

SAMPLE CHAPTER TO

THE  
RELATIONSHIP  
RIDE

A Usable, Unusual, Transformative Guide

by

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INTRODUCTION: SHIP OF DREAMS

## **I n t r o d u c t i o n : S h i p o f D r e a m s**

*If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*

*~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery*

Are you in love with your partner? If so, how do you know? If not, were you ever? When? What was it like? If you can't feel it anymore, what happened? The state of being in love can seem so mysterious. There it is at the beginning, when we don't feel like sleeping or eating and can spend hours just gazing into our new love's eyes. This intense feeling of bliss is one of the best parts of being human. The ecstasy we experience when thinking of or being in the presence of someone we cherish motivates us to

make a range of personal sacrifices, to throw caution to the wind, to be willing to behave in impulsive or moony or even goofy ways.

Being in love creates an ongoing sense of intense emotional connection and is a key aspect of sexual attraction and passion. We feel in love with others when we view both them and ourselves as highly valuable at the same time. We are equals in our wholeness; we feel met; we have a sense of touching into the outer possibilities of life through the depth of our connection with ourselves and with the ones we love.

What happens after that initial strike of Cupid's arrow, when we no longer feel those expansive feelings? Our culture seems to share the belief that these intensely blissful feelings will inevitably wane, that riding the amazing waves of this bliss will unavoidably lead to running aground until we finally dismiss the expanded experience of bliss as an illusion. When we buy into this belief, we are ready to accept as truth that the fall from grace into disillusion is a natural progression, and it's unavoidable. We say pragmatically, well, the honeymoon was a fun ride, but now it's over and real life begins. We seem to take the view that a successful long-term relationship is like a ship anchored in a harbor—safe and predictable and inevitably boring. This belief sets up an overall expectation that, in order to experience the tremendous ecstasy of new love, we must wrest ourselves from

the familiarity of the “old ball and chain,” find a new person, and start over. We often stumble into that process, finding with someone new the awakened feelings we thought we had lost. It is a testament to the intensity of this awakened state that we are willing to go through loss after loss in order to re-experience the wild rapture of bliss once again.

This whole process of finding “in-love-ness” and losing it can seem so mystifying. Because being in love feels so wonderful, we search for explanations as to where those feelings came from and where they went. Here are some popular beliefs:

- The bad shopper: I chose the wrong person. This person is defective, and I’d like to make an exchange.
- “In love” as a virus: It happened to me mysteriously, and it equally mysteriously left. But hey! Now it struck me again—with this new person.
- It’s all about romance: If my partner (or I) took time to be more romantic, we could get it back. But for some reason we don’t take the time.
- It’s not real anyway: I was just infatuated and in the illusion of newness and great sex; nobody is really that wonderful.
- It’s time for a new model: Cars get old and so do relationships, so they need to be replaced.

- Long-term relationships require “settling”: Being in love is just for those newly together or the young, so we should just resign ourselves to a passionless existence, accepting that we’re missing one of life’s sweetest gifts. (This one is closely related to the next, and most popular, belief.)
- I love my partner; I’m just not *in love* with him. The death knell of relationships.

What is really going on when we can no longer maintain the most precious part of intimacy with another person? How do we come to give up the ecstasy of sailing with the wind and find ourselves and our relationships crashing on the rocks?

An intimate relationship creates the perfect storm of predicament for most of us. It looks like this: We are drawn to the intimacy of connection because we want to be seen, and being seen is like falling in love with our self. We say things like, “I love who I am when I am with her” or “He brings out the best part of me.” To truly experience the bliss of intimacy, we believe we must allow ourself to fuse with our partner into the poetic epitome of love: two souls become one. This can feel wonderful, similar to the intense spiritual experience of blending into the cosmos. It is tempting to try to stay in that place of oceanic expansion. But because there are two separate people, we cannot

maintain that fused state. The self must pull itself out of the cosmic blend to once again create its own identity.

