

Aesthetics of Intimacy – What, Why, and How: A Metalab

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Abstract

This paper describes a metalab on the theme of '*Aesthetics of Intimacy*' under the auspices of Aastha Foundation for Human Learning and Growth held in March 2018. A metalab is a process lab for people who have either completed internship in process work or have completed at least two phases of internship. The methodology comprises both inter-personal and intra-personal exploration in the phenomenological mode and uncovering the conceptual basis of the theme.

The conceptual framework for intimacy was based on the cognitive and emotive dimensions of personal, social and cultural meanings of intimacy, sexuality and gender relations. These were explored using a mix of personal sharing, with the help of mythology, symbols, films and art forms like dance. Participants were invited to look at the whole journey of life from a perspective of intimacy. During the course of the 5-day metalab, participants revisited troublesome memories and also traversed the domain of human desire, fantasies, fears, hopes and dreams. The exploration of intimacy got participants in touch with the primal energy that led to a feeling of rejuvenation.

The importance of the theme, conceptual basis of intimacy, design of the program, and responses of the participants are described in the paper.

Introduction

Process labs are marked by a lot of good feeling and euphoria towards the end. The lines from an old Hindi song could not apply better - “*kal tak jo anjane they janmon key meet hain*” (tr : “Strangers till yesterday, we are now friends over lifetimes”). Both as a participant and a facilitator in a process lab we have all marvelled and wondered at the warmth that the participants exude at the end of the program. Even long-standing couples or family members have envied the quality of inter-personal relationships that are formed after such a short interaction. One of the cornerstones of the emergence of such friendships is possibly the experience of emotional intimacy that participants feel during the course of the process lab.

Yet in the times we live, with an abundance of resources and technology we have made it possible to live alone. We can often take breaks and be by ourselves or we can live completely isolated. Safety need not be found in friends and family, alarms and remote sensing and connections to call rooms can make us physically safe. Owing to hectic schedules, couples live together as strangers during weekdays. Children live unconnected to other siblings and parents within homes. Strangers and friends living far away seem to be people we are connecting with on an hourly basis. And these are people who can disconnect anytime they wish and can put on any persona that they feel appropriate, giving the other, infinite choices to do the same. Emotions need not be expressed and dealt with. Such interactions though rich in the number of transactions are bereft of closeness or intimacy. The era we live in meets all our basic needs and wants. It also allows for some psychological needs to be met especially the need for autonomy and control, but does not provide for the need for affection and intimacy. It may not be untrue to say that there is large scale deprivation of involvement in both emotional openness and physical closeness in relationships.

The metalab on *Aesthetics of Intimacy* was designed to explore some of these questions.

The invitation for the metalab on Aesthetics of Intimacy read, *"The stories we don't tell, the questions we don't ask, hold in their silent depths the flowering of maturity and the beauty of the human spirit. Unpredictable as they are, they may bring up troublesome memories or remind us of those romantic sequences. The complex domain of human desire with all its fantasies, fears, hopes and dreams need to be explored in order to retain the inner vitality and soulfulness that intimacy can elicit in our lives. Here we experience life energy in its most vital and elemental form. This is central to our experience of care, affection, attraction and love."*

By design, a metalab is an invitation to uncover and discover the philosophy of what it is to be human. In a metalab, a particular human process in the realm of inter- or intra-personal world is the central theme and participants engage in discovering deeper truths about that process by India ABS Summit – Aesthetics of Intimacy– R Kumar & N Vohra - 16th-17th Nov 2018

diving into their inner selves. While conceptual frameworks were used to form the base in this metalab, the explorations had threads of personal narratives, symbolic work through art, guided experiences, films, stories from myths, evocation through verse and dance, woven together. The use of the body, the heart and the mind simultaneously, enabled touching the depths and richness of both the emotive and the imaginative realm in our quest to deeply inquire into what it is to be human.

