

INTERVIEW

MAKING LOVE LAST

Psychotherapist Betty Berzon has written another book aimed at helping gay and lesbian couples stay together

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Shortly after meeting my partner, psychotherapist-turned-weaver Gregory L. Wolfe, on July 19, 1989, I purchased a copy of Dr. Betty Berzon's 1988 book, *Permanent Partners: Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships That Last*. After reading the guide once, I referred to it repeatedly as Greg and I fell in love, moved in together, cemented our union and became beloved members of each other's family of origin.

Books

Much has happened since: Greg and I spent seven months apart in 1991 while I—entangled in red tape—awaited the issuance of my green card back in my home town of Montréal. In the spring of 1992 we left Los Angeles, consecutively emigrating to such varied locales as Ashland, Oregon, San Francisco and Santa Fe, New Mexico. As I write this, Greg and I are in the midst of preparing for a return to the City of Angels. Through it all, we've both grown and changed, thankfully in parallel directions.

As for Berzon, during the past seven years she has continued to counsel same-sex couples—as well as single gay men, lesbians and bisexuals—via her private psychotherapy practice in Los Angeles. *Permanent Partners*, which has sold more than 60,000 copies in its Dutton and Plume editions, is still flying off the shelves of bookstores throughout North America at a steady pace. The author and her own permanent partner, Teresa DeCrescenzo, are going on their 24th year together.

For couples like she and Terry, and Greg and me, Berzon has written a sequel to *Permanent Partners* entitled *The Intimacy Dance: A Guide to Long-Term Success in Gay and Lesbian Relationships*, recently released by Dutton.

"I thought there were different issues involved in long-term relationships than the ones that I focused on mostly in *Permanent Partners*," says Berzon of her decision to write *The Intimacy Dance*, which includes such chapters as "Sex in the Long Term," "The Challenge to Keep Growing," and "Couple Counseling."

Below, Berzon shares some of what she's learned—both professionally and personally—about forging enduring same-sex alliances.

Vaillancourt: What is "the intimacy dance"?

Berzon: The intimacy dance is a way of describing the way two people in a relationship move toward and away from each other. It's a psychological dance that people do, and what it's really about is managing the emotional distance between two people. We all have a need to control how close we let somebody come to us, and how much closeness we allow at a given time. It differs in different people, and in some people it's different at different times. Some people are much more comfortable if they have a relationship in which there is some emotional distance from a partner. Some people don't want that; they just want closeness all the time. But what tends to happen—and I think it is not usually a conscious process—is that certain people feel imperiled when things get too intimate and too close. They have to do something to either move away themselves or push their partner away. And then that doesn't feel good, so then they have to do something else to bring the person back toward them so that there is closeness again.

It's not a problem a couple has to solve, so much as something both individuals must be aware of because it will probably go on for the length of their relationship.

Exactly.

What are some of the negative forces spe-

cifically at work against long-term gay and lesbian relationships?

Well, of course, we have a tradition of failure in same-sex relationships. As I said in *Permanent Partners*, when I asked a colleague I hadn't seen for some years about two other people we had known, I asked, "Are Bill and Audrey still together?" And he looked at me like I was crazy. He said, "Well, of course they're together. They're married." Now, what gay people too often say is, "Are Joe and Bill still together?" or "Is Susan still with Mary?" We reinforce that tradition of impermanency.

Also, of course, our relationships are not socially sanctioned, and that's more difficult for some people than others, particularly if families are not accepting.

When two people get married, almost always, in the heterosexual world, families are very supportive and everybody is thrilled and delighted. That does not always happen with gay people.

Also, I think the fact that you have two people of the same gender in a relationship creates some problems because they are two people who are socialized to the same role in life. Men are socialized to be competitive and strong, and to not show feelings. True intimacy really requires collaboration and being able to be vulnerable to another person. Women are socialized to be nurturing and relationship-oriented, and sometimes that means that two women become so dependent on one another that it really compromises their individuality. So that lack of complementarity, I think, is a subtle but probably important problem that same-sex couples have.

Can you name three essential components of successful long-term relationships?

I can name more than three. You pick out which three you like. I think it's important to always talk about what's happening. I think it's also important to expect conflict and not be afraid to fight, to be willing to learn from conflict and never to shut down, to be willing to negotiate.

Keeping up with change in a long-term relationship is very important because, of course, people change. Sometimes people come into my office and they say, "Well, the problem is he's just changed." [Laughs] "Yeah? So?" "Well, I didn't bargain for this!" As if some agreement got signed and nobody was going to change.

I think it's very important to continue to express affection. Too often people in long-term relationships settle down like old married people and forget about the importance of keeping the excitement alive, of expressing affection to one another as often as possible, of being not only supportive but appreciative of the other person and letting them know. People become complacent in relationships, and then they come into my office and say that they're bored. What they really mean is they're simply not getting the kind of response and affection that were there in the beginning of the relationship. They miss it. They feel lonely.

