

An Author's Note

on · *The Phone Between Us: The Contemporary Pair Bond*

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A long bond is, before anything else, a biological event. Two nervous systems calibrating around each other across years. Two autonomic systems learning the other body's rhythms, the other body's stress signatures, the other body's signal that says I am here. The bond is held together at the level of chemistry, breath, posture, sleep, the small daily exchanges of regulation between two bodies sharing a life. This is the level at which the bond actually operates. It is not where most of the cultural conversation about marriage is taking place.

The mind cannot directly perceive this level. The mind has no direct access to what the body is doing. The mind has to guess, from whatever signals it can read, and the apparatus it uses to guess is language. Language is a tool for building models. A word is a pointer to a bundle of features the mind has assembled from its specific encounters with whatever the word names. *Love* in my head is a bundle assembled from the specific people who loved me first. The way the word was used in the house I grew up in. The people I have loved across the years. The books and songs and films in which the word appeared at moments that mattered. Your *love* is a different bundle, assembled differently. When we use the word in conversation, we behave as if the pointer were unambiguous. It is not.

Most of the time the divergence does not matter. The pointers overlap enough that the conversation proceeds. We agree on dinner.

We coordinate on the weather. *Seven o'clock* is a coordinate on a shared clock. *The kitchen* points at a specific room. The practical outcome of these conversations is unaffected by whatever residual bundle differences exist.

The trouble starts with words that feel like coordinates but are not. *I'll be home soon*. His *soon* is forty minutes. Her *soon* is ten. Both are using the word in good faith. Both think they are agreeing on a coordinate. Neither has noticed that *soon* is not a coordinate at all but a bundle assembled from each speaker's history of waiting and being waited for, of urgency and patience, of what counted as quickly in the houses they grew up in. The bundles are invisible. The argument that follows feels like an argument about whether he was late. It is really an argument that two different feature bundles have collided in the same word.

The bundle is also not fixed. The same word, used by the same speaker, deploys different features in different contexts. The husband's *I love you* said in bed at night activates one cluster of features: proximity, tenderness, the chemistry of long co-presence. The same words said as he runs out the door activate another: continuity, daily commitment, the small reassurance that keeps a partnership intact across the working day. The bundle has internal structure. Context determines which subset of it is operative in a given moment. Most of what people mean by *you said this and meant that* is a mismatch about which features were active when the words were spoken.

The trouble compounds when the topic is one where the divergence matters operationally. Respect. Commitment. Boundaries. Need. Care. Fairness. Love itself. These are not weather words. The feature bundles inside each of them are heavily personal, heavily history-dependent, and heavily invisible to the speaker themselves. A speaker has direct access only to their own bundle. They do not experience their use of a word as deploying a bundle. They

experience it as naming the thing. The bundle is the thing the word points at, and the thing the word points at is, by the speaker's lights, the obvious fact the word describes.

This is why most disagreements about important things are not disagreements about what is being named. They are disagreements about feature bundles colliding inside the same word. The wife who says *I need more love* and the husband who says *I show love every day* are both deploying the word against the bundles they have each assembled. The wife's bundle has *being attended to* and *being asked about* and *being held without prompting* at its center. The husband's bundle has *being provided for* and *being defended in his absence* and *being chosen reliably over decades* at its center. Both bundles are real. Both are coherent. Both have been earned by genuine life experience. Neither is reducible to the other. The argument about whether the husband loves the wife enough is not, properly speaking, an argument about whether he loves her. It is an argument that two different feature bundles have collided in the same word, and the conflict has been mistaken for a content dispute when it is actually a notation dispute.

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This is the level at which most contemporary marriage advice operates. The level of the words. Communication skills. I-statements. Better listening. Active reflection. Express your needs clearly. Use the right vocabulary. The implicit theory is that if both partners deploy the words well enough, the bundles will align and the misunderstanding will resolve. The theory is partly right at the level it operates. It is also missing something larger.

What it is missing is that the bundles are not the territory. The bundles are descriptions of the territory, assembled by the mind from whatever the mind has encountered. The territory is what the

body is actually doing. The autonomic state. The hormonal background. The chronic activation. The chemistry of two nervous systems trying to regulate each other across the conditions they are operating under. The bundles are the mind's guesses about what is happening at this level. The mind has no direct access. It infers, from whatever signals it can read, what the body must be doing.

