

The Naked Eye

The Art Of Losing

BY MARK MATOUSEK

Knowing whether to end or mend a relationship is a matter of rhythm and rightness.

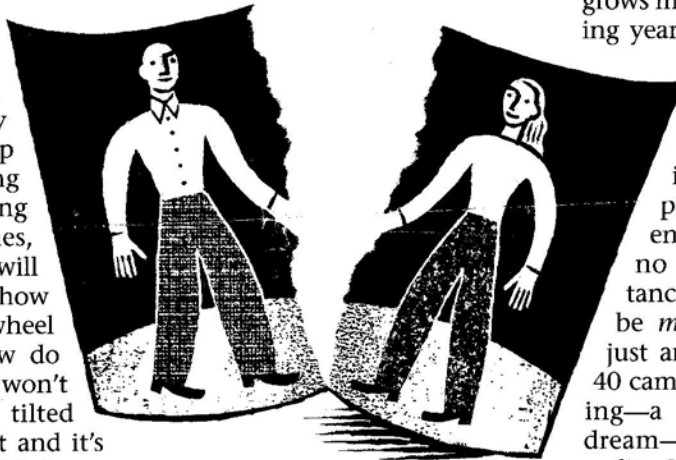
It's sad when the pain of staying in a troubled relationship exceeds the pain of letting go, when, no matter how fiercely you hold onto someone, your bond slips away like its own animal, telling you its time is passed.

Of course, every love brings its measure of pain, its particular mix of woe and unbalance, envy and guilt, lust and withholding, competition and family shadows. Every relationship ebbs and flows. Being grown-up means not being duped by estranged times, knowing that the wheel will turn and bring relief. But how do we know when the wheel has stopped turning? How do we know when the scales won't tip back, when they've tilted beyond the breaking point and it's time to let a person go? In his latest book, *Should You Leave?*, psychiatrist Peter Kramer claims that the issue of when to stay or go is the most common dilemma put before therapists (most of whom hesitate to give direct advice), and though Kramer is speaking of romantic situations, the questions involved seem germane to every relationship. When is a lot of trouble too much? How can two people know when to quit? When is enough enough?

I've been asking these questions a lot lately, not about my marriage but about my friendship with P. We've never had an easy time. From the day we met a decade ago, P and I have had our bumps in the road. Because I'm married and P never has been, jealousy has come into play, along with marathon talks about loneliness and P's chronic longing

for more devoted companions. In spite of the problems between us, however, we've done our best to remain friends since there have been so many wonderful moments and passions of a platonic kind.

But with the first of our "break-ups" two years ago, the balance of



pros and cons began shifting. Something was said that sent our friendship over the edge. A storm of petulant letters followed; after that, we made a decision to take a break while we took stock of what had happened. In the months that followed, I missed P but wasn't sure how we could continue. Still, I couldn't *not* try again, so I called and suggested dinner where we kissed and made up, promising to be more careful. This promise held for a few months more. More exhausting "processing" sessions followed, then another rapprochement. Following our last reunion, six months ago, I made a decision that if it didn't work this time, I'd walk away from the friendship for good.

Now I find myself challenged by my own decision. Last week, P and

I battled again. It doesn't matter whose fault it was (we can't even agree on that), the point is that we found ourselves in the same adversarial headlock, giving each other ultimatums, wondering how we got there.

The issue of whether to stay or go grows more complex with each passing year. As a young man, I didn't suffer as much over losses and gains in friendship and love. It was easier to be cavalier in a world of boundless possibilities, an ocean with endless numbers of fish, and no clock ticking in the distance. There always seemed to be *more* of everything waiting just around the corner, but then 40 came and I saw I'd been dreaming—a grandiose, promiscuous dream—with no basis in mortal reality. Middle-aged now, I find that it's increasingly hard to make new friends—*true* friends—and let old ones go. The more I age, the more I cherish the people I love and the past we've shared; the more finite and precious we all appear. My sanguine approach to beginnings and endings has turned now to extreme caution; in romance, friendship, mentorship, discipleship, I hold on these days as long as I can, sometimes longer than I should. Though staying too long can be a vice, in my evolution it's seemed like progress, working against my own skittish nature, seeing things through to their proper end.

Thinking about P, though, and all the sorrow we've caused each other, I wonder whether I haven't taken commitment-for-life too far.

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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How can you tell when loyalty has devolved into clutching what nature wishes to part? It's all well and good to quote the scriptures or counsel detachment, but I can't help but wonder what that word actually means in everyday life. While the "detachment" of enlightened people makes way for unconditional love, detachment in the rest of us can easily turn into indifference, an excuse not to care, or connect completely. I've seen this sort of ersatz detachment manifest in chilling ways, most notably around death. I've seen proponents of "spiritual" detachment veil themselves in robotic sangfroid, refusing to open their hearts to loss and the crushing mess of imminent grief. At times, I've used this acid test to gauge the love of people around me, conjecturing who would cry at my grave—who'd fall apart? who'd truly break?—and who would detachedly bless my soul, "celebrate my passing," and move safely into their unscathed lives. In a world of wounded and self-absorbed people (myself included), detachment's an ideal I don't trust. I've spent years learning to *attach*—to root, embrace, abide, and join—and though this attachment does bring pain, I prefer it to disengagement.

Wise men say "Let go and let God" and "If you love somebody set them free." They tell us to practice letting go. They tell us that nothing and no one is ours to possess, that things fall away of their own accord, that we must step back and allow this process. But who can do this absolutely? Even masters weep when people they love are taken away. When the Indian adept Mother Meera lost her guardian, Venkat Reddy, to kidney disease in the 1980s, she was privately disconsolate, however detached she appeared in public. To this day, she walks up the hill from her home to tend Mr. Reddy's grave outside the village. It's a gesture of love to remember and care; a mark of love to hold people close and not let them go too easily. Nature teaches

us to hold on: Vines cling, fish swarm, elephants circle the graves of their dead. People conjoin in memory and fear—the fear of not loving, and the fear of loving what will die. The fears of loving and losing are joined—"one art" as poet Elizabeth Bishop wrote—and seemingly inescapable.

I leaven this fear with bits of wisdom. To detachment's extremity I prefer the middle way, and the wonderful notion of "right relationship." I take this step on the Buddha's eightfold-path to mean the appropriate distance between things and people, the configuration of time and space that provides the most benefit to both parties. Such relationship changes constantly, as in a dance; sometimes it's "right" to hold someone tight, and other times you spin apart, but balance is always possible, provided you're following the rhythm. Sometimes right relationship may mean no visible bond at all, when the best we can do is love from afar (or if not love, at least cause no harm), as a friend of mine is forced to do with a parent who causes him great pain. In the end, this may be the solution with P. I certainly hope not, but if right relationship calls for permanent separation, we'll have no choice but to say goodbye.

"Sometimes you walk a mile with someone and that's all you get," P says. A single mile, not five, and not the lifelong journey you'd hoped for; just a bounded stretch of road to share before it forks. We wish this didn't have to be, but since it does, what can we do but savor the mile, remember it well, leave it with grace? There must be a knack for unanguished withdrawal, even though I've yet to learn it. "The art of losing isn't hard to master," Elizabeth Bishop assures us in her poem. "So many things seem filled with intent/ To be lost that their loss is no disaster." She's probably right, but I don't know. I've yet to stop fighting for good things to last.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is working on a sequel to his book *Sex Death Enlightenment*, to be published by Riverhead Books in 1999. He welcomes responses at MMATOUSEK@aol.com.



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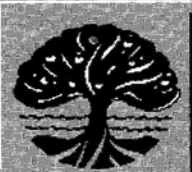
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