The paper is organised around 5 themes that emerged from 5 days of the metalab. The themes helped us understand and get in touch with our authentic experience in the realm of intimacy. Feelings of fear, anger, pathos, happiness, love etc., were explored. In a group development journey, intimacy is experienced only after a group has normed, stormed and formed iteratively with risks taken in self disclosure, offering reflections/feedback, and experiencing inter-personal understanding and trust. The formation of groups also reaches the level of performance due to development of emotional intimacy, resulting in an experience of warmth and intimacy. The existing literature on intimacy either focuses on theories or sexual intimacy but very little is written on the evolution of emotional intimacy in the context of groups and relationships. And, this is what we – 8 participants and 2 facilitators - undertook, a journey exploring the nuances of aesthetics of intimacy.

The tradition of process work practised at Aastha draws from phenomenology and existentialism. “At the core of this phenomenological paradigm lies the idea that it is important to understand the view or perspective of the human subject. The phenomenological inquirer attempts to make sense of the subject's 'lifeworld', how this subject experienced particularity in her 'lifeworld', how she felt about them, and how they conditioned a set response.” Through the lab, the exploration for each one was to dip into her/his ways of being vis-a-vis intimacy, reflect on what she has accepted as given and ‘real’ and what she needed to re-examine to free the spirit and feel alive. Also, to commit to her most fundamental human need of expressing and relating freely, which a space of intimacy offers.

The role of facilitators was to facilitate and enable this reflexivity and keep the focus on the macro theme, (while exploration of the inner selves continued for the participants), and review design elements in resonance with what was emerging in the group. The facilitators shared their experiences too, while keeping the thread of exploration going.

The theme descriptions are interspersed with the description of the concept, methodology used, and also the experiences of the participants.

Intimacy – Inter-or Intra-personal

What is intimacy? Intimacy is about feeling very close to another person, about being fully vulnerable and knowing that the person will not take advantage, about trusting, understanding and accepting the person completely. Being intimate is allowing the other person to see what makes one happy, sad, angry, and scared. Intimacy allows us to see the other person for who they are beyond the masks and the labels, giving name to all those feelings that seep into our heart and soul when someone fully “gets you” and makes one feel whole.

Erik Erikson in his theory of psychosocial development described intimate relationships as those characterized by closeness, honesty, and love. Harry Reis, a social psychologist who works in the area of social intimacy, describes intimacy as "what most people want in their social life - it's what people search for". A wildlife reserve owner in South Africa shares an interesting anecdote in his book 'Elephant Whisperer'. He spent months calming the adopted elephants, that were treated badly by humans. The matriarch of the herd looked at the author and raised her trunk. The man felt he had been seen, acknowledged and accepted and thus shared a moment of intimacy.

There were discussions on what intimacy is not. By definition, one can discover oneself, own oneself, love oneself, but not be intimate with oneself. Intimacy is an emotional exchange and requires the other. Several of the participants, being highly self-aware found this discussion enlightening. Initially, there was the sense that intimacy can be with the self as well. Though the two worlds of knowing oneself and sharing with the other tend to overlap, they are clearly distinct. Erikson postulates that the preceding step to intimacy is love and acceptance of self. As individuals accept themselves more and more their ability to open themselves to another becomes easier.

“Through the metalab, I acknowledged loss of self-assertion and validation. As soon as I acknowledged the loss, it revealed so many wishes and fears that were so far hidden. Within the first hour it became clear that the journey was mine with myself. It was going to be about 'Bringing Me back to Myself'.”

However, the key question for a young adult in the psychosocial development stage is ‘will I be loved or be alone?’ Being comfortable or uncomfortable with intimacy is impaired or helped by how we address/resolve the above question.

A participant describes, *“I felt that my lack of intimacy with my own self was a huge barrier. But as we worked on creating an art work during the workshop the words that came up*

spontaneously were –transient, uplifting, beheading, ecstasy and flowing – all pointing towards a flow that I had stopped for myself.”

Intimacy calls for interpersonal reciprocity. Reis and his colleagues have developed a model for interpersonal intimacy that is dependent on iterative self-disclosure and partner responsiveness. One of the participants who in her personal space has been exploring spirituality later said, *“I now see that to be intimate is human and it is about sharing oneself with the other. Intimacy does not detract me from my journey on the spiritual path”*. It is not one-sided devotion. It is not full surrender. It is not having spiritual connect with an image of the omnipresent. Meera’s love for Krishna for example cannot be described as intimacy.

