

To Imago Therapists

By Al Turtle © 2005 Al Turtle

INTRODUCTION

I am sorry that this took so long for me to write. It has taken me years to respond, with integrity, to the wonderful gifts I have received from Harville Hendrix and from so many others in the “Imago Community.” In a way I started to write this in the winter of 1996 when I started to sense that there was much more that could be revealed about those very gifts. The concepts and titles seemed to me so mysterious at first -- Conscious Marriage, MVE, the Cosmic Journey, etc. Yet I could see the “core” (that is what I called it) alive in couples and in my fellow therapists both in their actions and in their eyes. I began to look for the “core vision” that was evoked by the Workshop and in my therapy room, and in the planning of our national meetings. I went through much iteration before the landscape became visible. Now that this “core vision” is clear for me, I believe I can validate you all, and add details to both the “core vision” and to the repeatedly emergent confusion and frequent despair.

CHUTZPAH

Many people have spoken up to me and asked me “who do you think you are to write as you do? You don’t even have a PhD!” At first I felt put down, even shamed, by what seemed to be efforts to “put me in my place”. But somehow I have been able to stand firm, partially as a result of the strength I gained as a kid feeling “put down” by my family. In addition I gained strength from several other factors: a) I witnessed other people “being put down” who had more “credentials” than I, b) my friends almost universally were supportive, c) I found that the “core vision” excludes/evaporates put downs, and d) my wife, who would listen and validate over and over whenever she could.

The result is that I feel comfortable at speaking out. Following the “core vision,” I see my voice as simply my voice. I do not need credentials to share my integrity.

VOICE

I think there are two profound influences in my voice: simplicity and anger. Both have traditions behind them and I do not choose to apologize for either.

Simplicity

Long ago I fell into an argument with a Jesuit on a train to New Haven, Connecticut. My point was that the “word of God must be so simple that the simplest among us could see it immediately.” His point seemed to be that “the simplest among us had to be guided by those who were educated enough to see the word of God.” We ended our argument, as the train pulled into the station, with his advice that I was “on the pathway to Hell.”

The experience actually strengthened my beliefs, and I became sensitive to what I call the “priestly tradition” – that tendency to make the message so intricate that it is only an elite can hold or grasp it. I have studied “elites” ever since that train ride. An example is that in the Navy, I, an electronic technician, could baffle an officer with my language of technology, while the officer could baffle me with his language of command.

Thus in seeking and understanding the “core” of Imago, I have pursued simple language that was immediately understood by clients. Also if I found an “Imago” concept that was difficult for clients to grasp, I freely reformulated it until clients would easily “get it.”

Anger

As an emotion, anger seems very useful to me, now. As a kid I was raised to think of all anger useless and as a sign of “immaturity” – a put-down in my family. When I completed my Master Degree, I took advantage of my thesis to write on [Anger: A Resource Paper](#), both for myself and for teachers. Later I deeply studied the bodily experiences of emotions while I took years of training in the work of Wilhelm Reich, MD, who I gather is the founder of all the body therapies. For me the sensation of anger in my body is both a cue to “something is wrong here” and the source of energy to “fix it”. Being a person who cannot help ruminating a lot (ask my wife), I tend to reflect on my anger, find the message in my anger, and develop solutions. So much of my writing has originated in some sort of yell, “No!!” that emerged, usually silently inside me when I observed something going on. Thus much of what I have found to be wise has emerged from something I was originally taught was a negative.

I really want to thank those of you who have managed to evoke this simple emotion in me and thus have helped me continue to develop my integrity.

WISDOM

I entitled my website [Al Turtle's Relationship Wisdom](#). If this seems cocky to you, refer back to my paragraph on Chutzpah. I have come to love the term Wisdom as opposed to Knowledge. I remember Huston Smith, the great man of comparative religions, speaking of libraries and communities who use only oral traditions. What I loved was the idea that libraries have sections devoted to many kinds of knowledge. But they have no section on wisdom. He then went on to say that the cultures that do not use the written word, do not have libraries of books. Yet, when the community is gathered together, sitting there in center of the group, in the bodies of their elders and the group practice of traditions, is the entire section of their "library" on Wisdom. For them wisdom is always present.

