulff calls a creative woman's need for "a room of her own") is a requirement. They have created a home with both shared living spaces and individual studios. Time together and time apart are of equal importance in the balance that keeps the two women centered and happy with one another and with themselves.

Norming: Who Does What Around the House?

Many couples find that the issue of neatness is at the top of the list of things that "drive each other nuts." Conflicts regarding neatness are not usually at the top of the list in terms of importance, but these conflicts are often at or near the top of the list in terms of frequency. Day in and day out couples struggle with one another regarding how clean their home should be and who should feel and be responsible for keeping it tidy and attractive. As a couple, Tara and Donald indicate that they are happy and "like each other most of the time." Some conflicts immediately came to the surface, however, as the issue of household neatness was broached. Humor and anger were interspersed as Tara and Donald addressed this hot topic. Their responses echoed those of many other couples (especially heterosexual couples) that we interviewed:

Tara: I like you ALL the time. I just don't like some of your sloppy, godda0abits.

Interviewer: Give me an example.

Tara: He's a mess.

Interviewer: He's a mess?

Tara: Or he MAKES a mess and he doesn't care about mess when I point it out to him.

Donald: That bothers her more than the mess I make.

Tara: His standards are too low and so is his self-image. And he's willing to live with it.

Donald: I like a clean place, but it doesn't occur to me to clean it up. I like to think I have tremendous power of concentration, and I clean up the mess when I notice it.

Tara: Bullshit. And I like to think I have higher standards than his. I organize things and he messes them up. Like the pots and pans in the kitchen cupboards. [Angry] Two days after I organize the cupboards, they are a mess and when I go to find something, I have to look everywhere.

Donald: That is why we're such a successful couple. Tara: [Laughs] That's right. That's why we're so happy. Donald: See . . . I tell a joke and she laughs.

We see several classic conflicts enacted in this one brief vignette. Different standards in cleanliness are intertwined with the sense (from Tara's perspective) that Donald is simply lazy and waiting for her to do the work, and (from Donald's perspective) that Tara is too uptight about outward appearances. Anger centers, therefore, not only on the issue of whose standards are observed, but also on the extent to which either partner discloses his or her real, underlying perceptions regarding the other partner's lazy or uptight disposition. This couple is able to head off an escalating argument through the use of self-deprecating (and couple-deprecating) humor. Other couples often continue the escalation and create a home that is neither neat nor pleasing to be in.

Later in the interview, we discover yet other reasons why Donald and Tara are able to live with their differences regarding neatness. First, Donald has come to admire some of Tara's more obsessive traits. He praises her interest in making lists, and notes how these lists help both of them get organized, 'sometimes when I want to stall for a time, I say to her that she should make

a list . . . it works." Tara has also come to trust Donald more fully. She genuinely believes that his standards are different from hers. This has come about through extensive conversations between the two of them and the assistance of a marriage counselor.

A second reason is based on a somewhat less positive portrait of Tara and Donald. It seems that in many different domains of their relationship, Tara reacts off Donald. While she seems to get particularly mad about his messes around the house, she also has often reacted in the past (and even in the present) with considerable frustration regarding his relationships with other women, his taste in books, and his unwillingness to teach her how to use various electronic devices, thereby leaving her dependent on him. (Donald: And I intentionally try to show her how to operate them when she's in a bad mood. [They both laugh] She even complains about the way in which he fights with him.

It seems that Donald continues to find ways in which to provoke Tara so that she will attack and he will withdraw, thereby giving him a victory over her and reaffirming his impression that Tara is "damned unstable" and that he is necessary in her life. On the other hand, Donald is very compliant in continuing to give Tara messes for her to clean up: messes in their home and messes in his life. While muttering under her breath or screaming at the top of her lungs regarding the mess he has made, Tara has assumed an indispensable role in their family. In these complex ways, Donald and Tara insure that they are both needed and wanted, thereby reducing the insecurities that both of them have felt throughout their lives regarding their own value to other people and, in particular, their parents. As with most couples, many of the issues regarding home and possessions are based in unresolved issues with their own parents. Household possessions provide convenient triggers and symbols for old childhood memories, Conflicts regarding neatness provide relatively safe ways in which to represent old parental values and conflicts.

The issue of neatness was even more difficult for Sally and Max to address, because, unlike Donald and Tara, they came together as a couple much later in life and both had well-entrenched patterns of living. Sally and Max were both teachers when they met, and Donald was still grieving the loss of his first wife to cancer. Sally f 1 "hopelessly" in love with Max

within a year and envisioned them as married and providing a home together for Max's five boys. She anticipated domesticity, love, happiness and security. The home would reflect beauty, neatness and tranquility which she highly valued .

Unfortunately, Sally's dreams didn't match very well with reality. Since they lived in a small town not far from each other, the boys became friends and she would be told all about the "other women" in Donald's life. This certainly did not lead to either love or security—at least from Sally's perspective. Furthermore, Max's home was always in shambles with a backyard that resembled a "car graveyard." Sally was torn between not wanting to enter the "disaster area" and wanting to go "fix it up", Even tranquility was missing, for Max and his boys had hot tempers and differences were always being settled, to Sally's way of thinking, in a rather uncivilized fashion.

