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# KEEPING THE LOVE YOU FIND



*A Personal Guide*

**HARVILLE HENDRIX, PH.D.**  
AND  
**HELEN LAKELLY HUNT, PH.D.**

**ATRIA** PAPERBACK

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**to  
Laura Torbet**

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# *Foreword*

Finding one's true love has been the dream of lovers throughout history. It is the stuff of myth, fairy tales, poetry, and love songs. Hidden in this universal yearning is the belief that there is a special person who is "right for me" and in finding that person, "I will live happily ever afterward." From our perspective, there is a glimmer of truth in this belief. The person we yearn for represents a certain type of personality, of whom there are many candidates. When we find a person whose personality matches this type, we fall in love and live for a while in the illusion of happiness.

Contrary to what many single persons think, the problem for most of us is not in finding our "dream lover" but in keeping them in our lives or staying in theirs. They come with many different names. Think about how many times you have fallen in love during and since adolescence, and how many times you have fallen out of love or were rejected by your dream lover. Your dream of "living happily ever after" was shattered by conflict and disillusionment, and the person of your dreams became the demon of your nightmares.

When that happens, we tend to discard them, dubbing them the "wrong person" for us, and begin our search for another, vowing never to make that mistake again. Soon we find ourselves in love again, swearing that this new person is different, and that this time it will be better. What we don't realize is that, even though this person may not resemble our past loves in any overt way, hidden within their personality are subtle similarities. In this new relationship we repeat the same or similar pattern.

So what is going on here? Much has been written on the mystery of

love found and lost. We offer a theory that will enable you to understand what happens in your unconscious mind when you fall in love, and we also suggest a process with practical steps to help you establish and maintain a stable, loving relationship.

The thesis is relatively simple. In childhood each of us failed to get some essential needs met fully by our caretakers. The result was the creation of an emotional wound. We instinctively responded to this wound by developing a pattern of protective behaviors designed to prevent further pain and avert a fatal outcome. The repetition of these survival behaviors crystallized into our character defenses, an adaptive pattern to which we eventually refer to as “me.”

During this early interaction with our caretakers, we created an image, called the Imago, which was composed of both the positive and negative qualities of our caretakers combined. This inner image helps us recognize our caretakers and distinguish them from other adults, much like the imprinting of a young zebra whose mother circles him repeatedly right after birth to embed her distinctive pattern of stripes on her young.

In adulthood, this image guides us to a person, and when we meet an Imago match we fall in love. The yearning we experience is the anticipation that this person will meet the needs our caretakers failed to satisfy in our childhood. A problem arises immediately because our selected partner, bearing similar childhood hurts, also enters the relationship with expectations of need satisfaction and opposite patterns of self-protection. The collision of these mutual expectations and opposing patterns of defense creates a core conflict, called the power struggle, which turns the dream of love into a nightmare of frustration and disillusionment, bringing most relationships to an end.

From the Imago perspective, falling in love and entering the power struggle are natural stages of an intimate relationship. Both are supposed to happen. Ending a relationship at the point of conflict aborts a primal growth opportunity and starts the process all over again. What is needed is an understanding that our unconscious is trying to complete an agenda. Instead of repeating and prolonging the wounding, persons in conflict must learn to cooperate with the agenda of their unconscious, which is to achieve healing and restore wholeness.

How do we do that? The answer to that question is the purpose of this book. Our answer offers you some new information about relationships that was not available when the book was published in 1992. Because of new discoveries in the relational sciences, the path to keeping the love you find has become simpler, but not easier. In this preface we offer you a road map. In the book you will find all the details you need on your journey to lasting love. But first we want to share with you some-

thing personal that is different since this book was first published. On the cover, you will notice that this edition has two authors. While at the time of writing the original book, we discussed co-authorship, Helen firmly declined, and thus my (Harville's) name was the only author. Honoring the co-authorship now—twenty-six plus years later—reflects our journey and makes visible what has been true all along.

Our relationship was, and continues to be, a living laboratory for the theory and processes we have developed. While authorship previously seemed to be, in our minds, “who puts pen to paper,” it is now a reflection of who are the creators. The development and evolution of *Imago* has been a result of our relationship, the continuous oscillation of our trials and tribulations, and our ideas and experiences.