I like the idea that for each and every one of us as we age, our first job is to collect our Wisdom – what we have learned works. Our second job is to make it available to younger people.

A friend of mine came from such an oral tradition culture, one that excluded the written word. As a kid there was always an elder visible, 24 hours a day. If he needed wisdom he could ask. One challenge was to decide which elder to ask. His rule was to pick the "eldest with the most scars" – the one with the most experience. Another challenge was to understand what the elder said. It might take months for him to grasp what the elder said to him. And two elders might say quite different things, tell quite different stories. He learned that wisdom was unique to each person, and that he had to learn his own by reflection on whatever source he could find.

INTEGRITY

Perhaps the most fun about being me is getting to play with my brain. I am one of those functional ambidextrous people. I write with my left hand and hit a baseball with my right hand. I gather about 10% of the population ends up this way. I also gather that it means my right cortex, handling my pen, and my left cortex, handling that tennis racket, can talk pretty smoothly with each other. Practically speaking this means that my more intuitive side has become well integrated with my reflective, thoughtful side.

A result of this can be seen on my website. All the articles are written by me and they all link with each other. Basically this is one voice covering quite a bit of territory. If a point doesn't link smoothly, my good-old-brain will sense the dis-link and write a new more linking phrase. Thus when you read my "stuff" as I call it, you get an integrated perception or story.

Another result shows in what I, and others, sense is a kind of completeness. It is quite easy for my brain to notice black holes, places where answers are not given. "Something is missing here!" it says. Thus I have continued to find what will fill those holes. And I have worked on those pieces until they have a sense of completion – they fit in without holes.

Others sometimes experience this. "Gosh, Al, you have an answer to everything." Well, in the area of relationships I have chosen to focus on I probably do have answers. And I have developed quite a bit of confidence in using these answers.

FOCUS

Early on, I had to determine what it was I was going after. What was my field of interest – my task in life. I have been relating it thusly for some time. To live life, a person needs many skills: to feed, clothe, gain shelter, pay taxes, balance a checkbook, etc. All of us need these skills. But to live with another person requires an additional set of skills. I like to think of a tool box with three drawers of tools: two for just living and one for the tools of getting along with others. Sometimes I speak of living along on a desert island. All goes well for a while and then you see someone swimming toward shore. Now what skills do you need that you didn't when you were alone.

Thus my focus is on the skills of getting along with others, of which marriage and committed relationships are just one kind – one subset.

SUMMARY: INTRODUCTION

When people say that I seem to have an answer to everything, are my answers "Right"? Do I think I know facticity? Of course not! It is simply my view, built out of my integral view of relationships of all forms, Imago, and the "core vision". It is my view of what works in those relationships. I have confidence in my answers. It is my wisdom.

However, if you don't like what I say, and I tell this to my clients, there is always the delete key, the waste basket, the door and other elders to consult.

PART ONE: WHAT EMPOWERS THE IMAGO MOVEMENT

What makes Imago tick? Why do people join it? What is its product? Why does it spread? What's all the fuss about? Why do people drop out? These were the early questions that came to me somewhere about 10 years ago.

I had recently come from an experience working in a company call Itron. For a while I managed 50 software programmers and the company was growing and doing well. Particularly the software division was very happy. My job was to keep this going. How did it work? The "it" was called the Itron Magic, because the bosses could see it working, but didn't know how or why. At about the time I finally figured out how it worked, management had changed several of the key components and I got to watch, in real life, people killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Being in middle management, I could watch it die up close. And I was laid off as part of its death – even though I had a clear vision of what was going on.

Thus when my wife and I became Imago Therapists, and I trained as a Workshop Presenter, and we started going to conferences, I sensed something familiar. I remember hearing that Imago (the organization) was like an airplane built in flight – the engines were in good shape, even if the wings were not completed yet. Was this another "golden goose?" As I invested money and time, and as there was a possible path ahead of me (Clinical Instructor, Master Trainer, etc.), I really wanted to know what made up the "Imago Magic". I did not want to be "laid off" again because some management would "kill the Golden Goose."

