

Love together: Longtime male couples on healthy intimacy and communication

By Tim Clausen

A Review

By Armand R Cerbone, Ph.D., ABPP

Clausen, T. (2014). *Love together: Longtime male couples on healthy intimacy and communication*. Self-published. ISBN:978-1492822257.

Now that same-sex couples can marry, there is bound to be more need for research and training to treat them affirmatively. For those of us who have already been working with them for many years, there are new questions needing answers. For example, if and how will having options to marry affect the course of long-term relationships? How will legal recognition affect the age-old stigma against same-sex relationships and its effects on intimacy, attachment and expression? How will marriage affect younger couples or older couples whose experiences of sexual prejudice are vastly different? Or for those who live in rural communities or in red states? Or for those whose faith traditions are more conservative or punitive?

The questions are many and demand the kind of clarifications that only research can provide. I mean the kind of research that the Hereks, Pattersons, Kurdeks, and so many others have done over decades. Their research supported APA's amicus briefs that the California Supreme Court cited when they struck down the state ban against gay marriage that, in turn, resulted in the Prop 8 referendum outlawing same-sex marriages constitutionally. It was our research and the testimony of our psychologists in the appeals process that justices cited in nullifying the California referendum. And, finally, it was again our amicus brief that the U.S. Supreme Court cited in striking down all bans against same-sex marriages.

Now appears this book about gay male couples by Tim Clausen. Clausen is not trained as we are, steeped in theory, hypotheses testing, and critical thinking. Nor did he write with professionals in mind. He is, rather, an autodidact, developing his proficiency with interviewing over many years from his curiosity to find answers to his own questions, I imagine. He has studied not only male couples but also influential jazz musicians and families of the victims of the 9/11 horrors. The brief biography he supplies suggests a man who marches very much to his own drummer, who follows his own passions, but like any accomplished musician transforms notes into universal themes that keep resonating. In this book Tim has culled 23 from hundreds of interviews he conducted with gay male couples and strung them together. Collectively, they give us an oral history of relationships between two men.

While in no way could *Love Together* be considered qualitative research either, it is written in a way that will appeal to the research-minded among us. Clausen himself disclaims any pretense to science in the preface to the book. Rather, he places his work in the tradition of oral history and storytelling. Studs Terkel made a notable career as an oral historian, and more recently, National Public Radio is recording personal chronicles in its Story Core project. Thus, Clausen fits neatly and importantly into a long tradition of story telling. Reading his book in this way I was reminded, too, of the groundbreaking research of Evelyn Hooker whose friendship with happy, well-adjusted gay men in the 50's prompted her to conduct research that would dispel the myths of gay men as miserable and lonely. Her study was so convincing that over time it reversed thinking about homosexuality as an illness. No longer were we ill because of our homosexuality; what mental illness we suffered was the likely result of the oppression against homosexuals; what illness may have been idiopathic was likely complicated by discrimination. Clausen's stories give us a glimpse into the lives of the gay men Hooker must have known so well. Indeed, the oldest men in *Love Together* would have been contemporaries of the men in her study.

Though *Love Together* never rises to the standards empirical research demands, Clausen has provided the kind of rationale, purpose, and interviewing methodology we look for in more formal studies. The introductory pages include the list of the questions from which he drew for each interview. Each chapter begins with a thumbnail

description of the couple and how they met. The men interviewed come from a variety of regional and demographic backgrounds, though only one is clearly non-white. Though not a psychotherapist either, Clausen offers us stories that will sensitize practitioners to the human complexity of lives forced to live in the margins.

Because Clausen conceived his book as meant for the general public rather than a professional one, he cannot be criticized for not formally including a statement about the minority membership of his sample or sought to include them. In a private communication, however, he confirmed that there were minority men in his sample. Nonetheless, psychologists would want to know how the experience of minority male couples mirrors or diverges from those in his book. And similarly about women in same-sex couples.

Clausen has arranged in his book sequentially, grouping the interviews by the number of decades the men have been together. Thus, he begins with 6 interviews of men coupled for 10-19 years, then those for 20-30 years, and so on up to 60-70 years. The format of the book is itself proof that same-sex commitments are genuine and lasting. The last chapter is a sensitive, very moving account of surviving the loss of a husband after more than 60 years together. However, Clausen publishes the statements of only one half of each couple, arbitrarily choosing the interview he regarded as more interesting.

All relationships are complex and often complicated. Perhaps the greatest value that a book about male couples will have for a professional reader will be seeing themes emerge that echo the patterns in heterosexual relationships, like maintaining satisfying sexuality over time, and themes that are unique to stigmatized relationships, like surviving and thriving in unsupportive or openly hostile communities. It has been my experience over 40 years of work with gay couples that, forgetting the effects of years of oppression on attachments and sexual expression, they assume normative conflicts and persistent sexual frustrations indicate they have a bad relationship that should be abandoned. As a 70-year old interviewee opines in a later chapter, "Difficult is not the same as toxic. Difficult is something that can be worked with." Clausen's couples confirmed my own clinical impressions that cultivating lasting love and robust commitment is possible and may reward the partners with deepening appreciation and respect and desire for each other before electing separation.

As might be expected in a book about gay relationships, couple after couple recounts tales of discrimination and oppression from family, society, and religious institutions. The reader will find their resilience remarkable. Again as expected, Clausen explored sexuality with each couple. What arises is an appreciation of the diverse range of accommodations to monogamy or polyamory that a couple will make, how they determine their sexual boundaries, how those can change over time, and what meaning sex has for them. For older couples that often means adjusting to the frustrations of an aging body failing to perform or respond. For younger couples that sometimes means allowing for sex with other men, often with qualified restrictions. Here, age cohort has particular relevance. Older men sagely offer younger men the importance of appreciating that it is not lust that makes a relationship last but love...and persistent work. 10-60 years together prove the point they make.

And, while it is exclusively about male couples, and mostly white couples, it provides a window on intimate relationships as only very personal narratives can. As the Foreword suggests, what Clausen "has uncovered is a wonder." The wonder is the revelation of enduring love between two men. Because it is about love between two human beings, I think that, straight or gay, whether reading for personal benefit or professional enlightenment, you are likely to recognize clients or even yourself. Reading their stories will connect you with the people who lived them and may just resonate with your own. Lay or professional, you will experience the richness and variety of human love.