When this book was first written, I (Helen) was happy to be in the background in a supporting role while encouraging Harville to be the public figure. So while I knew I was co-creating this with him, I downplayed my role. This shift toward co-authorship not only reflects acknowledging my contribution, it also shows my ability to receive the recognition. And we believe this unconscious struggle within our own relationship is a mirror of our cultural struggles.

And I (Harville) eventually realized that I had unconsciously participated in this bias against women's equality by downplaying Helen's voice from the beginning. But thankfully, this movement of women coming out of the shadows is beginning to right itself globally. More than ever, the suppression of women is coming to the surface and a collective voice for equality is emerging. And this ultimately is a byproduct of our work—moving from hierarchy to equality. So while the text in this book still remains in first person, they are Helen and my stories, theories, and a reflection of our remarkable journey together.

Before we get into the “how” of keeping love alive, we want to clarify that this book is not about **finding** an intimate partner. Your unconscious mind will take care of that, and with little help from your conscious mind. This book is about **keeping** a partner once you find him or her. Our goal is to help you create the relationship of your dreams with the love you find.

Here is how you do it. It's different from the general opinion and research of the relational sciences prior to the twentieth century, which focused on personal insight. In our forty years of working with singles and couples, and especially from the relationship research in the past twenty years, we have found that while self-understanding is useful, even essential, it does not equip you to function successfully in an intimate relationship. Changes on the “inside” do not naturally migrate to changes on the “outside.”

New relational discoveries indicate that life is lived in what we call the

Space-Between and consists of the how human beings interact with each other. Interactions in the Space-Between become memories in the Space-Within, and those memories influence how we interact with others. But keeping love requires specific relational skills that are counterintuitive. While finding love is facilitated by natural processes in our unconscious, keeping love alive requires the intentional use of the conscious mind to develop relational competency. To do that you have to know “what” to do and then learn “how” to do it and practice it until you achieve a level of relational competency that helps you sustain it.

To prepare for a successful post single life requires the ability to establish and maintain *safety* in all transactions. Safety is the essential feature of all thriving relationships. To create and sustain safety requires commitment to three processes: 1) Learning a new way to talk; 2) Committing to a Zero Negativity; 3) Engaging daily in an Affirmations process. Learning and using these processes while you are dating equips you with having a successful relationship with an intimate partner. It makes dating more fun and saves having to go through a learning curve after your commitment.

We call the new way to talk Imago Dialogue. We call it a new way of talking because for thousands of years, the structure of conversations have been vertical, meaning one person talks down to another person who is supposed to look up to the one talking. This is called monologue. Monologue is one person talking, and everyone else listening with the admonition to agree and obey.

One-way conversation, however, expresses an inherent inequality and that creates anxiety. In intimate relationships, anxiety creates conformity that tends toward depression or rebellion that leads to anger and conflict. This dynamic makes talking among the most dangerous things people do, and listening the most infrequent. Imago Dialogue helps to listen with more accuracy, and to talk with more responsibility for what we say and how we say it. This structure contributes to safety in conversation. Imago Dialogue has three steps, which are elaborated in Exercise 15.

The second contribution to reliable safety is commitment to Zero Negativity in all transactions. The tragic reality about human relationships of all sorts is the negativity endemic in most of our interactions. Research has exhaustively established that relational negativity is second only to environmental toxins in impacting personal well-being. It is the primary impediment to establishing a potential relationship and the number one destroyer of relationships once established. In other words, negativity will prevent a budding relationship from blossoming into a flower and getting to the altar!



We define negativity as any expression that devalues another person. We call it a “put down.” It includes behaviors that are mild or intense—from a steely glare to violent language or behavior—and all forms of criticism. All negatives are inherently abusive because they devalue the other and turns them into an object. This is the source of personal, communal, and global violence.

A commitment to Zero Negativity is essential training for all serious relationships, and its practice before commitment prepares you for the tensions that will always arise afterward. Zero Negativity is looking at the other person through the eyes of love. We cannot have it both ways, that is, both be negative and also claim to love. Negativity and love cannot co-exist and travel the same neural pathways in the brain.

