**The Third Presence**

“When conflict, doubt, or the urge to separate arise in a relationship, it is difficult to remember the blessings of intimacy. Anger and grief are often the result of shaken trust in one's partner.

 Many couples live through these periods, sometimes at the expense of considerable mental and emotional anguish, wondering why relationship has to be so difficult or why the upheavals cannot be understood and embraced with greater equanimity. Such relationships may endure, but the stress of surviving these painful upheavals can leave little time and energy to fuel new growth.

When Third Presence abides in a relationship, the cycles of separation and intimacy can actually temper the love, much as a blacksmith strengthens his work by alternately immersing it in fire and cool water. The key is the continuity provided by a well established access to Third Presence, even when the connection between the partners is disrupted for a period of time.”(1)

“The notion of Third Presence and the practices that stimulate entry into this state of awareness have been quite useful to us and many other couples now over a period of many years..

The basic challenge in identifying the transcending qualities of relationship with a construct called Third Presence is to remind ourselves regularly that we are really talking about an expanded state of consciousness that is *co-created by two partners together with something unconditional and ultimately mysterious that is not of the ordinary world.* This means that exploration of the Third will never

be "complete." Every couple who enters the Third Presence will continue to make new discoveries about the nature of this state of consciousness.” (2)

**The Practice of Council**

*“Inviting the Third.* We call the council for two the "Third Pillow Ceremony." Just the sight of the

empty seat can transform the dynamics of the council. When the Third's turn comes around, the talking stick can be placed in front of the "empty" pillow and a few moments of silence observed. In the quiet of Third Presence, one or both partners may have insights that will refocus the Interactive Field in a productive way. Alternatively, when it is his or her turn, either partner has the option of moving to the empty pillow, if they hear the Third's message clearly. The other partner, of course, has the option of

commenting on the stand-in's authenticity. With time, this practice enables each partner to distinguish a statement by the Third.” (3)

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*“The Third Pillow Ceremony.* In this expansion of dyadic council, another pillow or chair is added as an invitation for the Third to join the ceremony. Just the sight of the "empty" pillow can transform

the partners' way of communicating in subtle but significant ways. The talking piece can be placed in front of the Third when its turn comes around and a few moments of silence observed. In addition, if the conversation becomes polarized or blocked, partners can decide to interrupt their dialogue, place the talking piece in front of the third pillow, and listen to the Third. In the silence, they may "hear" a comment or experience a shift in feeling that will refocus the dialogue in a more productive way. As a variation on this practice, either partner can have the option of moving to the empty pillow if he or she feels called to "stand in" for the Third and it is his or her turn to speak. The other partner has the option of commenting on the stand-in's authenticity when the talking piece comes around. We have found these practices to be a valuable way to receive guidance and increase our sensitivity to the Third's presence.”(4)

**“The Third” in Conflict Resolution**

“Since they are governed by the partners' personalities, the dynamics of a secular relationship tend to be patterned and predictable. Generally, the growth of both individuals and the partnership itself is interrupted frequently by interludes of tension and miscommunication. Equanimity is a fleeting blessing. A secular relationship is like trying to balance oneself on a two-legged stool. The inevitable instabilities make it difficult to build trust.

Another "leg" is needed for balance. In a transcendent relationship the Third's insightful voice provides a stabilizing presence that allows a couple to take the risks necessary for the relationship’s continued growth….

…….When the two partners are in deep conflict and cannot compromise, there is no alternative but to back off, take a deep breath, and try again. We are all familiar with the feeling of having the same basic argument with our partner again and again in a thousand different ways. Secular partners live primarily in the world created by their personalities. The old teaching, "You can't solve the problem from the level of the problem," comes to mind.

In contrast, when two partners learn to access Third Presence in their relationship, the alternatives for interaction expand beyond the secular level to include a portion of the transcendent domain …. Transcending partners discover they have ways to get beyond their difficulties other than withdrawing and trying again. They have an "additional dimension" in which to maneuver. The more developed the Third's presence, the greater the room for relating and the more choices they have for handling the challenges. With greater choice comes the trust that a path through the difficulties will be found. With the aid of council and other practices, the partners learn to treat their conflicts as opportunities for learning and growth.

In particular, regular access to Third Presence helps partners to let go of their attachments to strongly held emotional patterns….” (5).

**Manifestations of “The Third**.”

“Once established and supported by the partners' practices, the Third can be experienced in many ways: words of guidance from the third pillow, "heard" by one or both partners during a dyadic council; a glimpse of the relationship's future while walking along a country road at dusk; a time of sublime clarity, early in the morning after sharing a dream; or a vision of the archetypal forces that shape the relationship story during the afterglow of lovemaking.” (6)

1) Jack Zimmerman, Ph.D. & Jaquelyn McCandless, M.D., ***Flesh and Spirit***, p.184.

2) ***Flesh and Spirit***, p.114.

3) Jack Zimmerman, Virginia Coyle, ***The Way of Council***, pp.224

4 **)** ***Flesh and Spirit***, p.124

5) ***Flesh and Spirit***, pp. 178-179.

6) ***Flesh and Spirit***, p.181