THE SHATTERING OF AN ILLUSION: THE PROBLEM OF COMPETITION IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

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During the past ten years, the progressive psychiatric establishment has attempted to depathologize homosexual relationships. Once defined as a "perversion," homosexual object choice is now viewed as an "alternative lifestyle." The difficulties that homosexual couples encounter in relationships are beginning to be seen as no more unusual than the marital problems of their heterosexual counterparts. A rising divorce rate and increasing acknowledgment of child and spousal abuse has stimulated much political and social concern about the "crisis in the [heterosexual] family"—a crisis which has been attributed to everything from the women's and gay liberation movements to a troubled economy. Interestingly, there has been little psychodynamic explanation for the escalating tensions and frequent divorces within heterosexual relationships. Homosexual relationships, however, have long had a reputation for being short-lived. Psychological explanations for this phenomenon abound, viewing it as yet another indication of the inherent pathology and immaturity of homosexual object choice. More recently, various social factors, including discrimination, homophobia, lack of adequate role models, and, in most cases, the absence of shared childrearing have been recognized as significant contributors to the frequent dissolutions of gay and lesbian relationships.

As a psychotherapist, over the past decade I have frequently observed a particular interpersonal phenomenon in the lesbian couples whom I have treated. It is a behavioral pattern that generates a crisis, and commonly results in the dissolution of the relationship. Although it is not restricted to lesbian couples, I shall discuss why relationships between women are more predisposed

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to this experience and shall argue that competition is a useful way of managing this crisis.

The crisis occurs when one of the women begins to feel that she has become lost in her partner. She no longer has a sense of who she is. She feels invisible, unacknowledged, "less than." Some might call this an "identity crisis," but the feeling runs even deeper. It is not simply that changing jobs or becoming more secure in one's career would solve the problem. The affect here is one of panic and despair. There is a confrontation with separateness or emptiness, a frantic search to retrieve something that seems to have disappeared. There is the shattering of an illusion, accompanied by a feeling of disappointment and abandonment which is so profound it seems it can only be resolved by ending the relationship.

At this stage of crisis, one or both partners frequently thinks of herself as attempting to become independent and autonomous. But in fact the lesbian couple is often engaged in a more primitive struggle. In my work with these women, I have come to believe that I am seeing, with all its distortions, the re-creation of a primary experience: an effort to develop a separate self.

Yet the question remains: why does this struggle require that the relationship end? Why can't these women be separate in the context of a relationship? Can these women only experience themselves as "whole" in the absence of a relationship? To answer this, it is necessary to look more closely at the kind of intimacy two women can typically create.

There is agreement in the psychiatric literature that the experience of primal intimacy is a prototype for adult intimate relationships. "This primary tendency, I shall be loved always, everywhere, in every way, my whole body, my whole being—without any criticism, without the slightest effort on my part—is the final aim of all erotic striving." Adult relationships are, in part, unconscious re-creations, distortions, and attempted reparations of primary intimacy and merging, as well as other early familial experiences. Of course, the attempted reproduction of primary intimacy involves some degree of ambivalence. Along with the blissful experience of mother-infant oneness comes the terror of possible identity loss, object loss, and absolute dependence.

Given that women are the major caretakers in this culture, a love relationship between two women has a particular potential to
evoke certain aspects of mother-infant intimacy. As Nancy Chodorow, following Michael Balint, suggests, "a sexual relationship with a woman reproduces the early situation more completely and is more completely a return to the mother," than is a sexual relationship with a man. What emerges so powerfully, albeit often unconsciously, in the lesbian relationship is a profound desire for and concomitant fear of the primal experience of psychic and bodily oneness. Ultimately, the lesbian couple's re-creation of primal intimacy gives rise to the excruciating terror of primal loss. Thus, the couple finds itself in a tremendous dilemma: how can the women fulfill their original desire to merge, and simultaneously subdue the terror it arouses? This dilemma is at the root of the difficulty that many lesbian couples have in sustaining their relationships.