The third and essential process that creates reliable safety is affirmations. It is not enough to remove the toxin of negativity from a relationship. For it to thrive, we must add positive energy we call affirmations. An affirmation is an interaction that recognizes the inherent value of another person. To affirm another is also to validate their point of view and to show empathy for how they experience life. Because of the mirror neurons that reflect back what you express, the benefit to you for this stance toward others is that you simultaneously experience what you give. You begin to feel inherently valuable as a person and to honor your own truth while extending that to others. It is a win-win process, and what makes life and relationships ultimately work.

In summary, within the text of *Keeping the Love You Find*, you will be guided in step-by-step procedures to identify the childhood hurts you bring to intimate relationships for healing. You will also discover the defenses you use, because of your fears of being wounded again, that sabotage the fulfillment of your needs. By using the Imago process, you will learn how to use close relationships in your life to restart your psychological development, thus ending the cycle of serial relationships and repeated activation of your childhood wound. Each close or intimate relationship can be used as laboratory for discovery and growth. And using Imago Dialogue in all your interactions will help you learn how to connect with another person, whether or not they are a candidate for a lasting relationship. Every time you mirror, validate, and empathize you learn a new skill, decrease your reactivity, and increase your own self-esteem. That is the good news. Here is the bad news: what you can achieve while you are single and uncommitted is limited. You can discover your childhood wound in your current relationships. It will appear each time you feel frustrated, hurt, or afraid. But you cannot heal your wounds until you are in a committed relationship and use the Imago process. What you can achieve, however, is the beginning of the process of changing your

defenses and increasing your capacity for engagement and connection. Each protective behavior you surrender will eventually heal the wounds of childhood. And each connecting behavior you learn and practice will contribute to your being able to keep the love you find.

Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.  
Dallas, Texas 2018

# *Introduction*

I don't know your personal history, but I suspect that, like most single adults in this country, you are no stranger to the pain and disillusionment of love gone awry. Perhaps you want very much to fall in love and marry, but you never seem to meet the right person. Or, when you do, it doesn't last: your love is not returned, or the one you love doesn't want to be tied down. Maybe you are divorced—perhaps not for the first time. Or you are separated, caught in the tangled emotional and financial throes of dividing the spoils—and the children—of a marriage that didn't make it. As a gay or lesbian, you may find it hard to create and sustain a committed relationship in a society that doesn't recognize nonheterosexual marriage. If you are widowed, you can't imagine how to find love anew if it means going to singles bars or placing ads in the personals column.

Maybe your love life has been a series of one-night—or three-night—stands: either they're not right, or you're not right, but the result is the same—on to the next. Perhaps it's gotten to the point where you date just to have someone to go to the movies with, or to sleep with, but you never seem to fall in love, or you get bored quickly, and the idea of staying in a relationship is scary. If you're involved with someone now, you may be wondering whether it will last, but already you can see that your partner is not the person you thought he or she was; it's bound to end soon, and you will be alone, again.

For singles today, the spectrum of experience is broad, but confusion and despair about finding lasting love run deep. Marriage

and commitment seem both elusive and perilous, fraught with potential for hurt and heartbreak. It's not surprising that many single people become frantic about finding a mate, any mate. Others, too discouraged to try again, give up the search for lasting love and, like wounded animals, retreat to their caves to lick their wounds. They turn their attention to making the most of their single lives, their work and friends, their homes and hobbies, resigning themselves to casual, occasional relationships, or to none at all. I sympathize with them, for it is understandable to feel that the next time won't be very different from the last, and that they may be better off alone. And yet . . . most of us still harbor the dream of lasting love. We still hope that it will happen to us.

I believe that dream is possible for just about anyone who chooses to pursue it—whether you have never married, are divorced or widowed, gay or lesbian, young or old—and I believe that its fulfillment is vital to our wholeness. It is the goal of *Keeping the Love You Find* to show you how you can realize that dream. [NOTE: I want to acknowledge that while most of the material in this book pertains as well to homosexual singles, and it is my hope that gays and lesbians will find it useful, it is addressed more directly to heterosexual singles.]

#### A PERSONAL NOTE

For over ten years I have worked with couples in troubled marriages. It is often discouraging and heartbreaking work. The partners are angry, disillusioned, and in pain. They feel betrayed by their mates—and by love itself. Caught in a vortex of intense emotions and entrenched behavior, they can't understand how their joy evaporated, how their love turned to dust. I am often discouraged, too, because I know that in order for them to heal their marriages, there is much to learn—about themselves and about relationships. But too often they are overwhelmed by their day-to-day conflicts, and it is too late, and too hard—no matter how badly they want to make it right again—for the long, arduous process of reeducation and re-loving.