This is why I wanted answers to those questions at the beginning of this section. "What makes Imago tick? Why do people join it? What is its product? Why does it spread? What's all the fuss about? Why do people drop out?"

The Current Target Market

As I had done previously I first looked for the people who, by their actions, displayed awareness of the "Imago Magic." And I looked for two types of actions: people who moved toward the magic, and people who fought when they were separated from the magic. Wilhelm Reich said, "Always look for the passion."

I found that couples at workshops readily showed signs of buying into it. I felt the pull myself. I saw that many people, single or married, at annual conferences were buying into it. As I shared Imago concepts with single people, I saw their excitement. And I saw passionate struggles between, on the one hand, what was called "the hierarchy" of the organization or institute of trainers (IIRT), and on the other hand Imago Therapy students and practitioners. The passion behind AIRT seemed amazing to me.

Whatever the "Imago Magic" was, it had strong appeal to both marrieds, committeds, single-past-marrieds, and to professions themselves.

THE PRODUCT

The GTLYW Workshop

In looking for the "it", I first started with looking at the GTLYW workshop which I was now conducting. I think the central message of the weekend is, "Gather Hope! A Great Marriage/Partnership is really doable, and here's what to do to get it."

My wife and I did our workshops together. I was very interested in what were the central selling points to the central message. What I found in order was

1. it was the Stages of Relationship chart on page 1 of the work book,
2. it was the way Sandra and I treated each other and participants,
3. it was some experience of a change for the better within the couple
4. it was a convincing set of tools.

To say it again, what I saw was that the term that struck people the most was that "Conscious Marriage". That phrase, or that column on the chart, evoked in them a strong desire for something. Then they wanted to see if we

had it. Then they wanted to feel it themselves, then they wanted to know what to do to get it. It seemed as if the Workshop was overcoming some sort of skepticism about the attainment of some remote dream.

For me, the function of the GTLYW Workshop was to restore “hope” of something – described as “Conscious Marriage.” I noted that the workshop did not spend much time on what that would look like. However, the participants were critically looking at Sandra and me to model it. They would even follow us around during breaks to see how we interacted.

Two thoughts come to mind. One is that Sandra and I mirror a lot. We watched several other Workshop presenters doing their weekend. One of them taught mirroring, but did not do it. We were both startled by this absence of modeling. “I now want you to mirror each other, but I won’t mirror you.”

A couple of years later during the starting up of the FirePit, a weekly phone conference call for ITs to talk about anything, I received an email from a really dedicated Imago Therapist. It was our practice on the FirePit to mirror everything whether the speaker wanted it or not. The email said how refreshing and exciting it was to hear mirroring amongst “us”, something he had not heard since training.

The Community

I also looked carefully at the interactions in our community, particularly those with a lot of passion. At first these baffled me, since at that time I only saw the product in terms of what “we” offered couples and singles. For a while I wrote the “conflicts” off as being “typical political battles of over territory in an organization”. Still the intensity struck me as being very Power Struggle-like and I had already come to see the Power Struggle as a period of time when a couple is more and more intensely trying, by ineffective means, to obtain love. I began to think of the Imago community struggles in terms of frantic attempts to obtain some sort of “it”, something like that which was evoked in the workshop by the label Conscious Marriage.

At about that time I had the opportunity to spend several months in discussion with several Imago Therapists. We focused on the difference between a “normal” professional community and a “dialogical” professional community. Our task was to conceive of an Ethics Policy for AIRT. From those discussions emerged for me a clear concept of Dialogical Community – a concept that found Conscious Marriage as a special case.

In the past several years, since the creation of the FirePit, the development of Communologue and the Imago Peace Project, I have repeatedly observed Dialogical Community first hand.

The Core Vision

What I’ve found is that the “core vision” is inside those who participate, all of us, and it is there in us long before we discovered Imago. In a special way it is evoked in the powerful experience we call “falling in love”. It can be re-invoked by the GTLYW and KTLYF workshops. In them it has traditionally been called Conscious Marriage. Yet it can be also evoked by joining AIRT, IIRT and now IRI. I think it can probably be evoked by thousands of other expressions and actions in this world. I believe the “core vision” is specific, measurable, and achievable. And I think it can easily be encouraged or discouraged by specific acts.