Primary pre-oedipal preoccupation, of course, is not the only constellation for female homosexual object choice. However, the fact that, for both partners, the relationship can closely recapitulate primal intimacy leaves the couple vulnerable to experiencing this as a regressive threat, although not all such regression is pathological. Mature intimacy requires that the partners move comfortably between more merged and more differentiated relational positions. That is, the capacity for adult intimacy depends on each partner's ability to appropriately lose and establish psychological boundaries in relation to the other. Furthermore, the longevity of the relationship is enhanced by the recognition of and capacity to tolerate the partner as separate and different from the self.

I began by stating that lesbian couples long for and have the capacity to intensely re-create primal merging, but that these women are frightened of the loss of self that accompanies this experience. Ultimately, it is their inability to resolve this conflict that prevents these couples from making comfortable relational transitions. The phenomenon that I am about to describe is the couple's unconscious endeavor to reconcile this apparent contradiction.

Having stirred the memory of primal intimacy and passionately dissolved the boundaries between them, the lesbian couple arrives at the first step in their behavioral pattern: the sacrifice of sex. Though it may take weeks or months, sometimes even years, these women gradually stop making love. This sacrifice of sex has usually occurred by the time the couple seeks psychotherapy. In-
terestingly, not all couples enter treatment with much distress at having given up sexual intimacy. Those who do will often agree that they cannot seem to find the time. One partner will claim that she does not feel sexual, or both will assert that they have different rhythms. Others insist that sex is not important. What is important is "the relationship," "the communication" between them. In any case, these couples are no longer experiencing sexual intimacy, and it is essential to understand that both women are participating in this sacrifice—even when it appears that only one is responsible.

A question naturally arises about heterosexual women. Certainly they, too, experience difficulties with merging and differentiation. I have seen many heterosexual couples who have sacrificed sex. How are the women in these couples different from their lesbian counterparts? Often, they are not. However, even in instances where the behavior appears to be the same, the underlying motivation may be different. Heterosexual women may, for example, sacrifice sex out of a sense of anger or disappointment or failure at re-creating an experience of primal intimacy, for which they, too, have yearned. Homosexual women, on the other hand, frequently sacrifice sex because they have succeeded all too well at re-creating primal intimacy and are terrified of its consequences. In short, lesbians sacrifice sex out of having successfully re-created primal merging, while heterosexual women sacrifice sex out of having failed.

The sacrifice of sex, then, is the lesbian couple's first effort at quieting the terror of the merging that has occurred. It is, however, only a provisional solution that soon gives rise to another problem, and then again to another solution which also fails. Thus, the lesbian couple unconsciously begins to move through a sequence of patterned behaviors, which ultimately lead to the dissolution of their relationship.

Another question now arises. If these women sacrifice sex as a means of managing their terror, how do they simultaneously satisfy their need to merge? At the same time they are giving up sexual intimacy, the women are creating the sought-after merger in the nonsexual aspects of their relationship. This occurs, in part, because women have the capacity to develop a nonsexual intimacy that is "less differentiated," an intimacy of familiarity, comfort, and reciprocity. There is a sense of shared identification, of knowing what the other feels (or assuming one knows). It is an
empathic intimacy that has its origins in various aspects of the mother-infant relationship, one of which is that women are mothered by women.

Both Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan have described how a daughter's identification with her mother contributes to a gender identity based on nondifferentiation and intimacy rather than differentiation and separation. That female gender identity is based on a sense of connectedness and reciprocity, rather than separateness and hierarchy, explains in part the capacity women have for recreating primal intimacy in another, nonsexual form, when the anxiety of sexual merging becomes too overwhelming. This nonsexual merging the lesbian couple now brings about is in fact the next step in the pattern I am describing, and seems to occur simultaneously with the sacrifice of sex. But it requires a closer look. For there is an aspect of this nonsexual merging that is not simply gender-based but is particular to lesbian couples. Its source is an unconscious fantasy that has as its prototype a faulty experience of mother-infant oneness.

Concealed within this nonsexual merging is a hidden attempt on the part of each woman to sense and provide what the other needs. Because each views herself as so much "like-the-other," she often presumes that their needs are the same. In time, each one comes to believe that she can fill an unconscious emptiness and longing that exists in her partner. A certain complementarity develops: an effort to complete the other, to make the other "whole." Thus, the one who is always the life of the party teaches her awkward partner to dance. And the one who loves sports buys her timid partner a racquet. Each gives the other a part of her self. This happens intuitively. They sense what is missing in the other. And they are brought together because both women are searching for lost parts of themselves. Soon each is convinced, when she speaks to the other, that she has never met anyone who knows her so well. Throughout this unconscious, nonsexual merging, the other gradually begins to be seen as the self. All this is done out of love and devotion. It seems the most natural thing in the world. There is little, if any, sense of pain or loss. Both partners feel, in the most profound way imaginable, that each can be the person the other has longed for.