I saw this in my own first marriage. Although I was a pastoral counselor myself, years of therapy and the best of intentions couldn't seem to put it back together again. Now I recognize that the ingredients of lasting love remained a mystery to us, and to the professionals we worked with; we just didn't have the information and skills vital to the survival of our partnership. My devastation over the failure of that marriage, which we tried so hard to rescue,

led me to devote my studies and my professional life to uncovering the true nature, and the deeper purpose, of relationships. It was during this period that I developed the theories and practice of Imago Relationship Therapy, which is the foundation for this book. Now, happily, I am in a marriage that works very differently, but sometimes I wonder what would have happened *if only I'd known then what I now know about relationships*, not only for myself, but for the couples who I counseled with such frustrating results.

It's that feeling of "if only . . ." that inspired me to write *Keeping the Love You Find*. Whatever your history, whatever your heartbreak, I believe that as a single person you have an advantage over those who are married and trying to solve their problems in the throes of day-to-day crisis and hurt. You are in an ideal position to learn what you need to know and what you can do to greatly improve your chances for finding, and keeping, love. I do not mean to diminish your doubt and anguish, but I believe you are fortunate to be single in a culture that offers you the wherewithal and the opportunity to know yourself and your needs, to learn how to live on your own, to experiment with sex, relationships, and careers before you marry. Not only that, but if you don't get it right the first time, you're allowed second, and even third and fourth, chances to get it right.

This book is not like other singles books. It is not about how to snare the perfect mate, because the perfect mate is a myth. And it is certainly not about the joys of being single, for while I respect those who choose to remain single in these difficult times, I don't believe that you can fully grow and become whole except in a committed relationship. This book is about *relationships*; in particular, it is about what you can do *now*, as a single person, to prepare for lasting love.

I believe in the transforming power of love. And I believe that just about anyone, no matter how discouraged by past failures, or how troubled his or her history, can find and keep love. In 1988 I wrote a book called *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*, which was about repairing damaged relationships. *Keeping the Love You Find* is about *preventing* them. So much of the heartbreak of love could be avoided if we would postpone marriage until we learn what relationships are really about, and until we uncover the hidden land mines we bring to our partnerships. I think you will find that the program outlined in this book opens the door to growth and change, and to an awareness of the tremendous potential for healing and happiness inherent in the modern love marriage.

However, I don't have any quick cures for your relationship blues. You may find that the message of this book is discouraging at times, because while I'm idealistic about love, I'm hard-nosed about what

makes it work. But I assure you that if you do the work, you will see results. You will know yourself better, you will understand what relationships are really about, and you will be able to work on the things in yourself that need to be changed in order to have the partnership you yearn for. You will be able to break the repetitive patterns of past relationships; you will change the kind of person to whom you are attracted (and who eventually frustrates you); and you will be in a better position to attract someone who is willing and able to work to achieve a deep and lasting love. The severity of your partnership conflicts will be lessened, and you will have the tools to deal more effectively with what does come up.

#### HOW THE BOOK WORKS

*Keeping the Love You Find* is presented in five sections. Part I looks at who we are as singles and as human beings, what it is that we long for from life, and how our relationships can be the path to the fulfillment of our deepest yearnings.

The purpose of Parts II and III is to reeducate us about ourselves, to show how the experiences of childhood brought us to where we find ourselves today. Part II talks about how we were nurtured; Part III is about our socialization. Because how we were socialized with regard to gender and sexuality has such a powerful influence on our relationships, I have devoted a whole chapter to this topic. As you read these sections and complete the exercises, it will become clear how your particular childhood experiences charted the course you now follow. You will see that who we fall in love with, and how we behave in our relationships, is a direct outgrowth of what came before.

The dynamics of partnership is the subject of Part IV, which begins with your discovering what kind of partner your childhood has prepared you to fall in love with. In all likelihood, you will find the description of what I call the “unconscious” relationship all too familiar, from its romantic beginning in mystery and joy, through the long siege of disillusionment and anger, struggle and disappointment, to its ending in mystery and pain. On a more hopeful note, we will chart the course of the kind of intentional, truly intimate relationship that we want, a “conscious” relationship, in which couples understand and accept the challenge of keeping the love they find.

