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Book Review

Pivotal Love Relationships

Richard Alapack (2007). *Love's Pivotal Relationships: The Chum, First Love, Outlaw and the Intimate Partner*. Milton Keynes, UK/Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse Press.

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by **Roger Brooke**

Richard Alapack's book takes one on a journey through what are probably the four "pivotal love relationships". His focus is nevertheless only on heterosexual relationships. The book is at different times thoughtful, delightful, funny, moving, and tragic. At all times it seduces the reader into his or her own memories, complete with their warmth, tenderness, regrets, unresolved griefs, defenses and anxieties. Alapack's calling to join him in entering, descriptively and thoughtfully, the phenomenon of transformative love is one that this reader, at least, will never forget. There were times I was moved to tears.

Alapack's method is hermeneutic phenomenological. The methodological details are touched on but not described. The author says he has asked people to describe their experiences of having a chum/best friend, their first love, a relationship that is "outlaw," or taboo, and their experience of mature love. He does not say how he gathered his material or whether he conducted interviews. He does say that some people wrote down their experiences. He has also drawn extensively from literary sources as diverse as Kierkegaard, Rumi and Lawrence. Alapack then synthesizes his material into a structural narrative account of each of the four pivotal love experiences. He presents these narratives in the first person, as though the story is an original "naïve" description, the type of narrative with which phenomenologists who have collected descriptions are familiar. The result is

a collection of four love stories, each of which is meant to be structurally exemplary, detailed, and personally compelling. Each story is followed by phenomenological explication, clearly organized with useful subheadings, and further psychological reflections and comments.

The chum, first described by H. S. Sullivan, is beautifully discussed through the story of Rima and the narrator, an awkward, pudgy pubescent boy, who is a voracious reader and, even in early puberty, is familiar with the existentialists. Rima and the narrator, whom she names "Glowy" (short for "Glow-worm"), because of his radiant glow when they first meet, are soul mates from the start. Their acceptance of each other is unconditional and their loving commitment to each other is eternal. The relationship opens the possibility of a world of intimacy outside of the family's roles and obligations, and is deeply affirming of the nascent sense of a viable, independent and interior self. One's idiosyncrasies, often the source of social embarrassment and shame, are embraced and validated as worthy markers of one's uniqueness. The chum is also the advent of deep reciprocity and empathic reversals. Even after the advent of sexual maturity, the chum remains as a possible ground of intimate relating, one that might be necessary to enrich and sustain maturer sexual loves. After an extensive discussion of issues such as loneliness and parental jealousy, Alapack ends this section by arguing that the chum relationship is

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absent in the history of those who break down into schizophrenia. I would have liked some discussion of the shadows of the chum relationship: the way chums combine to behave in ways they might never do alone. Think of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and the Columbine High School massacre.

The story of “first love” is narrated by a woman looking back on a relationship she had had many years previously. There are no names in this short story, which is told through the wider account of how it interfered with the narrator’s later love relations. The first love relationship is unique, perfect, idealistic, timeless and delicate. The beloved’s presence is pervasive, and the connection involves one’s emotions, thoughts, body and spirit. It is also the first relationship to open possible futures, however idealized and realistically unsustainable. This first love, with its imaginary futures, helps cohere one’s values and emerging sense of gender identity and sexual self, although Alapack is careful to situate first love sexuality in its derivative and not primary place. The ending can be extremely painful; suicide can be a risk. In such circumstances, the ending constitutes a significant developmental challenge if the memory of this love is to be both integrated into a wider sense of self and relationships as well as let go into one’s history. The task, perhaps, is to be able to look back with a smile and gratitude for the gift that it was.

The “outlaw” relationship is the love that is taboo, crossing normal social boundaries, dangerous, and potentially life destroying. It is also thrilling and intoxicating, seemingly irresistible, although one willingly participates in the choices that seal one’s fate. The narrator in this story is a white American woman whose lover was from Ghana. The outlaw relationship is paradoxically with a stranger with whom one feels a deep affinity. One feels sucked into a vortex of desire and longing. Attempts to break up seem to end up in bed, or at least back in the same relational grip. One’s identity, which is to say one’s lifeworld, is turned on its head, or inside out, and one can never be the same again. There will always be the (sometimes secret) knowledge that one is more than “they” will ever know. Alapack ends this chapter with some critically balanced and nuanced discussions of the contributions of Freud and Jung to our understanding of these relationships. He writes:

Who can gainsay it? The Freudian and Jungian heuristics are powerfully insightful. Talk to any grown up who has had more than a little experience in love relationships. Everyday people know implicitly that we must silence echoes and

chase or scatter old ghosts, if we are to establish intimacy. This is curious. In our social milieu, the guardians of the psychological order muffle depth psychology and denigrate it as not fitting into the straight jacket of 19th century positive science. Nevertheless, humankind remains perpetually indebted to Freud and Jung for clarifying the less-than-conscious ground of our lusts, passions, and loves. (p. 133)

On the other hand, insists Alapack, the theories of Freud and Jung can never account for the existential Otherness of the one with whom we are in love. With regard to the Outlaw, for instance:

My outlaw is no image that disappears as soon as I stop thinking about her If I blink, she won’t disappear like last night’s dream. My outlaw is there in the flesh, wish it or not. She has come of her own accord. She is irreducibly other The outlaw is a unique flesh and blood individual whose powerful presence has turned my life upside down.