Begins Early and Impacts Early

Through revisiting experiences of early childhood, our relationships, experience of intimacy with the significant others in our life like our parents, siblings, elders, we explored our perceptions of intimacy. We made our experience/perception of the relationship with our parents (in public and private) explicit. We reflected on how the push and pull of all this, impacts us in the ‘here and now.’ According to Erikson, one’s early experience (or absence) of intimacy with parents and teachers, in romantic relationships, and deep friendships, helps resolve our views on intimacy. As one participant described *“while I was growing up, my experience with intimacy had been limited. Both my mother and father were very dedicated and loving parents but they were extremely non-physical in the demonstration of their love. Thus, I grew up in a home that was very conservative in matters of the heart and relationships.”*

Adults scalded by intimate encounters also teach their growing children to avoid intimacy. Also, there is a belief that emotional intimacy has to be or will be accompanied by physical intimacy and thus most adults will warn growing children to avoid physical contact with others and in the process children both consciously and unconsciously grow to be non-trusting of others.

Another participant noted, *“I also realised that to contain myself has become my habit over the years in response to the expectations from outside. While exploring my parent’s relationship, I was in touch with how I do not own aspects of my mother in me and disown aspects of my father. The wholeness of womanhood seemed to have been left too long back and too far away.”*

The link between the display of intimacy among parents and the individual’s beliefs about intimacy were uncanny. An experience during childhood that remains unexamined becomes a blind belief. The exploration helped the participants examine and question their assumptions and beliefs around intimacy. The facilitators in addition to sharing insights from their lives and

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experiences also guided the group to healing of the inner child. One participant remembered, “*It was good to put to rest some of the voices that kept telling me that it was wrong to feel attracted; even though I know cognitively that it is not wrong.*”

In addition, we enacted 3 incidents from our adolescent years around sexuality and intimacy. For many of us, there was shame attached to growing up. We were told to hide signs in our physical body of becoming adults. Any discussion or celebration of it was secretive and when discovered led to censorship.

One of the reasons why intimacy is seen as the forbidden fruit is because it is often thought to be akin to sexual intimacy. Unlike sexual intimacy which is physical, emotional intimacy is psychological. It is possible that sexual intimacy follows emotional intimacy but not necessary. Being sexually intimate need not be accompanied with or be a result of emotional intimacy. Inter-personal intimacy is a mutual experience of closeness and comfort with each other. Inter-personal intimacy may desire physical contact, which may not be necessarily sexual.

One participant said, “*It opened up my understanding of intimacy, physical intimacy in particular. I shed inhibition in talking about it and exploring it further. The reflections I received ... have made me less judgmental of myself.*”

Watching the documentary ‘*Venus Uncovered*’ through the lens of intimacy gave room and food for thought and reflection; of how the sacred and divine element of sensuality and sexuality has over time tended to be viewed through the lens of profanity. One significant insight that the group got in touch with after watching the film was to look at *desire as our ally and not as our undoing.*

Our fear for intimacy may also be traced to the fact that intimacy does involve putting our guard down. Any painful/negative experience takes up more cognitive space in our minds and we try to avoid pain. Hence, we tend to focus on the downsides of intimacy more than the upsides. Downsides of being open and allowing closeness (being intimate) is making oneself vulnerable - what if the other hurts, judges negatively, takes advantage, rejects, or we become dependent on the other. Upsides of intimacy include having the opportunity to enhance the feeling of being alive, becoming aware of the ability to care unselfishly for the other, to experience tenderness in oneself, to be able to relax at a deeper level because there is another who is interested in you, to be able to fulfil a deeply embedded need to be seen by another and accepted unconditionally.

Explorations in the lab revealed the irrationality of fear as one participant said, “*During this exploration I realised that I was dwelling only on the aspect of disappointment and rejection vis-*

a-vis my sibling and therefore experiencing loss of intimacy...” There is a yin and yang of intimacy - allowing “someone in” is making oneself open to violation and/or making one open to being held fully by another.