Part V is the nuts-and-bolts section, an intensive training course in which you practice the skills and work on the behavior changes necessary to become a “conscious single,” in preparation for a

conscious partnership. In the final chapter I will give you a preview of the prize for the hard work of a conscious relationship: real love.

Love is hard—life is hard—but it's the only game in town. It's a high-stakes game, because how well you play determines how you will thrive and grow. You might as well learn to play it as well as possible, as soon as possible. I believe that *Keeping the Love You Find* tells you what you need to know to do just that.





P A R T

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**BEING  
HUMAN,  
BEING  
SINGLE**



# 1

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## *What's Wrong with Being Single?*

Everything that lives, lives not alone nor  
for itself.

—WILLIAM BLAKE

**F**or the first time in our cultural history, being single is considered by some to be a preferred life-style. It's easy to see why. Carefree singles breeze through cola commercials with adorable partners, wearing great clothes, having a fabulous time. No doubt they have interesting careers, and apartments filled with the latest appliances and high-tech sound equipment. After dining out in trendy restaurants, they come home and have wild sex (of course!)—and there are no kids or dirty laundry to deal with.

An appealing scenario . . . but it's not the whole picture. I heard quite a different story from the singles who attended my workshops, many of whom had recycled through singlehood several times. They were there because the single life—even if it included the nice clothes and dream dates—wasn't making them happy, and they were wondering if there wasn't more to life, if they were ever going to find someone they really loved who would love them in return and with whom they would live happily ever after.

Now, why is that? Why, when in our society, finally, it is possible to live a good life alone, to live with a lover, to have sex with numerous partners, or even to have children outside of marriage, when marriage often seems like just the first step toward divorce, do most single people still want to marry? And why, for that matter, are those who are divorced or widowed so anxious to reenlist? To me the answer is very simple: we have an unconscious yearning for partnership, which is essential for our fulfillment; without it we can never feel whole. In this book I want to show you why our desire for a committed relationship is so powerful. I'll explain why you haven't had such a relationship (or why the attempts you've made have failed) and how you can. But first I want to talk about the issues singles are facing today. In particular I want to address the widespread lack of understanding about the deeper purpose of relationships, which I feel is at the heart of the confusion and pain felt so acutely by singles today.

### ***Singledom: A Neglected Rite of Passage***

Much can be said in favor of the single life, and this thirty-year-old New York ad-copy writer says it well:

"I have had a great time since coming to the city after graduation. I started out in a Greenwich Village walk-up with my old college roommate; we were scraping by on our entry-level wages. We learned how to iron our shirts and we cooked on a two-burner hotplate. In the evenings we'd check out free local entertainment and poetry readings, and cadge the free food at local bars during 'Happy Hour.' I met all kinds of people, many of them pretty strange by Midwestern-college standards. Now I have my own place in a high-rise on the Upper East Side with a modern kitchen—even a microwave. I've dated a lot off and on, many different women, usually nothing serious, but one who I lived with for almost two years (and who broke my heart). I've been to Europe twice and last year I camped and hitchhiked my way across Canada. I've been studying t'ai chi for two years and been in therapy for one. I'm terrified of getting married—it doesn't seem to me like I see many terrific marriages—but I've noticed that I'm beginning to lose interest in just having someone to go out with on a Saturday night, or even just another sexual adventure—and I never thought I'd say that. My girlfriend and I are about to move in together, and now it feels like it might be time to settle down."

I'd say this young man has had the ideal single life. His single period has been a *stage*, not an end in itself. Although it has been a period of relatively footloose independence, he has had to take care of his day-to-day living and be responsible for his own welfare. His time and his money are his own, and he's made his own choices about career, friends, and travel. He's experimented with different life-styles and with sex and dating, and pursued newfound interests and hobbies. He's sown his wild oats, and along the way had various relationships with women, at least one of them a relatively serious living arrangement. There have been good times and bad. He has established an identity separate from the collective/familial matrix from which he emerged. Through all of this, he has developed a strong sense of who he is, what he wants, and how to get it. It seems to me that his single years have provided him with education, experience, and an expanded awareness of the world. He is ready to move on without regrets.