What Alapack somewhat surprisingly calls “true love” is the intimate love of maturity – surprisingly, because a theme throughout the book is that each of the four loves is a gift with its own irreducible truth. The narrator this time is a man who describes a failed marriage and all the reasons his ex-wife was too defensive and unconscious of her own traumatic history to be able to relate to him with true love. This lengthy preamble to his meeting his true love felt uncomfortable for me, perhaps because it seemed unfair to someone who comes off very badly and has no voice herself. It was like reading one side of an ugly divorce. The account that follows is often filled with beauty. There are especially lovely passages on the meaning of touch, of what it reveals and awakens, and of a sexuality that is contained within love’s embrace. Mature love is about intimacy, of being simultaneously I, you and we. It is also about trust, experience, having porous bodies, and finitude. To fall in love like this, when you know that this one is for keeps, is to abandon all other possible romantic futures, to face the limits of one’s choices, and to prepare for the end of life. Alapack’s existentialist credentials are most stark here. Perhaps that is why his narrator’s wife loses her own son in a skiing accident and then dies of a broken heart (heart attack) a short while later.

The book ends with some pointed criticisms of mainstream psychological theories regarding love.

Consistent with his training in phenomenological psychology, Alapack has a keen eye for the almost universal problem in psychology, which is the Cartesian inability to speak adequately to the Otherness of the other and to love as a phenomenon that binds both lovers in a gift and mystery that can never be reduced to sociopolitical correlates, cognitive relations, or states of mind. He is also critical of the imposition of developmental psychology's perspective, which would sequence the above pivotal relationships as stages in personal growth and/or adaptation. Having said that, I would have liked Alapack to have taken this critique further, to have traced the threads of the chum, first love and outlaw relationships in mature loves that thrive, or to have shown more fully, for instance, the maturity that is germinating in first love.

The book seems to be the culmination of a long journey. Alapack's interest in the "outlaw" relationship, for instance, has been a concern for over thirty years. He brings descriptive depth and scholarship to the work.

I have a few criticisms. Firstly, Alapack does not seem to have decided who his reader might be. Much of the book can be enjoyed by an educated lay person; its rhetorical style, using first person conversational narratives, is popular. However, all his narrators are existentialists, having existentialist conversations with each other and/or the imagined reader. Each of them has supposedly read Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. A third reader seems to be a mainstream experimental social psychologist, with whom the first person narrators are sometimes arguing. I found this particularly unfortunate.

Glowy, the chum, for instance, has grown up with a chip on his shoulder: "I am acquainted with what it is like to be the scum of the earth" (p. 36), he says as an adult. Describing how he met Rima and felt he could fly, he interrupts himself – and the reader – with: "Your upper lip, Sir, is suppressin' a sneer. You doubt, don't you, that I truly rose into the air? ... I pity you, Sir, if you have not experienced a moment in your life when you had wings on your feet ..." (p. 14). Actually, I, the reader, was flying with the youngster, and I found his contemptuous interruption of my reverie offensive. I then pitied and was irritated with him for being so defensive. I wished he would get

over himself. More importantly, why should such a story, with its self-conscious violence, be structurally exemplary of the chum?

Alapack's narrator telling his story of true love similarly interrupts the reader with unfortunately defensive counterpoints. He repeatedly addresses the reader as "my man", and slides into a sort of pseudo-butch self-consciousness, one which is frequently crude: "Well, my man, you and I can bullshit for hours about love" (p. 146). Or: "Well, I'm not just a jag-off who after his divorce stumbled into love" (p. 149). Or, he refers to himself as an "early riser" (p. 157) who preferred sex in the morning: "I wake up ... up, if you catch my drift" (p. 158). Such interjections shadowed the text with a defensive quality that spoiled this reviewer's reading. I might add that this style did not for a moment give me a sense of the narrator's naïve authenticity. The author could not so crudely conceal his authorship. The wider import of this uncertainty about his readership is that many readers might not understand the significance of his style or commentaries. Developmental psychologists might also feel put on the defensive, used unfairly as foils, when some of them, at least, might otherwise have enjoyed the reading.

Two love stories end in premature death and two end in being abandoned. Glowy discovers sexual feelings for his chum, Rima, who kisses him in return, and the next day disappears in a plane in the Bermuda Triangle. Alexandra dies of a heart attack. The two women's stories, first love and the outlaw, end in sudden betrayal. I found myself wondering whether these were true stories and whether that question mattered. Rima's death sounds surreal. Does the author believe that all love ends badly? What about outlaw loves that end with mutual understanding and appreciation, or mature love that reaches into old age? I would have liked an account of a fifty year love.

Despite these criticisms, the book has much to contribute to the existential phenomenological conversation about love. We can especially appreciate Alapack's insistence on the coherence, irreducible integrity, and mystery of each love experience, of its life transformative meaning, and of the need for psychology to use qualitative methods which are more adequate to our lifeworld experience.

About the Author

In addition to his academic position in the Department of Psychology at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA, Professor Roger Brooke is a Board Certified (ABPP) Clinical Psychologist in private practice. In 2005 he was elected to the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Clinical Psychology for a three year term (renewable), and in 2006 he was elected to the honorary position of Affiliate Member of the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts.



Professor Brooke completed his Masters in Clinical Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand and his doctorate at Rhodes University, South Africa, where he worked from 1982–1993. From 1994–2007 he was Director of Clinical Training at Duquesne University. Having stepped down from this position, Professor Brooke now has more time to write, already being the author of *Jung and Phenomenology* (London, Routledge, 1991, to be republished by Trivium Publishers) as well as a contributing editor of *Pathways into the Jungian World* (Routledge, 1999). He has also published a number of papers on phenomenology and psychotherapeutic issues.

Roger Brooke's current interests in the psychological field include interpretations of analytical psychology, soldiers with trauma, geropsychology, therapeutic process, and therapeutic outcomes research (of which he is highly critical).