In keeping with many Hollywood movies (the musical "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" comes immediately to mind), Sally felt that they all needed a woman's touch, a civilizing influence, cleanliness, and manners. During the interview, she indicated that "Max was afraid," so they never got around to these things. Once, after eight years, they decided to move in together, so Sally moved some (not all) of her things over to Max's house. Three days later she moved out after he got incensed because she vacuumed too much. These idealistic expectations of hers will probably stay in the back of her mind for many years, as she goes on subtly trying to "civilize" him.

The issue of neatness is actually a subset (admittedly often the most important subset) of a more general issue, namely, who does what around the house? The assignment of responsibilities in many instances (as in the case of neatness) has to do with priorities, values and who is willing to do the lousy jobs. In other cases, the assignment of duties has to do with the actual or perceived competencies of each partner: "I'll take care of the car, because you don't know a thing about anything mechanical, and you take care of the garden because you have a green thumb. I'll handle the checkbook, and you antique the old desk we just bought. What if I buy the china (since I know a lot about ceramics), and you purchase the art work (since you were an art history major in college)? You do the cooking (since I can't even boil an egg), and I'll do repair work

around the house (since you keep bashing your thumb with our hammer).

In many instances, these assignments follow traditional gender lines. Men work on the cars, women in the kitchen and so forth. However, we found numerous instances where the traditional gender roles were mixed up or switched. Female mechanics, male cooks, female financial managers and male interior decorators. Reggie, for instance, assumed most of the household duties in his marriage to Sara. This began during their courtship. Reggie began to take responsibility for cooking, indicating that Sara was going through a "tough life" at this time because she had just been divorced. After their marriage, Reggie continued to take responsibility for the cooking, and also took responsibility for the protection of Sara's children. Reggie is now retired, while Sara still works full-time. Reggie has taken on additional responsibilities for maintaining the house, a role which Sara relinquished with considerable gratitude.

In many instances, the assignments matched with and helped to reinforce roles that were assumed immediately when the two people first met each other. The pervasive influence of the founding story was perhaps no more powerfully exhibited than in these assignments of household duties. Devon and Kurt find that the patterns established in their initial relationship are constantly being reintroduced and reinforced in their many household projects. Both Devon and Kurt thoroughly enjoy working together as a team on home improvement projects. Kurt tends to look at the overall picture, while Devon is a bit more compulsive and detail oriented.

At times, Devon thinks that Kurt is too messy, while Kurt thinks that Devon is compulsive. Yet, when they work together on projects around the house they value each other's perspective and contribution. This same pattern of coming together around a specific project is to be found in their first encounter with one another, when both admitted that the initiative toward getting acquainted was "mutual." Furthermore, they were mutually attracted to each other because each felt a need to find the "other half" of themselves. Kurt was first attracted to Devon because Devon was the stodgy, masculine "klutz" who spilled his punch, and Devon seemed to have been captivated by Kurt's flamboyant, gregarious free spirit. They still tend to play off these differences and reenact their meeting when they cook together, redecorate their home together, or plant their garden together. Kurt provides the spirit and Devon the plan.

While some couples avoid doing projects together because it re-invokes conflicts about decision-making, perceived incompetence, distribution of work, patience and so forth, other couples, such as Kurt and Devon, continually re-invoke the magic of their initial encounter through the work they do together on their home. This is, in turn, a concrete manifestation of their relationship and the values they share and express in public through their home.

Performing: What Do We “Possess” Together That Is Really Important?

Many of the couples we interviewed indicated that the things they most value in their home are not very tangible and are not really things that can be possessed. Sam and Caroline indicate that the thing they care most about their home is "the sense of family." For them, that means their two kids and having time with all four family members at home. Time together becomes the valued possession. This, unfortunately, is an elusive possession for Sam and Caroline. Like many successful, dual career couples, Sam and Caroline find time together at home to be a rare commodity. Like many of her peers, Caroline commutes about 35 miles one way to her job. Sam's job takes him out of town frequently and there are many night meetings. This, coupled with his responsibilities at their church (as choir director) severely limits the amount of time the four of them are together as a family.

Sam and Caroline may value this sense of family more than any material possession in part because they really don't possess many material objects of any financial value. They do not own their home, nor do they see any prospects of home ownership in the near future. Caroline indicated that she would definitely like to buy a house as soon as possible, whereas Sam thinks it would be okay to do so but doesn't seem interested in putting any energy into making that happen. Caroline was silent as Sam expressed his hesitancy. The interviewer sensed that she wished strongly that he would feel differently about buying their own home. For these two people, the sense of family is clearly the central possession, whereas material possessions (at least a home) was a bone of contention. Whether driven to it by financial constraints or by a growing understanding of the underlying commitments that possessions represent, most enduring couples eventually begin to appreciate the deeper values of their relationships, and are not just enamored with physical possessions.

KEY CHAPTER POINTS PLATE ONE: ESTABLISHING A HOME

Enduring couples:

- Engage in behaviors that are grouped into five categories labeled "developmental plates":
(1) establishing a home; (2) producing socio-economic viability; (3) selecting values; (4) preparing for the loss of partner; (5) raising children.
- Balance each plate as it exists in close interaction with one or more of the other plates.
- Deal with the stresses created as developmental plates collide.
- Confront the developmental tasks (forming, storming, norming, performing) associated within each of the five developmental plates.
- Seek resolutions to separation from parents or blending two households as they establish a home (Plate #1).
- Evoke their founding stories to help them through stormy times dividing household duties, purchasing a house, recognizing their differences.
- Take solace in the fact that small daily rituals help to cement the relationship.