I am suggesting then, that an original experience of faulty merging promotes each woman's attempt to provide "good-enough-
mothering" for the other. In the couple's unconscious re-creation of primary intimacy, the other becomes the idealized mother; and each woman becomes what she was for her own mother as a child. Both partners engage in this subtle seduction. It is a symbiotic fantasy in which each comes to believe that she keeps the other alive.

The lesbian couple's conscious experience is quite compelling. Each woman has a palpable sense of being held and made to feel alive by the exchange of exciting ideas, the intimacy of similarity, identification, and empathic responses. Who but two women would be better prepared to engage in this nonsexual merging, this "less-differentiated" mode of relating? It is familiar, comfortable, and socially reinforced.

When two people are involved in an undifferentiated merging, the emergence of "difference" is experienced as a sign of differentiation. Merging gives the illusion that two people are one. If I am merged with someone who has a particular quality, then by virtue of the "fact" that we are merged, I come to imagine that I have that quality as well. Because we are merged, I expect the other person to handle situations in the same way that I would handle them. The other should feel what I feel. But if a "difference" emerges, if the other appears to feel differently, it indicates the difficult truth that we are not merged, that we are two separate people.

"Difference" now takes on an affectively laden significance. One has the experience of "felt difference." The difference has some emotion attached to it. It is not simply that one has blue eyes and the other has brown eyes or that one is a parent and the other is not. These are differences which will not evoke intense affect unless there is some personal, historical, or social meaning attached to them. Imagine, for instance, that Ellen is a woman who does not experience herself as particularly sexually "attractive," and that Sheila, her partner, is someone who has the experience of attracting many people, someone who "exudes" sexuality. Because Sheila is attractive and attracted to Ellen, Ellen feels attractive as well. But then they go to a party and someone flirts and Sheila responds by flirting back and does not acknowledge the primary nature of her relationship with Ellen. Suddenly, Ellen no longer feels attractive. All she feels is an incredible anguish that she cannot flirt, she is not sexy, and she cannot hold Sheila's attention. Thus, Ellen loses the sense she has had of being attractive. At
this point, she feels enraged, betrayed, abandoned. She feels as if part of her is missing, that Sheila has something she wants and cannot have, that she must take back the quality she believes she has lost. Sheila, on the other hand, is afraid of Ellen's rage; is worried that she has taken something away; and feels guilty, angry, self-deprecating, confused.

This is what I mean by "felt difference." It is a subjective experience that occurs when something that has been experienced as part of the self is now experienced as being part of the object. In the context of an undifferentiated merger, "felt difference" is accompanied by a particular affective reaction. This reaction occurs on a conscious level when one person believes that she is not capable of having or being or doing the same as her partner. The conscious experience of this feeling is "she has it [or is it, or does it] and I don't." The unconscious feeling is that "something which [in more extreme cases, 'someone who...'] I experienced as part of me is being withheld from me, has been taken away from me."

The affect that arises in the couple's moment of "felt difference" when the soothing merger has been disrupted is known as "envy." Envy is important in this discussion because it is the affect that lies at the root of competitive behavior. Ultimately, I will suggest that competition can be a constructive way of managing this painful and potentially destructive feeling. For now, I want to focus on envy as the affect that emerges at the point of differentiation in the lesbian couple. And I want to describe exactly what occurs when couples have difficulty managing this feeling.