I think the goose that lays the golden eggs is this “core vision.” And I think Imago Therapists, the IRI community, can take advantage of this more consciously and with clearer intention or we can more or less stumble along as we have. While, I don’t think we can kill this goose (we didn’t create it), I think we can lose it from our community.

The Core Vision contains two parts: that part general to all people and that part specific to those who joined in Romantic Love.

Now, remember that this is just my belief. Try it for size.

MY GENERAL “CORE VISION”: THE STORY

I really want to give credit where I think it is due. Harville Hendrix and Wilhelm Reich were the two people who started me on this path. Hendrix contributed key dialogical concepts while Reich contributed the underlying cosmic and body dimensions. It all started with the Cosmic Journey and the Evolutionary Journey pages of the workbook. My concern was that, as this all was taught me, it was vastly too abstract for clients. I felt ashamed that I selling them “pretty things.” I dirty as if I were a used car salesman who was selling a product I had never tested myself.

Now, I felt comfortable with the Cosmic Journey having the Reich background and a background in physics. I had tested all this myself. But the Evolutionary Journey teased me.

In New York, Harville gave a two part lecture on Safety and Passion. It was audio taped and I got it. You can get it still, I think. I listened to the Safety section over and over, again seeking what was beneath his words. Finally I got it. Safety was not an abstract concept. It was specific, measurable, and achievable. It was concrete. I could see when I was safe by measuring my blood stream or by watching my actions. I could see when others were safe similarly. And Harville shared that couples were seeking a level of Safety abnormal in our culture. I was already familiar with the idea that our culture is a control-freak culture using “threat” to obtain conformity. From this came the idea that Romantic Couples were seeking an escape from our cultural norms.

Next I began to look, up close, at the phenomenon of safety in my partnership with Sandra. I made a written commitment to become “a source of safety to her” regardless of whether she would make the reciprocal commitment. I learned that in “making her safe” (a bit of an oxy-moron there) I became safe also. This evolved over several years and became our first presentation on The Lizard.

The first component of the “core vision” was what I had come across. People deeply desire to feel safe. They don’t have to be taught this. They are born with it in the structure of their brains – their old reptilian brain, their “Lizard”. And it is specific, measurable and achievable. The idea that all around me people walk in threat did not deter me. I noticed that Romantic people thought they were safe when with their partner.

The 2nd Component of the “core vision” took about 2 years to appear in my mind. Over and over I taught couples and individuals about their brain and their Lizards. Each time I noted the mammalian part of the brain. What did it contribute? What did it offer that reptiles didn’t have? Ah. A Community. A client pointed it out. Her iguana seemed only interested in warmth and food and water. But her cat liked to hang around her. And her dog reacted with joy when she came home and grief when she left. She said, “Mammals need companionship.”

In the laboratory of our relationship, Sandra and I looked at this concept. It was obvious. Both of us had a desire for a more or less specific level of connectedness. I, a fuser, clearly wanted a lot more than did Sandra. The felt sense of too little connection I call loneliness. Sandra, an isolator, clearly wanted less. The felt sense of too much I call feeling crowded, feeling a need for air or space, feeling overwhelmed. For me she was too little. For her I was too much. We worked on this issue of connection until we learned its dimensions and had found the resolutions in our relationship. We called this piece of the “core vision” Reliable Membership.

It was a small step from there to the second component of the “core vision.” People deeply desire to be connected with other people. Let them get divorced, but after a suitable time they will want to reconnect. This is built into us all. We are born with it. And it is specific, measurable and achievable and rests upon the deeper component of Safety.

The 3rd and 4th components of the “core vision” emerged from two sources: Harville Hendrix lecture at ColoradoQuest on Emotional Symbiosis, and the conflict in our community. I have listened to that tape on Emotional Symbiosis probably 40 times. I tried teaching it as it is and learned to hate the label “emotional symbiosis”. Clients could not relate to it. But I really was entranced by the concept. This was at the time of the greatest (visible to me) conflict in our “Imago” community. I want to thank all of you who engaged in that struggle. The laboratory of our community was just what I needed to solidify the next components of the “core vision.”