This transition between intense intimacy and separation is a rocking motion between the need to give up self in order to have connection and then, after the intensity of merging, having to give up connection to regain a sense of self. With awareness, this movement can feel harmonious. However, the merging of selves can bring up fears of engulfment, while traveling out into separateness can trigger past issues of abandonment, turning the smooth rhythm into jarring dissonance.

Self and relationship are impossible to pull apart. Without two equal selves, there cannot actually be relationship; it's just an entanglement.<sup>1</sup> If one person gives up self (which looks like the typical, "I don't care; whatever you want, Honey"), there is no connection, no sense of one person truly meeting the other. Instead, one person gets to be big while the other is floating around somewhere, diminished by his or her submissiveness.

Similarly, without relationship—that is, without relating to something, anything on the outside of one's inner universe—we cannot have a sense of self. Consider this: Imagine that you are all alone in space.<sup>2</sup> You are bobbing in the great void, nothing for you to interact with. Day after day you float all alone in the darkness. One day, a fly appears. It buzzes around you. Perhaps you feel annoyed by the buzzing, or happy to have another being

to share space with, or curious about what flies are like. Each of these different experiences gives you a sense of who you are, whether you are someone who gets annoyed or likes connection or is curious. Your relationship with the fly is a mirror of who you are.

Without something or someone to relate to, there is no way to learn anything or to know yourself. With a relationship comes endless opportunities to discover, learn, and evolve. If you are willing to notice what is happening inside you, really witness your own experience, you can see who you are right now as well as make choices about who you want to be.

When we make a commitment to another human being, self naturally flows into connection, and within the connection comes a new experience of self: self re-emerges, multi-dimensional, to create a new type of connection. And so self flows, never the same self, and connection flows, never the same connection. With each movement toward and away from another, we invent a new self, a new connection, like a ship sailing on the ocean, its keel pushing into the sea and the sea pushing into the hull, the ship's prow slicing through wave after wave, never the same combination of boat and sea coming together and moving apart.

Here is the problem: We don't know that relationship requires the skills of a seasoned mariner. Lured by the siren call of new love, we tend to jump onboard, fully intending to go on a

long journey. When the inevitable challenges occur, however—storms, sandbars, perilous rocks, monstrous waves, and even a variety of sea monsters slithering to the surface—we decide that we made a huge mistake, that we got on the wrong ship, that we didn't really mean to choose this particular crew.

Since most of us don't know what to expect on this wild ride called intimacy, all we can do is hang on. We really do our best in the face of the emotional ups and downs, the intensity of being called to face the unpredictability of the next moment, the emergence of our own or our partners' more challenging aspects. Some people actually thrive with these challenges. Many times, however, we get scared, we withdraw, we shut down. The resulting numbness is what we call "falling out of love." And we find solace in the idea that, really, relationship shouldn't be so hard. And we prepare to abandon ship.

### **Myth: It Shouldn't Be So Hard**

"It shouldn't be this hard!"

I've heard this over and over in sessions with clients. Whether people are talking about their intimate connections, their families of origin, or their business associates, this plaintive cry comes up again and again. It is as if there is some standard of difficulty that we use to measure whether we are willing to withstand the challenges of relationship, and if we could only

apply this standard, we would know if it is worth it to hang in there.

*Maggie and Pat have been involved for a year. After a very passionate and intense beginning, they now spend much of their time together sniping at each other. An interaction will start out well, but something inevitably sets them off into a bickering battle. Maggie shakes her head sadly when she says with a frown, “My last relationship wasn’t ever like this. If it’s this hard, it wasn’t meant to be!”*

The first time I encountered this idea—that if things were really hard in a relationship, it should end (a sort of euthanasia for an ailing connection)—I was in my late twenties. I was embroiled in ongoing power struggles with my partner of that time, and we finally broke down and called for help. The therapist we saw did her best to help us negotiate through the issues, but after a couple of sessions, she looked at us and uttered those words authoritatively: “It really shouldn’t be this hard.” Because she was a psychiatrist, I was even more impressed by the terminal diagnosis, and so I quickly put us out of our misery by initiating the breakup.