Envy is a primitive affect that is aroused by an early experience: wanting what the other person has and hating, feeling rageful, that one cannot have it. It is common to find people who have entered into relationships with the unspoken hope that One could acquire what the Other has, simply by being involved with that person. Frequently, in my clinical work, I have seen couples who have been drawn to each other because One perceives in the Other a quality that she [or he] finds lacking in her [or him] self. Perhaps One is the writer that the Other longs to be, or One is more serious or extroverted or nurturant. I mentioned earlier that lesbian couples experience a time of disappointment in each other. An illusion is shattered, and the disappointment is so profound that it seems it can only be healed by ending the relationship. The illusion, of course, is that Two have become One. And the disappoint-
ment occurs because this relationship, like most, began with a secret hope—that each woman would come to possess the very qualities that drew her to her partner from the start. But by now it has appeared that this exchange of qualities has not taken place. And each is shocked to discover that One's ability to be nurturant has not enabled the Other to comfort herself, or One's skill as a writer has not made the Other more facile with words.

When the internal representation of one's self is merged with the partner (an object), the experience of "felt difference" evokes a deep sense of abandonment and, depending on the pathological extent of the merger, a perceived loss of self. In other words, "Something that is mine, that is part of me, is gone. It has been taken away from me, and she has it. Therefore, I am incomplete." And in more extreme cases, "I no longer exist." Envy, a destructive affect, emerges to defend against this loss. It is a desperate attempt to eradicate the separateness, the experience of "felt difference," by spoiling what the other has, or by taking it back for one's self. Aspects of this experience can be so toxic that they often remain unconscious. Envy, at its most raw, contains a wish to harm the other, who seems to have taken the quality away, perhaps even to destroy her—as if destroying the "container" will provide access to its contents. At this moment, the problem inherent in the couple's effort at nonsexual merging arises. It, too, is part of the pattern that I am describing, and it requires further examination.

Aspects of this dynamic are apparent in the relationship of Betsy and Sue, who have been together for three years. Throughout their relationship, Betsy has criticized Sue for being "passive," "forgetful," "spacey." She complains of repeated incidents of stoves left on, doors unlocked, and other "irresponsible behavior." Sue responds to Betsy's criticisms by being apologetic and self-effacing. She is fairly accepting of Betsy's constructions of reality and has difficulty demanding that she be treated as an adult. In this way, one partner appears young and accommodating, while the other is anxious, overinvolved, and controlling. There is a certain complementarity here. Sue secretly wishes she could organize her life in the adultlike manner that Betsy has. Betsy harbors a wish to give up her exaggerated sense of responsibility. Betsy, who is about to complete a professional degree, has encouraged Sue to enter a similar profession. Sue, who has always been interested in this field, has been saving money to go back to school, and will
enter the same program that Betsy is finishing. Unlike Betsy, who argued and worried her way through school, Sue is approaching it with great excitement and very little anxiety. In fact, Sue appears unconcerned about the potential difficulties of this program. This is a "felt difference." Betsy envies Sue's joy and enthusiasm. She manages her envy by trying to get rid of the difference. Betsy repeatedly insists that Sue will find it impossible to survive at school unless she becomes more conscientious and aggressive. As their therapist, I suggest to Betsy that she is envious of Sue. Sue, in turn, has difficulty with Betsy's envy, fears its destructive nature, and manages her discomfort by trying to convince Betsy that she has nothing to envy.

The experience of "felt difference" occurs, to some extent, in the context of any intimate relationship, heterosexual or homosexual, where the partners have difficulty establishing psychological boundaries. However, this experience is particularly difficult for women, because female gender identity is based on a sense of continuity, connectedness, of being "in-relationship." "Felt difference" confronts women with a knowledge of their individuality and separateness. There is more potential for intense envy to accompany this experience when two people are identified with each other. And there is a tendency toward overidentification in lesbian relationships. The same-sex nature of the relationship, women's comfort with "less-differentiated" relational modes, the recapitulation of primary intimacy and merging, and the social oppression that locks the lesbian couple in the closet, contribute to this overidentification. In this context, being separate, the discovery that "I" am "not you," the sense of "felt difference" is a shock, a threat, and the emergent envy has the capacity to destroy the relationship.

It is no wonder, then, that two women who have unconsciously set out to re-create primary intimacy and merging would want to avoid the experience of "felt difference" and its accompanying envy. What better way to squelch this murderous rage, to kill the experience that threatens to rupture the much-needed merger, than to deny differences? What better way for these women to avoid the anguish of "felt difference" than to pretend that they are alike?

