

## ***Couplehood as a Spiritual Path - By Dr. James J. Wisecup***

The global economic crisis is affecting not only peoples' jobs, health-care benefits, and finances, but also their marriages and partnerships. As one couple put it: "When everything in our world is shaken and falling apart, what do we have? We have each other and our faith." Both clergy and psychotherapists know that most people can get through any crisis if their relationship is strong and based on a sustaining faith. But even strong relationships and faith can be damaged by doubt and fear. The challenge before everyone today is "how can we survive this current economic crisis and social upheaval?" There are many things that churches and synagogues can do for couples and families at this time. Worship has always been central to every faith community.

The other essential faith ingredient is education. What couples need now more than ever is education in spirituality. An excellent response is "Couplehood as a Spiritual Path," which is built on the Imago Relationship Therapy developed by Drs. Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt. By integrating Imago principles into their Christian or Jewish faith, committed couples can learn to follow the second great commandment: to love our partner – our closest neighbor – as our self. Human love in relationship is the very essence of spirituality. Three main concepts create the context for and the possibility of this love: One, making the space between couples sacred.

The relationship between two people is unique and special. It is to be cherished and made safe. Love cannot flourish without safety. The question for each person is: "How can I ensure your safety with me? You are not going to feel safe and connected with me if I am criticizing, blaming, or threatening you." We must change the focus from, "What do I need from our relationship?" to "What does our relationship need?" This paradigm shift develops and sustains an open, trusting, intimate connection. Two, uncovering the purpose of attraction. The power of attraction is deeply rooted in our unconscious. We all have a picture (Imago) of the person we want to love and be loved by. The purpose of romance is to connect with someone who will help advance our spiritual journey toward wholeness. Our Judeo-Christian faith starts with the belief that we are "children of God," created in His image (Genesis 1: 27). We are created with a purpose and destiny. Three, fulfilling the purpose of conflict. Conflict between a couple can be viewed as growth trying to happen. Conflict can be better understood and resolved by learning a new way of talking called Imago Dialogue. This approach enables each person to listen and really understand the other person. When a person feels understood by the other, then connection is possible. Everyone needs to be understood and feel connected. Dialogue is a powerful and effective spiritual practice. It is what "love in action" does. You listen and reflect back on what the other person says, you validate the truth or perspective of what is said, and you empathize with how the person is feeling. The sending and receiving of each person's ideas and feelings, hurts, complaints, dreams and desires creates a mutuality that holds and nourishes the space between couples – the space where God resides. God's deeper purpose for our relationship is the co-creation of a loving space where wounds are healed and growth happens. Using dialogue as a spiritual practice, couples can achieve the transformational power of love and deep connection in their journey toward wholeness. The intention to safeguard the sacred space between us and the daily spiritual practice of Imago Dialogue can help us negotiate difficult times. After all is said and done, life is all about relationship. What kind of relationship do you want to have – with God, your partner, and yourself?