For gay men, particularly, the issue of monogamy versus non-monogamy is a big one. What is your position on the subject?

Well, I think that what works best in enduring relationships is monogamy. For gay men, outside sex has really been an escape hatch that gets used when there are difficult things to deal with in the relationship. It's just much easier to go outside the primary partnership where there's always a challenge and excitement and so on. But that takes energy away from working on the relationship.

Lesbians, I think, have a different problem. It's much more difficult for women to separate sex and affection. So outside sex very possibly might lead to an emotional attachment that is a threat to the primary relationship.

In a general way—and I think this applies to all relationships—monogamy really does enable trust, and it eliminates the distractions from working on the primary relationship. I have known of many experiments—going back to the '60s, in heterosexual situations—where people tried all kinds of variations on the two-person couple in environments like Esalen,

where anything goes. It never worked. Everybody agreed that it didn't work, that the most comfortable arrangement for any two people building a life together is monogamy. I know a lot of people would disagree with me.

For those opting for non-monogamy, what do you suggest?

Well, in [David] McWhirter and [Andrew] Mattison's [1984] book, *The Male Couple*, they have a list of the kinds of ground rules that they found, talking to people in open relationships, worked best. It really differs for different people. People say, "You can have sex with somebody else when I'm not in town." "Not in the house." "Not in the bedroom." "Not more than once." I certainly have worked with couples who want to have an open relationship, and what I work with them in terms of is the ground rules.

What's crucial is to be clear about what each partner wants so that there are no unpleasant surprises.

Exactly. Very clear. And that's really hard for people to do. Very often what happens is one says, "Oh, but I thought the agreement was...." "Oh, no, no. That wasn't the agreement. We talked about it, don't you remember?" You have to really keep at people about being specific about the ground rules. The ground rules [must] really come from what you want, not what you think you should be saying. And then, be consistent. Or at least be willing to keep talking about how it's going.

How can a couple differentiate between a relationship that needs work and is worth saving, and one that should simply be abandoned?

That is a superb question, because I work with

people all the time who are trying to decide if this is the right person, if this is the right relationship. "Is it healthy to go on, keep trying?" I have a chapter in the book called "The Challenge to Keep Growing—Does It Have to Be So Much Work?" People say, "Well, I don't really want to be in a relationship that I have to work on all the time." But, you know, every relationship requires work if it's going to be really viable and enjoyable.

I have found in my own life—and I find with clients—that commitment to permanency is very, very important. So much can be accomplished when two people really make a commitment to one another that they're going to be there no matter what. I try to get people to do that. Especially people who have an investment of years in a relationship, and who have just come to a point where it doesn't feel good anymore. I try to get them to make that commitment to work on it. "Let's look at what's going on here." I have another chapter in the book that's called "Is This Really It? Am I Missing Something Out There?" Rather than working with them in terms of looking out there for what they're missing, I try to get them to look in the relationship to see what's missing there. Very often that does work.

I have at times—not very often—said to people, "Why do you want to go on with this?" These would be people who, after quite a few sessions of watching their interaction, I see don't even like each other. They're torturing each other. I say, "Why do you want to go on torturing each other?"

Or sometimes—and I hesitate to say this—it's just true that one person is emotionally rather disturbed as an individual. Working in this format, with the couple, you can see that this is just not going to work.

For two people who feel their relationship is in trouble—but who want to save it—what avenues exist?

Well, there are now a lot of books if people are interested in that. I am gratified to say a lot of people use *Permanent Partners* in that way. And I think this book will be very valuable for people, too, because it deals with different issues and serious problems more so than *Permanent Partners* did.

There are, especially in large cities, many, many openly gay therapists now who understand quite a lot about same-sex relationships and how to make them work. I actually have a chapter in this book, as you know, called "Couple Counseling—How Can It Help?" It's still really true in this country that many people look upon psychotherapy as something that you do if you're crazy. Their family background simply mitigates against their feeling comfortable going to a therapist. But therapists can help quite a lot in a relationship.

I know firsthand that having a partner who is a psychotherapist certainly makes "talking about it" and "working it out" a lot easier. But there is a widespread myth out there that therapists have all the answers when dealing with their own intimate relationships. Would you like to dispel that myth?

[Laughs] Yes, I certainly would like to dispel that myth, because we do what everybody else does in relationships. We do such things as bring the unfinished business of our childhood into the relationship, and so there's that whole layer that goes on that we do not particularly have insight into when it's happening. I try very hard to practice what I write, but I am not always successful. It does help, I find, that I have thought through so many of these things. Sometimes I will have a fight with my lover, and what I really want to do is just go away and pout and not even deal with it. [Laughs] But I say, "I've written this damned book, so I can't do that. As miserable as this is, as horrible as it feels, I have to stay here and work this through until something is different, until something is learned that will help in the future."

The Intimacy Dance by Dr. Betty Berzon. Dutton, 1996; \$24.95, cloth.



Betty Berzon

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