I want to call the process by which a couple pretends that they are alike pseudomutuality. And I want to point out that, once again, we are at a crucial step in the couple's spiral of problems and at-
tempted solutions. Pseudomutuality is an effort to solve the inevitable problems of separateness and envy. It is an avoidance of "felt difference," and an establishment of a unified front. A kind of exaggerated accommodation develops; one that goes beyond the sort of compromise that is essential in order for any two people to maintain a relationship. The one who used to be the life of the party claims the couple is content just being at home. She rarely eats Chinese food because her partner is much more fond of Italian. But she does not insist; "it's not worth the fight." The two take similar stands on political issues. And they never eat meat, because it's bad for their health. To most people it would appear that these women were made for each other.

It is necessary, here, to distinguish pseudomutuality from nonsexual merging. Nonsexual merging is, itself, the (nonsexual) re-creation of primal intimacy. It is, in essence, the longed-for merger in an emotional form. Although it involves behavioral changes, these transitions are frequently unconscious. The partners do not focus on the accommodations they have made. Nonsexual merging is felt to be benevolent, altruistic, and deeply pleasurable. Each partner has a conscious and unconscious experience of giving (her self) to the other, and dissolving all boundaries between them. On the other hand, pseudomutuality is a tactic that is used to protect the couple from the threatening experience of "felt difference." In pseudomutuality, each partner is aware of the accomodations she makes. The one who has stopped going to parties begins to feel trapped when her partner is home. She eats Italian food, but she misses Chinese food. Though she gave up on meat, she craves corned beef on rye. Politically speaking, she is not really sure what she believes. The couple, in its efforts to manage envy by killing off difference, has forced each person to give up too much of her self.

Now, to handle the resentment each feels because of this loss of self, and to reinstate a sense of separate self, the couple enters the next step in the pattern. They create the appearance of difference, as a reaction to not feeling separate enough. This pseudodifference can take many forms, and its content will seem of major significance. More often than not, it contains the resentment that has been building between the partners since the inevitable envy emerged.

The following conversation took place in my office, between
two women who had been together for many years. This couple discusses what they, and countless others, did to avoid the experience of "felt difference," of envy, in their relationship. They also reveal the solution that they chose in order to feel like two separate selves. Note that this is not a conversation about sex. This couple gave up sex over a year ago.

Joan: We were young when we came into the relationship, but we were people with our own ways of doing stuff.

Lisa: Yeah, but I feel like I don't know that anymore. I've just been reacting off you for so long. I don't know who I am!! You don't seem to understand that. . . .

Joan: I don't know who I am either! I've just been reacting off you.

Lisa: Well doesn't that bother you?! Doesn't it bother you? [Lisa is crying now.] It really bothers me! I just feel like I'm defined by you. It's so automatic. I don't even know what I want sometimes. When you get mad or you don't like something, then I just give in. I just go along with you, even if I don't agree. But deep down I guess I get resentful. And I guess that's why I've been doing things that I've been doing; you know, like having an affair and not telling you. I feel insecure. It's like we're this one person. We're this unit against the world or something. Like with one opinion and one set of values. It's easier to give in than to fight. I just wanted everything to be nice. I didn't want to jeopardize our relationship.

Joan and Lisa, for a while, pretended to be more alike. Then Lisa decided to have an affair. She did this, I believe, in order to feel more separate from Joan. In this way, the couple created a pseudodifference about monogamy and nonmonogamy. After months of arguing about monogamy and nonmonogamy, Joan and Lisa came to see me, stating that their six-year relationship had come to an end. This pseudodifference might just as easily have appeared as an issue of alcohol or drug abuse, sexual dysfunction, childrearing practices, or the expression or withholding of feelings in the relationship. All these are desperate attempts to establish a sense of separate self in a relationship where separateness has been a threat to the longed-for merger. It does not matter which person drinks or has the affair. Both women suffer from not feeling separate enough. The one who is drinking has had her drink poured by the one who claims she never touches the stuff. And
the one who is looking for an affair has been invited to do so by the one who is always waiting at home.