I wish I could say that this man's story was typical. Unfortunately, many singles manage to bungle this valuable opportunity for independence and self-knowledge. It's not surprising, for despite the freedoms, choices, and wherewithal singles have today, many of them haven't a clue about how to make the most of their single years. But how should they know? Until recently there was no such thing as singledom as we know it—it was merely a bridge between the childhood bed and the marriage bed, to be crossed as quickly and uneventfully as possible. It's no wonder that, free to live in new and exploratory and self-defining ways, young men and women play out traditional scripts, or grapple in confusion with murky new gender roles and relationship dynamics.

Typically, the tales I hear are of women whose entire focus during their single years is staking out a mate, and not just any mate, but one who meets an exhaustive list of specifications. Predictably, they are disappointed that this paragon hasn't made an appearance, or, if he has, that he's not dying to tie the knot. I talk to young men, trained on a parallel track (same teachers, different lessons!) who devote these same years single-mindedly to having as good a time as possible, chalking up sexual conquests while they move through the appropriate career ranks as fast as possible. Complaining that all their dates want from them is a marriage proposal, they avoid for as long as they can the kind of intimacy that they will have to face when the pressure builds on them to knuckle under to grown-up demands. You'd think men and women came from different planets, they are so at cross-purposes.

Those who go against the social grain have their own set of problems. Young women intent on establishing careers feel at risk in

postponing marriage, knowing that their statistical chances of marrying decline precipitously the longer they wait. Women still have the stigma of old-maidhood to contend with. "Does anyone notice," laments Mary Anne Meyer in an essay on the *New York Times* Op-Ed page, "the paradox of a society that says no matter how much success a woman achieves, she hasn't really made it until she says 'I do'?"<sup>1</sup> Young men who are *not* focused on advancing their careers, or who try and explore nontraditional gender paths, also feel they pay a price; they worry that their eligibility and desirability are compromised.

Appearances to the contrary, these are difficult times for singles. A glance at the wealth of newspaper and magazine offerings for singles tells the story. First there are all the products and services aimed at bringing singles together: the Club Med vacations, the single-gourmet clubs, the singles-only condominiums; the books on how to meet men, or to pick up women, on learning what the opposite sex is really like and what they want; the personals ads in which singles enumerate the qualities they want—and offer—in a mate. Then there are the offerings aimed at singles for whom none of the above seems to be working: therapists specializing in the depression and loneliness of singles, support groups for the "temporarily single," dating services that promise to deliver where others have failed, books on women who love too much and on men who hate women. Singles feel caught between a rock and a hard place, unwilling to go backward to a traditional relationship, unprepared to move forward to the new, under pressure both to settle down and to live it up. What, as they say, is wrong with this picture?

#### REDEFINING SINGLENESS

In *Childhood and Society*,<sup>2</sup> the famed psychoanalyst Erik Erikson talks about the moratorium period observed in most primitive societies, in which the individual is allowed, even expected, to have a period of irresponsible dependency before settling down with a mate, having children, and becoming a contributing member of the community.

In our culture, those fortunate enough to go to college have, by default, such a moratorium. Even so, many college students marry soon after graduation, before they've had a chance to try their wings. Though the increasing numbers of students going to college have raised the average age of first marriages in recent years, many young people still marry directly out of high school. Those who get the opportunity to fly solo for a while do so without a clear map of where they're going, or where to land.

## A BETTER WAY

We need to redefine singleness, to update the rules, and to educate singles as to the purpose and benefits of this vital transition. I suggest that the best way to accomplish this is to institute a modernized version of Erikson's moratorium. In our society we hold up to young people a model of early decision and commitment as to life's path, and then we end up with burned-out executives and displaced homemakers thirty years down the line.

Not that all early marriages are disastrous, by any means. Those who have had a healthy family life, who have used college or their early work years to explore and establish a sense of self, and who have made good partner choices, have what it takes for a successful marriage, despite their youth. But these are fortunate circumstances. To my mind, most people should wait to marry until they're well into their twenties. During this period between childhood/school and marriage, singles would be *expected* to try on the world and its goods and services for size. There would be no pressure to marry; in fact there would be pressure *not* to marry. For that matter, there would be pressure not to fixate on career, but rather to explore all areas of life. Singleness would be recognized as a vital stage of the journey to maturation, a time to learn about who we are, to learn responsibility and self-sufficiency, to identify our true desires, and to confront our inner strengths and demons, a time to make changes in the things that stymie our pleasure and progress in life, to learn how to connect and communicate on all levels. It would be sorely needed relationship training.