I began to note the specific event that would trigger an outburst. Remember, I was assuming that an outburst of anger was ok and something to look at. Since much of the conflict in our community appeared in email, I began to sense that I could predict an outburst. I tried it and it worked.

I identified MasterTalk – any sentence that implies the existence of a single truth, or any sentence that implies threat to a disagreeing listener. At first I was scared about what I found. It was so concrete and visible. I could see it in anyone’s writing or speech. I could see it in my writing or speech. I felt naked.

Sandra and I took this into our laboratory and learned to love it and laugh about it. We could catch each other easily. But by agreeing to refrain from it, we made great progress and --- all arguments ceased. We haven't argued in 10 years – with each other or with anyone else.

I went back to the “Imago” community and tried two tests.

In one case I took an email by one of the more combative members of our community. I made 8 copies. I gave it to a group of men after a 20 minute lecture on MasterTalk. I then asked them to mark any sentence in the email that was MasterTalk. They found every instance and were in complete agreement. And they enjoyed the exercise. These men were carpenters, insurance adjusters, carpet layers and plumbers, who were laughing at the “foolishness” of PhDs. I felt a little more nervous and at the same time I felt gratified that the emerging issue was so simple. Remember my principle of Simplicity.

My other “community” test was to take on the role of the Scribe for the R2 Committee. My goal was to produce “minutes” of these critical meetings of AIRT and IIRT members as they tried to morph into a new form of relating and to share what happened with the entire community -- to share in such a way that committee members would not feel threatened by exposure and the community would not feel threatened by being excluded. My method was to listen to each meeting several times and then produce a summary of what went on and never use MasterTalk. For the first several scribings I was pretty nervous as I had a lot of exposure. But never in that year of work did I get, what I thought was by that time, a typical explosive reaction.

During this same time Sandra and I formulated the eminently teachable concepts of Master/Slave vs Friend/Friend relationships. This became the updated, and easily accessible, form of the Emotional Symbiosis lecture. This lecture also gave birth to the critical concept of PreValidation and 3rd and 4th components of the “core vision.” I call these Diversity and Autonomy. The human cortex appears to be designed around appreciating and understanding things differently from all other cortexes and at the same time it seems designed to act or make decision based on that complete difference. Agreement or conformity seems to me to be an illusion. The other two sources that informed these two core components are the scholarly field of General Semantics and the work of Wm Glasser: Choice Theory.

As Sandra and I experimented with and elaborated on these ideas of Diversity and Autonomy, we came to see how specific, measurable and achievable they were in action. And we saw how they rested upon the deeper concepts of Reliable Membership and Safety. There seemed to be a natural priority.

Also what emerged was a sense of “getting close” to a definition of a Dialogical Community. Our early guess was “a community of people who acted Friend/Friend.” I started using the term “dialogical” to refer to the behavior of people in such a community. And I saw that being Dialogical meant PreValidating, as being opposed to being Non-Dialogical (or in the Master/Slave mode) means Pre-Invalidating.

By this time Sandra and I had stopped offering GTLYW Workshops as what we were finding seemed so much more teachable, efficient and useful to couples on their way. It was more specific, concrete and, we thought, effective. Here's an example: It took Sandra and I about 5 years of MVE before we stumbled on PreValidation. We now model it in all our first sessions and teach it in all our second sessions.

The last workshop we taught was based on a 30 page manual that we completely created ourselves out of parts of the Imago material and the replacement parts on Safety, Reliable Membership, Diversity and Autonomy. Participants wanted to know why and what and we had a good set of answers: specific, measurable and achievable.

The final component of the “core vision” had been with us all the time. We just had to notice it. We called it Purpose, and I think is referred to by many terms: self-actualization (Maslow), meaning in life (Frankl), etc. I think as humans feel the presence of the first four components of the vision, this last will tend to emerge.

And at this time the whole picture of the “core vision” fell into place. I believe that the human brain is built around Safety, Reliable Membership, Diversity, Autonomy, and Purpose. It dreams of a community where these features are understood, protected, and supported. Such a community we call Vintage Love when an intimate couple are involved (Conscious Marriage) and a Dialogical Community, otherwise. I believe the human brain spontaneously resists a community where these are not practiced. It does not have to be taught this desire – this dream. I called this the Biological Dream, and see that it is specific, measurable, and achievable.