Joan and Lisa are typical of the lesbian couples with whom I have worked. Their relationship provides an opportunity for us to review the interpersonal phenomenon we have already discussed. Joan and Lisa are two women who have come together to establish a primary sexual relationship. They do this with the unconscious goal of re-creating an experience of primal intimacy and merging. Because they are both women, it is easier for them to identify with each other, to empathize, to believe that one knows what the other feels. And because they are women who have been mothered by women, their identities as females are based on a sense of relatedness, connectedness, and they are more comfortable relating in "less-differentiated" ways. This propensity to merge, to become one with the other, to return to the mother, is reinforced by cultural expectations and society's stigmatization of the lesbian relationship. So the merging comes quickly and passionately, sexually and nonsexually, and with it comes a tremendous loss of self.

Eventually the couple sacrifices sex. They do this because the merging has become too intense, too overwhelming, and the loss of self is too catastrophic. They do it because the memory of a long-forgotten time in earliest childhood has been stirred, and the pain of loss is too great. And they do it because they have been told time after time, day after day, that it is wrong to love a woman.

The longed-for merger, then, is created in the nonsexual aspects of the relationship. It is a merger that is preserved not by the power of sexual union or the mutual connection of two separate people, but by the fear of differentiation. In an undifferentiated merger, separateness is intolerable.

In this situation, the anguish of "felt difference," and the emergence of envy are signs of separateness. "Felt difference" is a threat to the merger and an experience that must be destroyed. Envy arises to kill off difference. But envy is, in its own right, so painful an experience, the women now attempt to avoid "felt difference" not only because it is a sign of separateness, but also because it gives rise to envy.

The women pretend to be more alike. There develops between them a pseudomutuality. And this, in time, leads once more to a loss of self that is so extreme that the couple creates the appearance of difference in order to feel that they are two separate selves.
These pseudodifferences take many forms and appear to be true. One will claim that she feels sexual and the other will admit she has lost all desire. One will express every possible feeling; the other will state that she has no voice. But the simple truth is that these are only reactions to not feeling separate enough. They are situations in which one part of a conflict is assumed by each partner. Instead of two separate people, there is one divided self.

Finally the couple decides to end the relationship because the disappointment and resentment have grown so strong. The women separate "in the name of difference," but the relationship ends precisely because so few real differences have been allowed to exist.

Is it any wonder, then, that I rarely see competition within the lesbian couples who come to me for help? Competition requires two people, each of whom has a sufficiently separate identity to risk measuring her self against the separate identity of the other.

Given that the issue of "sameness" is central in lesbian relationships, I was, at first, perplexed by the absence of competitive behavior. In fact, I was so perplexed that I began to doubt my perceptions. I wondered if I was really looking at what was being presented to me. A few of my colleagues seemed to be seeing differently than I. They claimed that there was quite a bit of competition, but that the behavior was focused around such typically "female" issues as "who was better at the relationship," that is, who was more communicative, nurturant, other-directed. I still disagree. I see envy, and I think that gets confused with competition.

Carol and Debbie illustrate a common transactional pattern. Their interaction looks like competition, but it is really an experience that remains at the level of envy. Carol and Debbie have created an undifferentiated merger, and the following pattern occurs at a moment of "felt difference."

If Carol is upset, for any reason, Debbie "automatically" becomes upset as well. They argue about each other's lack of emotional availability, about who takes care of whom more often. Finally, Carol stops being upset and takes care of Debbie. This cycle repeats itself each time that Carol expresses any distress. Eventually, Carol, claiming that she is protecting Debbie, stops telling her partner when she is upset. Debbie experiences this as withholding, or she comes to believe that she is the only one in the relationship who ever "talks about [her] feelings." This, of course, is
frustrating and humiliating to Debbie, so she decides to stop telling Carol when she is upset too. This upsets Carol which upsets Debbie, and the pattern begins again.

The clue to the undifferentiated nature of Carol and Debbie's intimacy is that one's distress consistently activates the other's distress. This time, Carol's activates Debbie's. The initial brief instant of "felt difference," when Carol is upset and Debbie isn't, is intolerable to this couple. Both women unconsciously fear, in this moment of difference, that something is being withheld or taken away. Debbie unconsciously fears that she has caused Carol's distress, and that Carol, in the end, will deprive her of nurturance. Carol believes that Debbie withholds nurturance, that "Debbie automatically takes my feelings away." It would appear, as the interaction continues, that Carol and Debbie "compete" to see who is the most upset, or who has been the most emotionally available. They keep score. The "winner" is supposed to receive nurturance from her partner. Of course this implies that there is only enough nurturance for one person and, moreover, that nurturance comes from the other and not from the self. There is never the assumption that each woman could remain upset, nurture herself, and in this way, nurture the other as well.