If it were to become the norm for singles to delay marriage until they had made this journey, many of the problems that sabotage relationships would not arise. To be sure, certain deep issues only appear, and can only be resolved, in a committed, day-by-day partnership. But some of the underbrush could be cleared away. Fundamental issues of selfhood would have been dealt with, so that they would not be an additional burden on marriage. Partners would know themselves better; they would be more comfortable with intimacy, and ready to take on the responsibilities of marriage. Knowing more about what they truly want from life, they would not face so many surprises later on. Such singles would be more able to cope with the powerful psychological confrontations that are intrinsic to marriage, and more aware of its tremendous spiritual potential. Besides, what's the rush? At twenty-eight or thirty or thirty-two, there is still plenty of time to have a couple of kids, to move ahead with a career that has been freely chosen.

## IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BE SINGLE

Given the limited life expectancy of marriage today, being single is not just for the young. Thirty-, forty-, and sixty-something singlehood can be particularly difficult for those who married early and innocent, who thought they'd managed to avoid confronting their loneliness and dependence. All too often mid-life singledom is compounded by fears of aging or entering the job market for the first time, by the difficulties of raising children alone, by financial straits.

But a moratorium on mate hunting can be an invaluable opportunity for self-discovery at any age. Even forced, unwanted singleness can be a blessing in disguise, a time for healing and reestablishing one's priorities and sense of oneself. I've heard numerous tales from divorced people who dreaded being on their own, even if their marriages were loveless and painful, who dreaded "dating" and reentering careers, but who found to their relief that their new lives were a wonderful balm, a time to heal and to reconnect with themselves.

A middle-aged woman who had great foreboding about the loneliness and change of life-style that leaving her marriage portended was pleasantly surprised:

"I would find myself singing around the house; I relished the most elementary things, like eating a meal alone (and eating exactly what I wanted and when I wanted, no matter how unorthodox). I took baths, browsed through magazines, stayed up half the night working. For a long time I had no desire or need to find a mate; it was as though I had to put myself back together, to find out who I was and what I really liked, in every area. In some ways it was tremendously painful, but my growing sense of myself and my ability to go it alone were a revelation to me. Of course, there came the time when things just seemed so easy on my own that I feared any involvement that would upset my equilibrium. And now I worry that at my age I won't find a partner. But that's another story."

Brian, a driven, headstrong man who divorced in his fifties, told me that after an initial splurge of dating and doing everything to avoid going home to his empty apartment, he found out that what he really liked to do was bake bread, stay up late and play the piano (which he hadn't touched since he was twenty), go in late to the office, and take camping trips to exotic fishing areas—all of which



were radical changes from what he thought his life was about. "Why did it take me so long to figure this out?" he said. "And couldn't I have had all this, and my marriage, too?" Many divorced or widowed people—especially if they can get past what one man characterized as his period of "panic and promiscuity"—do with their singleness what they should have done *before* they married the first time: live alone, find their own rhythms, date a variety of people, go into therapy, develop new friends and interests, learn how to live with and care for themselves.

#### FOREVER SINGLE

For increasing numbers of people, however, singleness is not just an interlude between relationships, but a permanent life choice. Some consider it a sacrifice necessary to pursue demanding creative or career goals, while for others it is a rebellion against expected gender roles or responsibilities, and for yet others a decision to avoid either the pain or the intimacy they've experienced in past relationships. (In a separate category are those whose singleness is a part of their religious vows, and their devotion to a life of service. In this case, there is a cultural validation for singleness. But even Roman Catholic nuns, who have chosen singleness and celibacy, take vows of "marriage" to Jesus.)

I have a friend who has chosen to remain single. A dedicated composer, he is a semi-hermit who works erratic hours and lives a simple life, content getting by on the \$15–20,000 income that his work generates. He fears that marriage would obligate him not only to increase his income, but to change his habits and whole way of life at the expense of his true love, music. "I live in a ramshackle cabin with a leaky roof. There's no TV, I've got no health insurance, and I haven't left the state in three years. Do I sound like an eligible bachelor to you?"

Ingrid, a dedicated research chemist, says she is happy with her life but angry at the choice she feels she's had to make.