Skills

As I had worked so hard on becoming a source of Safety to Sandra, I now was working on becoming a source of Reliable Membership, Diversity, Autonomy and Purpose. I realized that each component of the Biological Dream could be described by specific skills that would evoke, affirm and protect or threaten, undermine them. I set my goal on learning these Biological Dream affirming skills. This period seemed like moving through a school with no teachers, but with the guiding principles. Here are some examples.

- **Safety.** Someone expresses they are fearful and you see nothing threatening. You can a) tell them there is nothing to fear or b) ask them what you can do specifically that might make them feel safer. In my experience choice (a) doubles their fear by making you an additional source of threat, and choice (b) moves them toward experiencing you as a source of safety.

- **Reliable Membership.** A person shows signs that they want to withdraw from you while you are talking. You can (a) talk louder or quicker, and maybe block their retreat or (b) you stop talking and invite them to take their break, tell them this can continue some other day. In my experience (a) tends to double their need to get away from you, while (b) tends to set up them up for continuing the conversation at a higher quality rate.

- **Diversity.** A person says that they disagree with you. You can (a) assert that you are sure that you two will agree if you dialogue long enough or b) you can affirm their statement of disagreement and encourage the sharing of the two points of view with no need to agree. In my experience option (a) increases tension and decreases the likelihood of deep or intimate sharing, while option (b) increases the tendency toward intimacy and depth of connection.

- **Autonomy.** You want someone to do something your way. You can (a) speak persuasively about the benefits of your way, encourage signs of assent and discourage signs of indecision or (b) tell them what you want them to do directly and then say, “of course it is up to you” and let go of the need for them to do it. In my experience option (a) increases their tendency to be stand-offish and decreases their tendency to be “cooperative” while option (b) increases their willingness to work with you.

- **Purpose.** A person says they are bored with their job. You can (a) encourage them to find things in their job that might be fun or (b) you invite them to share their dreams of what they would rather do.

Summary: This first part of the model, for that is what it is, seems very useful in explaining all the phenomena within our community and more generally in our culture. It explains a lot of what drives our “Imago” community and meetings. And, after all, that is what a model is for – explaining and predicting things. I think it shows what so many are looking for when they join and “Imago community” which they imagine is Dialogical. I think it explains why so many are frustrated, reactive and despairing when they notice non-dialogical behavior within the community. I also think it shows the way for further specific training and practice that will lead to a much more vital team.

The Romantic Version of the Core Vision

The above section had little reference to the needs of romantically connected couples. Even though all the above seems to hold true for them as well as for any grouping of people, the great contribution of Imago, of Harville Hendrix is something more. I have always been amused when people say, “I can get along with anyone at work, but my husband/wife sure knows how to push my buttons.” The tasks before committed couples seem so much greater. I created a wonderful module called Boundaries for Couples to share my understanding of this problem.

I was so grateful for Harville Hendrix tape on Marriage as a Spiritual Path. If I recall rightly he described the double-double transference relationship that faces the romantically selected couple. Not only do I project on her childhood issues, but I select her to be easily able to act out the triggers to those issues. And not only does she project on me her childhood issues, but she picked me because I was easily able to act out the triggers to her issues.

Now people have a hard time grasping this. It seems vastly too much psycho-babble. But they can get it if they feel it and see it in more simple terms.

I believe children are born with an expectation of the Biological Dream. “It’s going to happen!” This expectation is passive. They don’t have to do anything, to receive the skills of support. And then they run into caretakers who don’t know how, who don’t have the skills.

What I found is that core issues are nothing but instances of when a child expected and desired a supportive response from their caretakers and they received a blocking response. Remember, a child is born with the Biological Dream. They do not have to be taught what their needs are. It is in the structure of their brains. The child needed a response to affirm their safety and received threat. A child needed a skill to affirm their Reliable Membership and they received threat to that need. And so forth. Of course the child will survive – the reptilian brain takes care of that, but with a deep sense that something should have been different – without knowing what. “My deep need was thwarted!”