Clearly, this is not true competition. Sit with this couple for a little while and be swept into the painful, churning, repetitive undecurrent of something being withheld, something being taken away. Sense the powerful pull of this unconscious undertow of deprivation, of loss, of not-enough-to-go-around, which this couple experiences in their moment of "felt difference." These women are drowning in envy. Each is frantically clutching the other in hopes of saving herself. This is not a competition between two women who are confident in their own and each other's ability to survive.

I believe that, more often than not, my colleagues who claim to see competition are really watching the struggle of two envious women trying to wrest particular qualities from a partner. These women are trying to get hold of the other's nurturance, expressiveness, creativity, rather than each assuming that she can develop that quality for herself.

A distinction between competition and envy may seem purely semantic, but I believe it is extremely important, because the confusion of these two processes can lead to a misguided interpretation of what is actually occurring within the relationship. For in-
stance, returning to an earlier example, had Ellen’s envy of Sheila’s “attractiveness” arisen within a relationship to two “whole” selves, it might have been transformed into a competition. Each might then have expressed her own sexiness, rather than assume there was only enough for one person and that Sheila had it. Competition is a constructive process that can evolve when an experience of “felt difference” occurs between two separate selves in relationship. If, however, this experience of “felt difference” emerges between two women who are not separate, the couple’s interaction will remain at the more destructive, difficult, painful level of envy.

Competition has acquired a bad reputation among women, and certainly within the feminist community. I want to discuss some of the reasons for this. Then I will argue that it is essential for women to become comfortable with competition. Lesbian couples, in particular, must begin to see it as a way to manage envy and to encourage the development of “whole,” separate selves in relationship.

The following comment was overheard at a party: “There’s no competition in our relationship. We have different careers. But Donna and Kate. They’re both writers. I don’t think they compete either.” “No,” her friend stated quite proudly, “I don’t think lesbian couples are very competitive.” Lesbian couples, and women in general, dread competition because they think of it as a process whereby someone gains something at the expense of another person. In other words, there is an assumption that one’s coming to possess a certain quality means that one has taken something away from someone else. By now this has become familiar to us as a paradigm for envy, which evokes conscious or unconscious feelings of rage; a wish to harm the other; and a concomitant terror that thinking or feeling this way will, in fact, contaminate or destroy the Other, the Self, and/or the Relationship. Rather than experiencing competition as a particular kind of relatedness, these couples experience it as a lethal separateness that they imagine will destroy the relationship. In truth, envy—not competition—is the potentially destructive element here.

It is this fear of loss—loss of Other, of Self, of Relationship—that ostensibly lies at the core of women’s psychological difficulty with competition. I am suggesting, however, that competition is not the cause of this type of loss. In many of the relationships that I have seen, true loss occurs precisely because the partners have been
afraid to compete. True loss occurs when repeated experiences of envy have not been afforded any constructive outlet. Competition, on the other hand, can be a functional means of sublimating envy and generating a sense of separate self in relationship. For, in essence, competition detoxifies envy. It encompasses the intense affects that envy evokes and encourages their benign expression.

In competition, the envious wish to harm the Other is modified by displacing this aggression onto the task of developing the desired quality in the Self. In order to compete, one must call up the quality in the Self that has previously been attributed to the Other. To recall our earlier example: Ellen cannot continue to allow Sheila to embody her sexiness, or her flirtatiousness, or her femininity, if the relationship is to last over time. Initially, albeit unconsciously, Ellen may have been attracted to and dependent upon Sheila’s ease with sexiness. Sheila became an incubator, a container, providing a protective environment in which Ellen could safely experience being sexy. Eventually, however, Ellen must give up the illusion that the only way she can be sexy is by being connected to Sheila. This is a reciprocal process: Sheila must give up the illusion as well. For she, too, has had an unconscious investment in being the container of the sexiness in this relationship. Instead, Ellen must come to understand that, for whatever reason, the envied quality lies dormant in herself. What she has acquired from Sheila is not the desired quality itself, but the permission to express that quality. A quality that Ellen feared in herself has now acquired value in her own eyes, precisely because she valued it in Sheila. Thus, Ellen must risk having and exhibiting the quality of which she felt herself to be deprived. And she must commit herself to the slow, complicated, often arduous task of developing it.