The cultural conversation has been operating at the level of the bundles for decades. The therapeutic vocabulary. The relationship-advice literature. The dating-app self-descriptions. The Instagram-quote frameworks. All of it is mind talking to mind, in vocabulary that was assembled before the conditions changed, against bodies that have changed in ways the vocabulary does not track. The result is an apparatus of language that is doing its work confidently and producing worse outcomes than its confidence implies. The couples who have used the vocabulary correctly, by the apparatus's lights, are not always the couples who are doing well.

The book is operating at a different level. The level the bundles were supposed to describe but have drifted from. The bodies. The architectures. The substrate the bond requires. The contemporary conditions doing specific things to that substrate. The work the book is asking the reader to do is partly a relocation of attention. From the level of the words to the level of what the words have been pointing at, badly.

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This is also why the book introduces new vocabulary. The inherited vocabulary was assembled against a different set of bodies in a different set of conditions, and the assembly has thinned. Some of the inherited words are still useful. Many are not. Some of them are actively misleading, because their feature bundles include assumptions that are no longer true and that the speaker is not aware they

are deploying.

Biological standing. The privileged regulatory position another person comes to occupy across the systems by which the body desires, calms itself, calibrates against threat, predicts, and imagines life. What a long-bonded partner provides at the autonomic level. Not what the cultural script for love names. Something underneath it.

The registers of intimacy. The six channels (physical, emotional, attunement, attentional, operational, future) through which access is granted between partners. Each read continuously by the body. None reducible to the others. The cultural script collapses these to one or two. The body has been reading all six all along.

The antechamber. The room before the room. The space where the architecture of an outside relationship is operating but no act has occurred. The cultural conversation has had no word for this. The configurations have been operating without language, which means the people inside them have had no way to see what they are inside.

Sensorimotor decoupling. What the contemporary phone-using body is in. A slow, distributed, continuous version of seasickness. The eyes report stillness while the vestibular system reports motion, except here the body is doing one thing while the mind is somewhere else, and the autonomic system cannot settle into a steady state.

The witness function. What a long-bonded partner provides that other configurations do not. Continuous, accurate seeing, across years, of a self that has been gradually revealing itself in conditions that other relationships do not produce. The thing that makes a long bond different from a sequence of shorter ones.

Each of these is a deliberate construction. The features each term bundles together were chosen against the bodies the book is trying to describe, not against the cultural script the bodies have been op-

erating inside. The hope is that a reader who internalizes the vocabulary will be able to think things about their own life that the previous vocabulary could not produce.

The new vocabulary is needed now, urgently, because the conditions the bodies are operating under have changed in ways the inherited vocabulary did not anticipate. The smartphone. The algorithmic feed. The dating-app architecture. The social-media broadcast layer. The AI companion. These are the past fifteen years' contribution to the conditions inside which long bonds have to operate. None of them existed in the form they take now when the cultural vocabulary about marriage was assembled.

What the new conditions have done is specific and describable. They have stripped the village that has always sat around the bond, replacing the slow time of co-present human company with the fast time of mediated interaction. They have decoupled the body from the mind, asking the body to be in one place doing one thing while the mind is somewhere else doing another. They have made available, continuously, configurations that previously required deliberate construction and that previously had social friction to slow their progression: parallel relationships, parasocial bonds, the antechamber that no longer requires a physical room. They have industrialized the productization of self in a market that does not close. They have produced bodies in chronic autonomic activation calibrated against ancestral environments that did not contain any of this.

The inherited vocabulary for marriage and intimacy was assembled against a different set of conditions. Most of its terms still function for the situations they were calibrated against. Many of them have drifted past the point of usefulness for the situations contemporary couples are actually in. The book is a response to this. The

new vocabulary is not a replacement of the old. It is an addition calibrated against what the old vocabulary was losing track of, against the bodies operating in the conditions that now obtain.

This is what the book is for, at the most general level. Not to give the reader facts they did not have. Not to teach a method they can apply. To give them concepts they can think with.

The concepts are feature bundles, deliberately assembled, against the territory the book is describing. A reader who internalizes the vocabulary does not just learn things they did not know. They acquire the capacity to think things they could not think before. The conversations they can have with their partners, with their friends, with themselves, are larger after they have the vocabulary than they were before. Not because the new vocabulary is correct in some absolute sense. Because the new vocabulary tracks something the old vocabulary was losing track of.

A reader who finishes the book and finds themselves reaching for *the antechamber* in a conversation, or for *biological standing* when describing a partner's role in their own regulation, or for *the registers of intimacy* when explaining to a friend why something feels off in their marriage, has received what the book was offering at one of the levels it was offering it.

That is the work. The book does the rest.