One participant wrote, *“I discovered that we can ‘make desire our ally and not our undoing’ Intimacy as a ‘sumptuous togetherness’ can be absolutely delightful – something I crave for too, however, whether I would make that my strength or my undoing was in my hands and I chose to rise, not fall, in my search for more love, more intimacy and more passion.”*

“By withholding my emotions, I had completely missed out on seeing myself as a perpetrator. The revelation was potent with possibilities of how and what I could do to change things” (quote from a participant).

The fear and discomfort with intimacy (of significant adults in our lives), society’s debasing of intimacy (example, *Venus Uncovered*), our own experiences held back from teenage years lead to residual unexamined feelings which play out in our expression in our relationships. The exercises in the metalab helped uncover our own and made us become aware of the similarity of residues held by others and collectively cognize the need to let go of some of the residues.

One participant strikingly puts it - *“In my early childhood I sensed equality in relationships, respect and dignity between men and women at home, between my great grandparents, grandparents and my parents. Whereas I picked up inequality and disrespect between genders in the surroundings outside of home. As a result of an over protective and an over normative ambience, even though women were respected and girls were precious, women’s sexuality was hidden, held in shame.”*

The universe of pathos of intimacy - loss, rejection, betrayal and violation, was also explored in the metalab. Through the discussion the group got in touch with dissipation of energy and vitality as they engaged with these universes. The group was able to look at the two sides of any phenomenon. We reflected on the truth that there are no guarantees in life. As a participant observed, *“The understanding of the intimacy-pathos, the push and pull, relooking at the early experiences that shaped these dynamics was amazing, exciting and awe-inspiring”*.

Revisiting negatives brought starkly to light the fact that everyone experienced highs and lows of intimacy. The negative was so powerful that it dampened the energy of the group for the whole evening, despite the joy the group had experienced the previous two and a half days. We transitioned to discussing the power of the negative and to sift through its overpowering nature

and consciously focus on the positives of intimacy. It also helped us to understand the resilience of human beings.

“Intimacy is no longer a bad word, it encapsulates life in its myriad hues and the bounties that being fearless can bring. As I ‘Unselfed the Self’ the adventure expanded and the more I touched base with my angst, my immense loneliness and my need for more love, I also got in touch with my own resilience – a trait that was part of me but had never been acknowledged”.

The Yo-Yo of Emotions While Being Intimate; Is it worth it?

One participant shared, “I vicariously experienced the highs and lows of intimacy that my friends went through. Their experiences also scared me; I believed I was better off being a quiet rational person. The belief I carry about myself is that I can be caring, nurturing, loving but not really intimate”.

Intimacy is emotion-ridden. Emotional intimacy requires openness, trust and emotional maturity, (acceptance of one’s and others emotions as they are). Many adults lack emotional maturity and have emotional outbursts. Some, instead of responding to the situation, respond to the story they have built in their mind. This makes them feel guilty and stupid. Emotional maturity is the acceptance of own, or others’ emotions without trying to hide, displace, ignore or control it. This helps in maximizing the relationship and respond to others’ emotion without discounting self and/or the other. Expressing our emotions might be scary but we cannot live a life in our head with our own thoughts. To feel and express them is a better choice than unconsciously internalizing them.

“Notebook” a Hollywood movie relayed during the lab had several interpretations. The mother finally relents and shares her daughter’s love letters. The participants reflected on the fact that at the end it is the expression of one’s desire which opens up the possibility of understanding. Status and security are indeed important but what does it take to live a life of fulfilment?

A participant observed, *“Looking at life with a romanticized vision had allowed me to be hopeful but I had still refrained from actual romance. I realized if a delusional romance could bring optimism and hope, imagine what a real truly passionate engagement and romance with life could unfold. The possibilities were tremendous, the openings plenty, paths diverse”.*

Another wrote, *“I gnaw a lot less at myself for expressing sensitivity, sensuality and sexuality. As soon as I acknowledged and owned up to the underlying intent, I felt lighter and my experience became joyous.”*

Multiple Ways of Expression

We explored the different worlds of intimacy and love, (with a parent, friend, spouse, mentor and lover). This helped in experiencing its many shades. The realization that we experience intimacy in various worlds and its expression can be verbal and non-verbal took our understanding to a deeper level.