When we fall in love the Biological Dream is re-evoked. That’s what my model shows, plus the dream is again passive. The dream will be realized without my efforts. And the partner I pick is “familiar” to my old brain, and thus lacks the same skills of supporting the Biological Dream. Or, to flip that coin over, The partner I pick has many non-supportive skills, not supportive of my Biological Dream in the same way my caretakers had and taught non-supportive skills. It is this Biological Dream, this passivity, the trust in non-supportive skills, and specific experiences of unmet needs that seems to me to lead to all the trouble.

Thus the goal each of us faces, and the journey to get there, involves learning the skills of the Biological Dream so that we can ourselves create, nurture and protect a Dialogical Community for each other, for our children, for our friends. It is a long trip from passive dream to active competence.

PART ONE: SUMMARY

Back at the beginning of this section I shared the questions that started my journey about 10 years ago. What makes Imago tick? Why do people join it? What is its product? Why does it spread?

During the next six years I watched and studied, developed small models, taught them, watched clients learn, honed the models, and eventually assembled a single model that held all. My one demand upon myself was that the model must be grounded in the practical. It could be abstract, but the connection to the immediate, the simple, and the concrete had to be visible. If any client could understand it, then I deemed it a success. And if the model comfortably answered any client’s question, “Why should I do that?” then I deemed it a success.

Two years ago, after teaching the model about 400 times, I firmed it up. I haven’t modified it since save to change a couple of words to be more simple.

During the last four years I started to use my model upon the Imago Community – the community of Imago trained professionals and any others who became involved with it – partners, staff, etc. When I say “use the model upon” what I mean is a) refer to the model to understand and validate what is going on and has gone on, b) to assess strengths and identify weaknesses, c) and to attempt to address those strengths and weaknesses in only limited ways, d) and to observe what happens.

For those of you who have tracked my Imago related career over those years you will see several stages: 1) Scribe for R2 Committee that evolved into IRI Board, 2) Board member of IRI for about 8 months, 3) regular facilitator of the FirePit, 4) one of the facilitators of the Imago Peace Project, 5) author of two of the principle theoretical and practical concepts used in Communologue.

At this point I feel comfortable with the answers to my original questions.

What makes Imago tick? The community of therapists seems to gather around the idea of “the possible Conscious Marriage,” but more fully the mostly unconscious drive toward what I call the Biological Dream. Repeated use of Couples Dialogue, and the feelings of comfort that come with it’s use or even witnessing its use evoke hope “for me” – an appetite. I’ve witnessed over and over that when a couple come to bridge that gap between them, the witnesses and facilitators feel a rush of personal delight. I think this is a bit addictive, certainly reinforcing.

Why do people join it? I believe a smallish portion of therapists who take the training are simply interested in another tool for their toolkit. I think the majority are more or less consciously looking to join a community that expresses, maintains and supports the Biological Dream. This I have tested by watching people who observe Communologue (an expression of the Biological Dream in a group) and who want to become part of it. One observer told me, “Who the hell wants to leave this. It feels so good.”

What is its product? Currently, I believe the primary approved products of our community are the GTLYW and KTLYF workshops and these market the “hope of doable Conscious Marriage.” These two products seem able to break down in most participants the cynical attitude of our culture toward lasting intimate relationships.

Why does it spread? I think it spreads and continues to spread because there are an unlimited number of people out there who have not quite lost all hope of realizing the Biological Dream.

What’s all the fuss about? This has become very clear for me over the past 10 years. I believe the Imago Community is not a Dialogical Community. Frequently at points where members expect to experience the skills of the Biological Dream practiced, they experience non-dialogical skills, and they become frustrated, angry and reactive. For these years I have observed that every time someone steps in the Master/Slave position, and starts to use MasterTalk, at that moment fuss begins. In our community, being non-dialogical triggers distress. And I have observed that this distress spreads like a wildfire in the community.

I believe that the feature in this “spread effect” is that observers react just as strongly as participants. I found that if one person is Dialogical to another, many witnesses feel safe. I found that if one person is Master/Slave to another, many witnesses feel unsafe. And the witnesses talk to others and then the others will feel safe or unsafe.