This, of course, is what happens in a true competition. One is provided with the opportunity to become competent. It is not an easy task, nor is it one that can always be accomplished. There is still the possibility of deep disappointment. But it is hardly the toxic, damaging, irreparable self or object loss that repeated episodes of unresolved envy can produce. In undertaking the challenge to compete, to become competent, one has, at the very least, the experience of developing a particular aspect of the Self and observing that the Other is not destroyed by this success. When One gets better, the Other does not have to get worse.
The following story, told to me by a colleague, offers a sense of the way competition can develop from envy and can provide a couple with a productive experience of two separate selves in relationship. This woman told me of her fervent wish to become a skilled public speaker. As it happened, her partner of many years was quite an accomplished public spokeswoman. My colleague would eagerly attend her partner's public appearances, secretly harboring this belief: "She is a part of me. Therefore, her performance is mine as well." Repeated experiences of what I have termed "felt difference" forced these women to begin to relinquish their illusion of oneness. Still, my colleague would sit in the audience with great pleasure, now consciously hoping to acquire the skill herself. "In the beginning, I loved to go when she spoke. I loved to sit in the audience and beam. But pretty soon, I wanted it myself. But I kept thinking, 'If I have more of it, she'll have less. If I compete, she'll be damaged.'"

This, of course, implies my colleague's belief that her capacity for public speaking rested in the person of her partner. Her feelings imply that there was only enough "public speaking ability" for one person, and that her partner had it. In considering that she might develop her own capacity to speak in public, my colleague feared that her partner would become envious. This, too, seemed a reason to avoid competition. Initially, then, this couple's interactions stayed at the painfully difficult level of envy. My colleague found herself becoming increasingly critical of her partner's work and would often provoke hurtful arguments prior to a performance. Eventually this woman was able to acknowledge her envy. She and her partner spoke of the "felt difference" between them, and began to develop genuine competition. "Now in our relationship, she and I compete to see who is the better public speaker. . . . We are benignly competitive and we keep goading each other on. It's like someone sets the bar higher and the other springs over it. . . ." I do not mean to imply that each woman must strive to express a particular quality or ability in the same way that her partner expresses it. That one woman envies her partner's passion for public speaking does not mean that she must work to become a skilled public speaker herself. It is the passion that is envied. The capacity to be passionate about something is what must be examined and developed.

Competition solidifies an experience of two separate selves. It is
a process that depends on separate selves in relationship. The illusion of oneness may be shattered, but it is important to remember that in competition, "the relationship" remains. Yes, there is a net which separates two tennis partners. Of course there are differences in each person's playing styles and skills. But it is impossible to play the game without a partner. And during the game, one's sense of one's self as separate and different comes from being in relation to one's partner. Competition, then, is a process that promotes competence, and emphasizes separateness and difference in the context of relatedness.

I admit that I am simplifying a very complex set of behaviors and circumstances. Women are socialized not to compete, especially with men. These cultural expectations have economic and social/historical roots, and leave women with little or no constructive outlet for their experiences of envy. In fact, the social system discourages competition and encourages envy by training women to devalue themselves and each other. But I oversimplify in order to make a crucial point. Women, in general, and lesbian couples, more specifically, have a psychological propensity to subordinate their individuation to the perceived continuation of the relationship. This propensity has been created and reinforced by a culture in which women are the primary caretakers. It is a propensity that is based on the female development of the Self, a resultant comfort with "less-differentiated" relational modes, and women's socially instilled sense of caretaking responsibility. Thus, women come to perceive that separation-individuation is a threat to relatedness. But why not view differentiation as a particular way of being connected? Why not see competition as a particular way of expressing a separate self in relationship?

I would like to view competition as a kind of relatedness in which two women who are separate selves motivate each other toward some heightened capacity without fearing damage to one's self, the Other, or the relationship. The partners are separate and connected in a competitive process. The process itself can encourage a separateness that is relational rather than reactive, a sense both of the ongoing presence of an other, and of a self that is separate and whole.
NOTES

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