“It was so wonderful exploring these 5 universes (Mentor, Friend, Parent, Spouse, Lover), This made me look at intimacy through a different filter. And as we explored this it was new and wonderful to see how intimacy gets translated/ expressed in various ways.” Says a participant.

Stages of intimacy include - I like you (“*Sarputa*”); I feel safe with you (“*Samipta*”); I want something that you have (“*Salokta*”); I in you and you in me are inseparable (“*Sayujyata*”). Interpersonal relationships deepen with emotional intimacy and can be expressed with verbal and non-verbal communication. It develops through conversations and spending time with each other. Talking slowly leads to disclosure of the deepest self which in turn triggers a similar response from the other thus building intimacy. For example, by sitting next to each other in an open park bench one can create a glorious moment of connection.

Sharing oneself authentically with another allows emotional intimacy to develop. The intensity of emotional intimacy is never constant over time and relationships. In the beginning of an intimate relationship there is trepidation. However, over time, feelings of anxiety diminish as the positives of intimacy begin to surface. The choice of words, the congruent expression of feelings in the moment builds trust and deeper intimacy. The group experienced this in our engagement with each other.

The expression of intimacy through drawings and symbols helped us explore the rich landscape of intimacy. The symbolic work, the sharing that followed and reflections opened up more possibilities to engage with our beliefs and led us to untouched and unexplored facets within ourselves.

“My artwork revealed my deeply held need to relook at my definitiveness and the sense of security it gives me, to explore the nebulous world of vulnerabilities. Somehow I feel ready to engage with it and that is energizing!”

Joseph Campbell, had emphasized, “Mythological images are the images by which consciousness is put in touch with the unconsciousness”. Exploring intimacy through the filters of Indian

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mythology was an interesting and innovative element of the design. Through 3 stories from Rigveda and Mahabharata; Arjuna and Ulupi, Agastya and Lopamudra, and Yama and Yami, we explored more subtleties in intimate relations and the complexity that exists. The fact that these three stories are layered allowed for intense discussions and multiple and differing perspectives. Questioning of norms by the protagonists in the myths led us to further questions, moments of deep reflectivity and diving into the truths we hold for ourselves and the norms that we need to re-examine.

Another innovative element of exploration was the experience of the *Shringara Rasa* through a performance by one of the participants (on the request of the facilitators). Emotions are called *Rasa* in Sanskrit, meaning essence, that has to be savoured, enjoyed. It touches a chord deep within. The *Navarasas* are intrinsic to Indian Art forms like music, dance, poetry, theatre or sculpture. They “were (and are) the strength of character of Indian aesthetics ever since they were symbolized in the *Natyasastra* (written sometime in 200 BC-300 AD)”. After having explored the varied hues and shades of other emotions the timing was ripe to explore *Shringara*.

The performance was through the finely nuanced story-telling tradition of *Mohiniattam*. Through the *nayika*'s tale of pining and yearning to be one with her beloved and experiencing the pain of unfulfilled desire we touched and embraced Mohini, the enchantress within us. The actual experiencing of *Shringara Rasa* which is love/beauty in all its expansiveness was stirring. It helped participants get in touch with transformative/ healing power of this emotion and possibilities thus held in deep intimacy.

Stirred by the performance, a participant writes,

Magical Mohini

You beckon, you invite, you inspire, you stir

To touch and live out my unique and ordinary story

When with you feel a resonance, a connect inexplicable

A kinship, a bond indefinable

Play on in my life!

Intimacy is also accompanied with the experience of sensuality – a way in which we are intimate with our own feeling selves. Sensuality is not to be confused with sexuality. “Sensuality is the moment to moment relish of who we are and our willingness to show ourselves to this world”. Intimacy arouses sensuality which in turn arouses sensuality for the other. Two sensual persons create magic by being authentic and alive. The group explored the universe of sensuality through

a delightful exercise which required each participant to feel sensuality through any medium they chose and share what and how they experienced sensuality.

