

A Note Before Beginning

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

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This is a book about what the past fifteen years have done to long bonds. It is written for readers who are inside one and trying to keep it well, between bonds and trying to understand what happened, or unpartnered and trying to understand the field they are operating in. The smartphone is the recent change in the conditions the bond has to operate under, and the most pervasive of those changes. It has restructured a great deal of what couples used to do together and what unpartnered adults used to do with each other.

The conditions are visible in the demographic record. Marriage rates in the United States have been falling since the 1970s. Fertility across the OECD has been declining since the 1960s. Average fertility now is roughly 1.4 children per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1, and below 1.0 in the lowest-fertility countries.¹

¹The OECD's Family Database (2024) places the OECD-average total fertility rate at 1.40 in 2024, down from 2.84 in 1970. The 2025 OECD *Pensions at a Glance* report estimates the 2025 OECD average at 1.46. Korea has the lowest TFR in the OECD at roughly 0.7 children per woman in 2023; Ukraine, China, Singapore, and Korea all have rates below 1.0. Israel is the only OECD country currently above replacement (2.87 in 2024). The replacement-level figure of 2.1 children per woman is the standard demographic threshold under conditions of no migration and stable mortality. Sources: OECD Family Database, *Society at a Glance 2024* (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2024), *Pensions at a Glance 2025* (OECD Publishing, Paris, 2025).

Roughly two thirds of the global population now lives in countries with fertility below replacement.²

The trend lines were already in place when the iPhone shipped in 2007. What changed in the past fifteen years is the rate, particularly among adults under thirty, and the shape. The contemporary inflection involves not only later marriage and fewer children. It involves measurable declines in dating, in cohabitation, in sexual activity, in the time young adults spend with each other in person at all. The longer drivers were many. The entry of women into the labor market and the educational changes that accompanied it. The contraceptive technologies that decoupled sex from reproduction. The housing-cost structure that has made family formation expensive in ways the previous generation did not face. The financial conditions of the post-2008 period. The cultural conversation about marriage that has, for several decades, encouraged what fails and discouraged what works.

The book's narrower argument is that on top of these older drivers, the past fifteen years have layered a specific new set of conditions. They act on bodies calibrated against an ancestral environment that did not contain them. The always-on personal device. The social-media environment. The algorithmic feeds. The dating-app architectures. The collision of these contemporary conditions with bodies that have not changed produces specific predictable failures in how humans pair-bond, sustain attention to a partner, and inhabit the long arc of a life with another person.

A structural distinction runs underneath the rest of the book and is worth making explicit. Society and children need a marriage to be a stable container. Roughly fourteen years of continuous

²United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Fertility 2024* (United Nations, New York, 2025), which reports that more than two thirds of the global population (68 percent) lives in countries where fertility is below 2.1 births per woman, with 55 percent of countries and areas below replacement.

adult investment per child, in arrangements stable enough that the other institutions children develop inside can be built on top of them. The two adults inside the marriage need something different. They need to be motivated and willing to keep the container stable. The two needs are related but not identical. The contemporary difficulty is partly that the older institutional conditions that used to keep adults motivated to maintain the container, even across periods when the bond was thin, have thinned themselves. What is left is the bond function, asked to do the container work without the buffering that previously made it feasible. The book is partly about how two adults, on purpose, build the motivation and the practices that keep the container stable across the decades the children need it.

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The book asks the reader to set aside the moral framing the cultural conversation about marriage has been organized around for several decades. The good-versus-bad-person framing in which the work of a struggling marriage is to identify which partner wronged the other, with the marriage's recovery dependent on the wronging partner's contrition. The book is making structural claims about architectures that run on both partners simultaneously, calibrated against ancestral conditions, producing behaviors that neither partner consciously authored. This is not a softening of the moral register. It is a different register entirely, addressed to a different level of description. The reader who imports the good-versus-bad frame into the diagnostic chapters will read them in ways the book does not intend. Both partners have been inside an architecture that was producing both of their behaviors, and the work the book is pointing at is not the adjudication of fault but the conversion of the architecture.