This idea followed me into my next relationship, so that, with each conflict, I measured it with my own barometer of difficulty. How difficult was this? Too hard? Phew, got through

that fight. But—oh no! Here’s another one! Maybe two fights in one day added up to “too hard.” Or—OK, we’re not fighting, but we’ve had a few days of distance. That’s got to mean trouble.

Using this barometer kept me so focused on what was wrong in the relationship that I missed two important aspects: what was working (which, in retrospect, was quite a lot) and what I was learning about life through my partner and our conflicts. My attention stayed on trying to keep the dysfunction from happening, which is about as effective as, say, asking your brain to not think about a pink elephant. I became an expert at noticing and commenting on our problems, which is another way of saying I became very good at criticizing my partner and myself. This orientation meant I could no longer appreciate what was good, including the fertile possibilities for learning that were right in front of me.

Meanwhile I was seeing clients who were either in the middle of relationship trouble or who were coming in because of the painful aftermath of endings. (Couples rarely see a therapist during the thrilling beginnings of intimacy.) I began to appreciate the huge impact connection has on people’s moment-to-moment internal worlds and ongoing mental health. There was nothing that triggered more anger, evoked more pain, or created more ecstasy than that energy cord of connection between people. I also noticed a consistent pattern. Conflict and pain would escalate

until one of the partners decided that “this is too hard”; someone would press the ejection button to end it all; and there would be a period of relief as both contemplated being out of the relationship. Sometimes, with time to regenerate self and feel the reality of loss, each would reassess and decide to try again. However, this chipping away at the bond often ultimately resulted in someone making that pronouncement, “See? We just shouldn’t be together,” finally ending the relationship. Some couples were so shut down by this point that they felt more relief than grief; for most, however, the grief that followed often meant months, perhaps years, of devastating waves of aching loss. I hated that part and wondered what it does to the human heart to sentence it to several rounds of this excruciating process over a lifetime, as a person determinedly continues the search for the perfect relationship, one that wasn’t “so hard.”

I saw this pattern in friendships and familial relationships and between co-workers as well. People seem to have an ongoing gauge to try to measure when “enough is enough.” A friend may seem to need “too much,” or the conflict with a parent is unrelenting. Work issues can really take a toll, where it often seems that there are only two options: shut up and take it—or quit. Following those early times when everyone is on their best behavior, issues build until one day the only option seems to be to just get away. Most people I observed did not think to make the

key move of turning the blaming finger back around and asking such questions as “What does this have to do with me?” or “What can I learn from this?” or “How am *I* keeping this going?” And so they missed the rich opportunity to shift old unconscious patterns that were keeping them from getting what they really wanted.

Paralleling these observations was my next attempt at intimacy. As I inevitably repeated my patterns and re-created the same old power struggles, I saw only two possibilities:

- It shouldn't be this hard, so I'd better go find someone I'll be “more compatible” with (which meant going through my own next round of the anguish of loss).
- I was a relationship failure, so I should really be alone.

After a period of despondency accompanied by some desperate introspection (“What am I going to do?! How many more losses am I going to go through before I find the perfect person?? How am I going to be alone—I love being involved with people!!!”), I realized that maybe there is a third option, something like this: Maybe this whole set-up is exactly how my higher, bigger, more expanded self put it together for me.

What if the level of difficulty was not a signal that my relationship was in trouble but was instead a beacon from my soul to pay attention? What if relationship—any relationship—was *the* place for our souls to evolve, expand, and grow? What if relationship was a pathway out of the darkness of difficulty—

what I thought of as “real life”—and into the more unfamiliar light of joy?

From this perspective, suddenly the idea of “too hard” makes no sense. It is like a scary story we tell ourselves that is so effective we are afraid to leave home because of imagined perils. And in relationship, this particular story gets us to jump ship just as we are making the most headway. There we are, so in the grip of old patterns that we want to flee. We are face to face with exactly the issues that are the barriers to our true happiness. With a combination of willingness, courage, and the right skills, that is the moment when we could sweep away our biggest obstacles and find our way back to being in the great flow of life—so long as we don’t abandon ship.