One such expression was -

अपने गुस्से का अहसास दौड़ता है रगों में
अपनी आवाज़ की नरमी सुनाई देती है
अपनी हँसी की छनक घुँघरूओं सी थिरकती है
अपनी मुसकान आँखों तक पहुँच जाती है
अपना दुख का भारीपन पैरोंके भारीपन में झलकता है
अपना डर अपने गले में आकर रुकावट पैदा कर देता है
अपनी ममता का सानिध्य दिल को मोम कर देता है
कुछ देर के लिए धड़कते दिल को भी आराम देती है

Being Whole and Joyful

Erwin Raphael McManus in his book *Soul Cravings*, writes, "we are most alive when we find it (intimacy and love), most devastated when we lose it, most empty when we give up on it, most inhuman when we betray it, and most passionate when we pursue it." The experience of intimacy helps us feel and whole and joyful which in turn leads to appreciation of the beauty around us. It showcases the larger, deeper, richer whole which goes beyond our limitations and brings in new perspectives. It is to have a sense of something beyond. As one participant put it, "*throughout the span of the metalab, I was in touch with the elements of mystery ingrained in intimacy.*"

In addition to being taught, cajoled and warned against intimacy, (directly and indirectly), we are led to believe that intimacy is something that happens to us. Just like we are erroneously told to believe that love cannot be found, love has to find us, we believe intimacy cannot be sought or built over time, it has to simply happen. The possibility of intimacy growing as one invests in oneself and the other became apparent as the lab progressed and the participants reflected on it. One participant eloquently stated, "*as the days of the metalab progressed, I realized I expect authenticity from another like I bring it to them. It can be overwhelming and an uneasy process for another. I just needed to recognize that!*" Another wrote, "*the distance and the distinction between 'I need' that comes from self-belief and affirmation vs 'I am needy' seemed to be filling up as I owned up my need to myself.*"

In process labs one has often noticed that if the group becomes open, feels safe, and accepting, able to express emotions without drama and learns to be empathetic, emotional intimacy

develops. This can happen through conscious exploration with awareness. The metalab provided them with this opportunity.

“The sharing of our sense of wonder and the slow peeling of deeply buried layers of deadness...”
“I wish and hope to continue ... the enormous gift of Faith that I received from the Metalab”.
(were some comments 3 months later)

The Ubuntu tribe of Africa have a greeting, (invocation) spoken in 2 parts. One is *Sikhona*, meaning “I am here to be seen”; and the other is *Sawubona*, which means “I see you.”

(8). Intimacy is about seeing and understanding a person in all her/his complexity. It is about respecting the others’ dynamism. The group lived out a precious space of intimacy during the metalab in ‘willing to be seen and seeing the other’!

The co-anchors of the metalab, Minaxi Mathur and Ashutosh Bhupatkar, summed the metalab in the following verse-

Moving closer to ourselves and each other
Fears faced inhibitions fell
Touched the deep sense of it all
Song broke out with a spring in the step
Hope in the eyes, arms in arms
Slowly the fragrance filled the air.

Minaxi in her sensual, expansive and fully feeling being, and Ashutosh in his witty, poetic, cognitive and reserved ways, and both with their raw and alive selves complimented each other beautifully. The differences of the facilitators helped show that there is no one way of being and doing and working with deep, difficult and sensitive themes such as intimacy.

Conclusion

As process workers, it is meaningful and enriching to have engaged with intimacy at the personal level. It enables co-creating spaces where mutual trust, understanding and acceptance is deeply experienced. Additionally, it allows greater insight and ease of facilitating to those struggling with intimacy in a group. Exploration of self during process work is furthered with interventions made at the group level. Many times, there may be covert unconscious inhibitions because intimacy is felt but repelled by some members of the group, or because of pushes/pulls felt for wanting to be close to somebody and/or shame felt because of the need for intimacy. We believe that when process workers themselves engage deeply with intimacy they would be able to offer more of their raw, alive selves, their humanness and be nimbler in helping the group work with it

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in enriching ways. Also, at a meta level when a group of people work together on difficult, but very basic, human issues it changes something at the collective unconscious level. Lifting the misconceptions, myths, taboo and shame around intimacy, we hope, will make human beings free to express and liberate themselves and experience, *“intimacy as a sumptuous togetherness...”*.

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