This does not mean the book is morally neutral. It treats coercive control, deception, and the deliberate destruction of a partner's interior as structural injuries that warrant the strong responses the chapter on *Love as Extraction* describes. It treats the deliberate maintenance of antechamber configurations against a partner's clear objection, once the architecture has been named and the conversion has been refused, as a fact the partner is entitled to act on. What the book is setting aside is the cultural script's particular form of moral seriousness. The form that adjudicates good and bad people inside marriages whose architectures are producing behavior on both sides.

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The claims in the book operate at the level of populations and distributions, not at the level of individuals. When the book says that the male nervous system is calibrated against variance in reproductive success, or that women on average maintain attentional contact with men who could function as backup partners, or that the male coalitional village runs on hierarchy and fast forgiveness while the female social network runs on relational long-memory and distributed empathy, these are statistical claims. They describe how distributions of bodies, configurations, and behaviors look across populations, not predictions about any specific person. The mean of a distribution is not where every member of the population sits. Any particular individual may sit anywhere on the curve, including the opposite end from the population mean. The accurate reading holds three pieces simultaneously. What the population looks like. Where you yourself sit on the distribution. Where the specific people in your life sit. None of these contradicts the others.

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Several chapters of the book may surface recognitions from inside the reader's own current or recent life, sometimes with a force that is unwelcome. The chapter on trauma bonds describes a dynamic some readers are inside without yet knowing they are. The chapter on repeat injury in rupture-and-repair describes a pattern some marriages are running on. The chapter on asymmetric activation around money describes a configuration some couples have been living inside for years without language for it. Other chapters may surface other recognitions. The descriptions are general. The diagnoses are ones a careful reader can apply to themselves. The help that follows the recognition is not in this book, because it cannot be. It is in the work that happens between a person and a therapist who knows the territory, in the conversations with friends who knew you before, and in the long quiet recovery of an interior that the dynamic was structured to suppress. The book points at the work. It does not perform it.

If at any point in reading the book a recognition surfaces something the reader needs help with, the help exists and is more available than most readers assume. A therapist trained in the relevant territory is the most direct resource. Many work on sliding-scale fees and many have low barriers to a first conversation. If there is any concern about physical safety, present or potential, the National Domestic Violence Hotline is reachable in the United States at 1-800-799-7233 or at thehotline.org, with comparable services in most other countries. Their bar for taking a call is lower than most callers assume. They handle situations involving no physical violence, situations the caller is not yet sure are situations at all, and situations where the caller is calling about someone else.

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The book's framework is built on serious clinical work that has

been developing for decades. The Emotionally Focused Therapy tradition pioneered by Sue Johnson and her colleagues. The trauma-and-the-body synthesis developed by Bessel van der Kolk and Peter Levine. The polyvagal framework developed by Stephen Porges. The Internal Family Systems tradition. The somatic-experiencing literature. The Hakomi and AEDP traditions and others. The clinical traditions themselves draw on a broader body-centric philosophical and scientific lineage. The phenomenological tradition, especially Merleau-Ponty's argument that consciousness is constitutively embodied. The contemporary embodied-cognition research program. The neuroscience of interoception developed by Damasio, Craig, and Barrett. The contemplative traditions that have been investigating the body for as long as humans have had introspective practices. The book extends all of this into a structural-historical register the existing literatures have mostly not addressed. The clinicians and the thinkers working in these traditions are doing the body-level work the book treats as central, and the book's debt to them is real. Where the book is critical of the therapeutic establishment in the chapters that follow, the target is the cognitive-behavioral mainstream and the academic-credentialing apparatus rather than the practitioners working in the body-oriented traditions named here.

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The book is written in a register that describes the situations it names without softening them. The aim is accuracy rather than emphasis. A description the body's own evidence can confirm, delivered without the consolation that would make the reader feel better at the cost of seeing less. Readers facing real difficulty are usually better served by clear description than by reassurance. The clarity is what the book has to offer of use. The reader who needs warmth

in addition (and most readers do at some point) should find it elsewhere. In the people they love. In the therapists who have chosen this work as their life. In the long traditions of consolation literature and religious practice that have addressed these questions for as long as humans have had them. The book argues throughout that one of the things the smartphone era has quietly cost us is the easy availability of those forms of care. Where this book falls short of supplying what a particular reader needs, that lack is part of what the book is trying to describe.