

An Accompaniment initiative for couples in crisis

Paths of Light

Rita and Rino Ventriglia

Paths of Light is an accompaniment initiative for couples, born from reflections on the experience of crisis. It is opening a path of hope for couples in difficulty and has evolved into a promising methodology in caring for seriously wounded families. Two of its co-founders – a psychotherapist and a gynecologist and sex therapist – speak about this initiative.

When the New Families Movement coordinators, Anna and Alberto Friso asked us to help give life to the dream of Annamaria and Danilo Zanzucchi (among the first married focolarini couples) - of developing a professional way of caring for couples experiencing trauma in their relationship – we understood that *Paths of Light* would necessarily be a project born out of suffering. So, together with Marina and Gianni Vegliach, and other couples, we started with a common goal: to accompany couples experiencing difficulties in their relationship.

Remembering that early period, it seems to us that the communion among us suggested how to start. There was a need to retrace our history as a couple, to reflect on the crises we ourselves went through and to try to understand the path traveled. It is precisely the awareness of our darkness and acceptance of fragility, which was the opportunity to develop the needed tenderness to understand (take in) the wounded heart of the other. In this way it would be possible to help partners to do so with one another, reciprocally. We have repeatedly experienced how offering partners the opportunity to name their own pains helps them to start a new dialogue.

An embrace that welcomes and gathers

We continue to experiment in using a method that is not based on the directives of an animator, or experts aimed at solving problems and improving a couple's relationship. Rather, it is one based on all of us, one animated by a spirit of respect and acceptance of oneself and another that sees ourselves to be of equal value. Canadian psychiatrist and founder of transactional analysis, Eric Berne, expresses this in one of his most significant texts, in stating that to greet another means "... to see another, to become conscious of him

or her as a phenomenon, to exist for them and be ready for his or her existence for us "(Berne 1979).

In this way, couples in crisis, who had often been judged, labeled and dismissed where they were, can experience an atmosphere of home, of the beauty of being acknowledged with affection, esteem, and respect. Then in addition, couples taking part in *Paths of Light* find something more: "arms that welcome, arms that gather" (Ventriglia 2017). It is a welcoming embrace and gathers what people need when they are down, when life has knocked them out and those around them see them but have not had time to stop and pick up the pieces.

The crisis of the couple in a family is like a *tsunami* that destroys everything and adds loneliness to the pain of the situation. Friends disappear and in some social contexts, including Christian ones, people are marginalized. How often we encounter Christians in the *Paths of Light* initiative who feel like lepers. That bond of love in which they believed, which pushed them to build a family, is often disintegrating. Therefore, those who are experiencing a crisis in a relationship, who have lost the compass of the meaning of their existence, need someone who bends down to them and gazes at them with love. This is what makes another who is desperate and disillusioned feel deserving of a place in this world, one that uniquely belongs to him or her as a human person.

Understanding the Other's Emptiness

The name, *Paths of Light*, was born over the years. It is meant to indicate that through a tunnel of darkness, a couple can arrive at the light. The perspective inspiring *Paths of Light* is a belief that each one, each couple, possesses its own truth within itself. Thus, the task of helping couples is to enter fully into a relationship with all couples and in an atmosphere of communion to share even the storms, darkness and nights of the heart and soul, while at the same time striving to understand the other's emptiness. In a reciprocity of love, participants slowly become aware of mistakes made, take responsibility for them, choose to forgive and start again by experimenting with new ways of relating as a couple. Or instead, for the authenticity experienced through *Paths of Light*, they may choose to say goodbye for one reason or another, without resentment, and with the painful awareness that it is necessary to separate. Generally, such a decision is taken either for serious reasons of violence, or serious psychological injuries to one or both partners.

In *Paths of Light*, the two partners are able to understand that they have hurt one another through behavior which were born out of defense mechanisms and unconsciously implemented by their own ego to protect themselves from ancient pains that originated in relationships with primary attachment figures that they could not elaborate as children. By embracing each other's fragility and giving and sharing your own, it is possible for couples to build a stronger union. Relationships based on authenticity have a generative power. Thus begins a dialogue characterized by new depth and intimacy, in which downturns become less and less frequent and getting back up again becomes quicker. A new mutual trust can be born from which children also begin to benefit by witnessing that their parents are not perfect people, but authentic ones. This generates hope precisely because they have made mistakes and fallen and are able to get up and start again.

Accompanied couples, accompanying couples

Over the years, some have also felt the urge to accompany other couples, giving birth to the 'Help Couples' initiative. They make an important contribution because they are a tangible witness to the reality that crisis can be a source of new life for a couple.

A fruit and a sign of the intercultural promise of *Paths of Light* is its early development in other countries, with specific approaches reflective of enculturation in each culture. In Switzerland, Slovakia and Croatia, it is called *Programme for couples in crisis*, and in Spain it is called *Porque dijimos Sí, quiero*. Its development, structure and enculturation all continue to go hand in hand.

Specific Components

Paths of Light is divided into two extended moments, four months apart. We call this second moment a 'booster,' for its similar function to that of a vaccine booster. These are days on which, stimulated by the testimonies of accompanying couples, there is a group experience of sharing, of communion, thanks to moments of spirituality and deepening of psychological issues inherent to the couple's relationship. The program also includes recreational aspects, like outings, a dance evening, romantic dinner, etc. These moments are incorporated according to the culture of each country.

In addition to those mentioned before, the presence of a priest – or in some countries a consecrated person – is deeply important. So far, the consecrated people have been focolarini living in community life. By their presence at a couples' side, they remind us of another calling: That of an exclusive love for God. In Slovakia, a priest of the Greek-Catholic rite attended with his spouse. Their presence was an immense richness that made it possible to experience the multiplicity of expressions of God's love in a profound manner. It is a spiritual love. Yet, as Pope John Paul II reminded us, it is an authentic love, a love which knows all the phases of the love between spouses, beginning with falling in love. One of our dreams is that *Paths of Light* will continue spreading to other countries, grafting itself into each respective culture, and in openness to people of other religions as well.

Bibliography:

E. Berne, *Hello... And then? The Psychology of Human Destiny*, Bompiani, Milan 1979.

Study Commission, *Paths of Light Project*, Manual for internal use of the Focolare Movement, edited by M. and P. Acler, R. Almada, L. and U. De Angelis, A. and F. Scariolo, R. and R. Ventriglia, Rocca di Papa 2020.

G. Pieroni, *Abbracciare la fragilità*, in «Città Nuova» June 2023, pp. 56-57.

R. Ventriglia, *Forgiveness: A Crossroads of Life Paths. Wounds and Scars of Relationships*, Youcanprint, Tricase (LE) 2017.