Well, I love challenges, so this was a compelling idea. As I pondered this notion, it occurred to me that there really could be no better setup for my own evolution. Let’s say I somehow found the exact right person and everything was blissful every day, day in and day out, and we had fabulous sex all the time and I never had a flat tire or was in a bad mood or got lost and I put the exact right amount of money into my retirement account so that all the financial planners would clap their hands gleefully that I’d accrued the exact right sum when I reached my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In fact, many of us hold such a happily-ever-after picture in our heads, which turns out to be impossible to achieve and a

set-up for frustration, disappointment, and heartache. And, while such an ideal scenario might sound good, there would be nothing to push against, no obstacles to overcome, no way to actually develop beyond where I already was. In the absence of the ongoing challenge that relationship offers, there would be no way for my soul to actually evolve.

## **Out of Myth and into Reality**

*The Relationship Ride* is not about finding an easy path into a relationship where your every need will be met all the time and you will never have a nasty fight or period of disconnection from your partner, family member, friend, or colleague. This book does not give you a gauge for how long to stay or how to know when to say enough is enough. I now understand how misleading those perspectives can be. They keep our attention on what is wrong with the other or with us, like staring at the bottom of the boat to detect any possible leaks to decide when exactly to abandon ship rather than being present with the glorious feeling of sailing the open sea.

*The Relationship Ride* offers something much more useful and precious—and fun. It assumes that you and your partner together create the *relation-ship* ride. By coming together, you have set sail into the wide ocean blue, and rather than being at the mercy of the wind or drowning in the waves, you have tools and supplies for a

voyage of great adventure: maps (for the inner and external world), a compass (to locate yourself on the maps and set your course), a variety of other necessary instruments, and guidelines for how to steer, how to catch the most wind in your sails, and what to do if a big storm comes through or you run aground.

The voyage of relationship thus allows us to test our mettle with an endless variety of challenges—from rough seas and violent storms to no wind and too much calm. Through our relationships, we become seasoned sailors so that when we come into that final harbor at the end of our lives, we have discovered who we really are, and we have fully lived out our potential. Choosing this course means steering into the world of possibility, where we can ride the waves and run before the wind, charting a course to the relationship of our dreams.

So which do you choose? Would you prefer to go the unconscious route, pretty much doing what you have always done, letting your automatic reactions lead the way? Most of the world follows this path, and you certainly get to decide if this is the way for you. And I must warn you, once you head into the streaming energy of being conscious, it is not easy to steer back around to the land of the old familiar. What this comes down to now is choosing to remain in the land of the known or to learn to use the tools that will allow you to strike out into the wide-open sea, where your soul will lead the way to your full evolution.

## **Are You Ready for a Voyage?**

Turn the page and take a short quiz to help you decide what to do next.

## Q u i z

Are you a landlubber or a sea-bound adventurer?

**Scoring: 1: Totally disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Don't know;  
4: Agree; 5: Totally agree**

1.	I want to live life as an adventure.	
2.	I would like my intimate relationship to be passionate, alive, and long lasting.	
3.	I am willing to look at how I am creating the issues that come up in my close relationships.	
4.	I have old patterns that I would love to shift.	
5.	I am willing to learn a new way to be if it means being happier and freer.	
6.	It's OK with me to be challenged by my relationship.	
7.	I feel ready to face into all of who I really am.	
8.	I'm ready to see what is possible instead of focusing just on what's wrong.	
9.	Although there are plenty of issues to deal with, life is full of possibilities.	
10.	I would like to experience as much bliss, in-love-ness, and ecstasy as I can possibly enjoy.	

TOTAL SCORE:

### **Score Results:**

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1 – 15:	Stay on land and enjoy the view.
15 – 35:	You might want to read this book and expand your ideas of what is possible.
35 and up:	Come aboard! You're ready to set sail!

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## Notes

### Introduction: Ship of Dreams

- 1 Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks, *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment*, New York: Bantam, 1990.
- 2 Thanks to Donald Walsh for the idea behind this image. *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue, Book 1*, New York: Putnam, 1995.