Thus I believe that the Imago Community has experienced many instances of unsafety, which have never been remediated. The stronger of the two impulses (safe or unsafe) is the unsafety. Probably this situation is continuing, though I haven’t been a witness for a long time.

As a friend of mine from Israel said, “Sure you have to work on the project, but you also have to tend the community at the same time.”

Why do people drop out? This seems to be a two part question with a single answer.

- A) Why do couples and singles come to the workshops and then drop out – of mirroring, of doing caring behaviors, of doing restructuring frustrations, etc?
- B) Why do Imago Therapists go through the training and then drop out – of doing Workshops, of using MVE, of promoting Imago?

I believe Imago, the current Imago movement, sells the “hope” of Conscious Marriage to couples and “hope” of being a member of a Dialogical Community to therapists, and doesn’t yet market training in the abilities to deliver on the promise. Over time, I believe the majority of people who experience Imago (couples, singles, and therapists) loose hope and look elsewhere. (I salute the hundreds of Imago Therapists who, like me, are trying to fill this gap.)

This seems a great opportunity for development. All is fixable, I believe.

PART TWO: SHALL WE DANCE?

I was going to start offering some suggestions about how to launch new energies into the places where the current Imago Community shows open needs. But I was halted by an old familiar question. I am not the community. Who am I to say it should change?

Over the years as a fuser I have come up with ideas about how to change my marriage with Sandra. It is normal for my mind to do this. I generate improvements, fixes, solutions. I’ve learned these are a dime a dozen. The bigger question is “Does Sandra, my partner, want to engage in this change?”

What do I have: a model? I like it. It is simple and elegant and concrete. It has five concurrent points – one hand of fingers. It covers everything. And it is grounded in specific actions. It is not based on any psycho-mumble or spiritual belief system, but certainly can include them. It is easy to teach. Its name, Biological Dream, arose from what I thought was a clumsy formulation, Evolutionary Journey. I have used this model consistently for 5 years, and it just works. I’m satisfied with it and I’ve published it on the Internet. Making a great intimate relationship and living at peace with our neighbors is not rocket science to me.

Still mine is just a model among many models. I imagine that there are several hundred models out there, developed by Imago Therapists as they repeatedly teach the current Imago approved models, and compared these models to their own experiences. I imagine that there are hundreds of couples (therapists?) who have reached “Conscious Marriage” and who have built their own understandings of what it takes. Collectively I think we know a lot better what to do and why, than we did when we started 15 years ago.

Recently Tim Atkinson, the Executive Director of IRI, started a dialogue with me about helping on a team to develop some short courses that would invite more couples into our workshops. He mentioned a course on PreValidation. I told him that I was very interested in teaching PreValidation and was open to continuing dialogue with him. But I told him my biggest concern was the question, “Am I doing Imago?” or am I a rogue.

For some years this has been a question for me. The term “Imago” is used so loosely that I can’t tell for sure.

People ask me what Imago is. I love to speak passionately about the relatively durable image of our caretakers that each of us forms between say age three and seven. I like speaking of the unique troubles facing romantically selected couples as they face their Imago in experiencing each other. I love teaching Restructuring Frustrations to guide people in healing those specific wounds from their past. I loved it when my partner said, “You really anger me when you do that! And I picked you that way.” This model is vital to me in understanding and helping couples unravel their troubles.

But what does that have to do with MVE? What does it have to do with Validation? What does it have to do with Empathy?

When a couple first shows up, I bring them into a space where the skills of the Biological Dream are practiced, modeled and supported. I let them feel it. I want them to sense at the visceral, biological level, what it could be like in Conscious Marriage. I’ve defined Conscious Marriage, which I call Vintage Love (a name I think I stole from Pat Love), as a community where people are practitioners of the skills of the Biological Dream. And I see that when people get there, they are no longer exclusive to their partner. They share with their community. I model this, teach it, guide it, support it and live it.

And MVE? I have to re-teach it to anyone I’ve seen who has gone to a GTLYW workshop. I think the MVE is a wonderful tool only after a committed couple figures out how to use it – if they do.

And what, I ask myself will happen, if I create and teach a course on PreValidation, for example, and then a couple goes to a GTLYW workshop where PreValidation is not taught.

I am puzzled. Am I doing Imago? What do you think?