"Men in my position have wives to take care of them, to cope with the daily chores and logistics and distractions, and to be of support. Not only is it hard for a woman like me to find a man who would understand or tolerate my immersion in my work, but in most cases I would be expected to give this up in order to have the privileges of marriage. At least nowadays I can have a lover without getting too much flak—though for some people it's a problem that my current lover is so much

younger than I—again, a choice that would go unnoticed if I were a man.”

In a somewhat different category are those who are single by default. They may have come to terms with living a single life, and to making the best of it—which many do well. But on some level, in choosing to be single they have given up their dream of a relationship, often because they have been badly hurt in the past. As Edna Ferber quipped, “Being an old maid is like death by drowning, not an altogether unpleasant sensation after you cease to struggle.”

For some, of course, the choice to remain single is but a rationalization of their inability to deal with the demands of a relationship: “I need my space,” “I never found the right person,” “My work consumes all my energy.” Often those who choose singleness have run repeatedly into the same problems and pains. They feel that their troubled childhoods have left them with scars that wreak devastation in each successive relationship. Wounds are reopened and not healed; again and again they find themselves in the same stuck place. And so they decide, perhaps rightly, that they are better off alone. They choose to make the best of the situation, in a cultural climate that at least tolerates their singleness.

I see the coming years as happier ones for those who choose to remain single, and more productive ones for those who see singleness as a stage in their growth, a passage en route to marriage. I applaud the growing acceptance of singleness, and hope that it becomes even less stigmatized. But as you have no doubt guessed, I see singleness in a limited framework, as an opportunity to find and establish oneself, at whatever stage of life. Mostly, given my own experience, my view of human nature, and my experience with singles, I see *what’s wrong* with being single. Presumably, you’re reading this book because you don’t think it’s so hot either, even if you’re currently enjoying your single life. Presumably your desire is to be in a lasting relationship, and presumably that hasn’t come to pass yet.

#### WE’VE GOTTA HAVE IT

Singles often tell me they feel there’s something wrong with them because they’re so needy of a relationship. Sometimes, they say, they get to the point where they just hope that someone—anyone, practically—will come along and fall in love with them, and they’ll get married and everything will work out fine. This seems immature and desperate, but such “it’s my only chance” marriages

occur all too frequently, with disastrous results. People who marry without honoring the mandate of their singleness are, in a way, just postponing their single years until after they divorce—unless they get lucky, or work very hard in their marriages, or stay in dead-end relationships.

I don't want to judge too harshly, though, because in most cases something more complex is going on here—not just a desperation to get married, or a desire to fill up an empty life. That neediness is symptomatic of a profound but unrecognized desire in the unconscious, a manifestation of the human need for wholeness and connection and, specifically, for a safe, intimate, enlivening partnership. I am saying that in order to feel whole, to feel fully alive, fully human, and to heal the wounds we carry from childhood, *we've gotta have it*. This sounds pretty dramatic, but I believe it is profoundly true. It is not just a matter of desperate singles. Our human nature and needs, no matter how we rationalize or adapt, cannot be denied.

Just think about how we use the term single—it doesn't at all mean what the word implies. We define singles *in relationship to their relationships*: divorced, widowed, separated, engaged, bachelors or spinsters—some version of *not married*. On the surface, this may seem to reflect our society's bias toward marriage; in fact, it reveals our unconscious acknowledgment of our essential relational nature. We have only to recall how alive and at peace with the world we feel when we are in love and connected to another, how disconnected and out of sorts we feel when such a connection is missing, to see the truth of this.

Health statistics reveal our innate need for relationship. People who are single over long periods of time tend to suffer from depression to one degree or another; they have weakened immune systems and so are more vulnerable to disease and have a shorter life expectancy. They are also less efficient in the workplace, and less able to weather crisis or disappointment. It is practically a commonplace for a widowed person to go into decline, to become ill and even die within a year or so of a spouse's death—whether the marriage was a happy one or not. And numerous studies have demonstrated the withering effect of neglect or lack of affection on babies.<sup>3</sup>

In short, we need relationships, and in particular we need the kind of committed long-term love relationships that allow us to heal and grow. To my way of thinking, perpetual singleness stunts growth, for it denies the fundamental needs of the unconscious. I believe that singleness is meant to be a stage, not a permanent way of life. There are certain things that we can only accomplish, spiritu-