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# The Tavistock Model Of Couples Therapy





*“The tasks that have been entrusted to us are often difficult. Almost everything that matters is difficult, and everything matters.”*

**Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet**

# A Primer to Tavistock

## A Couple State of Mind

- The relationship as container and as projective system
- Projective Identification and Reintrojection (the laboratory of the couple state of mind)
- Shared unconscious phantasy (co-created or agreed to)
- Shared unconscious anxiety (primal or present)
- Shared unconscious defenses (belief/delusion)
- The couple state of mind (holding the architecture)

*After all, theory, good theory, is rooted in clinical practice and is the clinician's attempt to conceptualize that experience.*

**Mary Morgan**



- The Tavistock Institute of Marital Studies (TIMS) - Great Britain in 1948.
- The Family Welfare Association (WFA) and the Family Discussion Bureau (FDB) merged and officially became the Tavistock Clinic in 1953.
- In 1988 it became known as the TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE OF MARITAL STUDIES.
- Its corpus of knowledge is comprised of many leading thinkers in the analytic field: *Alfred Bion, Warren Coleman, Mary Morgan, Stanley Ruszczynski.*
- The work of the Tavistock Institute remains the standard for psychoanalytic couple's therapy.



# Couple Configurations

- The couple is mutually concerned about the relationship
- One member of the couple wants to change something in the other
- There is an offense identified and agreed to
- Other times the couple are experiencing ennui
- Individuals who bring in the couple in absentia.





# When thinking of couples...

- THEORY OF MIND - In relationship one mind revises another.
- Experience methodically REWRITES the brain, and the nature of what it has seen dictates what it can see.
- The couple's SHARED INNER WORLD is the client. It is their psychic "third."
- The couple is more in their third than they are in the sum of their individuality.
- The therapist holds the ARCHITECTURE for a couple state of mind.
  - To allow the couple to be themselves.
  - To help the client to think.
  - To help the client make patterns conscious.
  - To help their unconscious shared phantasies touch reality.

**Working in the  
“NOW”  
I think...**





# Past, Present, & Future

## Attributes of the Past

- Unconscious Choice of Partner
- Collusion & Fear
- Projective Identification
- The Self before
- Arc of relationship

PAST

PRESENT

FUTURE

# Past, Present, & Future

## Attributes of the Present

- Relationship Dynamics - What kind of couple am I experiencing?
- Regressive, non-linear development
- Struggle between independence and dependence
- Fusion
- Narcissism
- Projective Gridlock

PAST



PRESENT

FUTURE

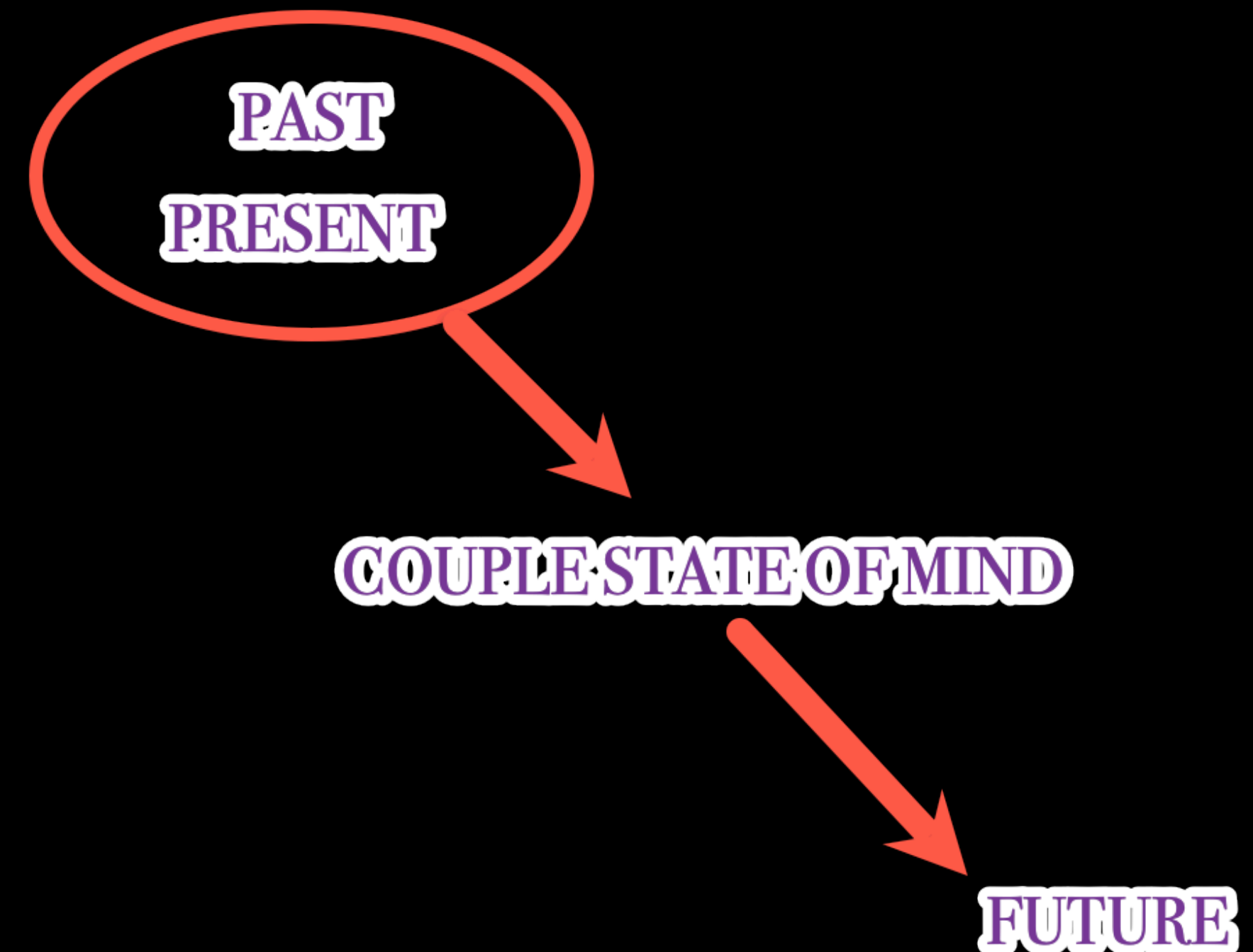


# Past, Present, & Future

## Attributes of the Future

- A Couple State of Mind
- The Creative Couple
- Psychic Space

*The couple can take a third position. They can observe themselves.*

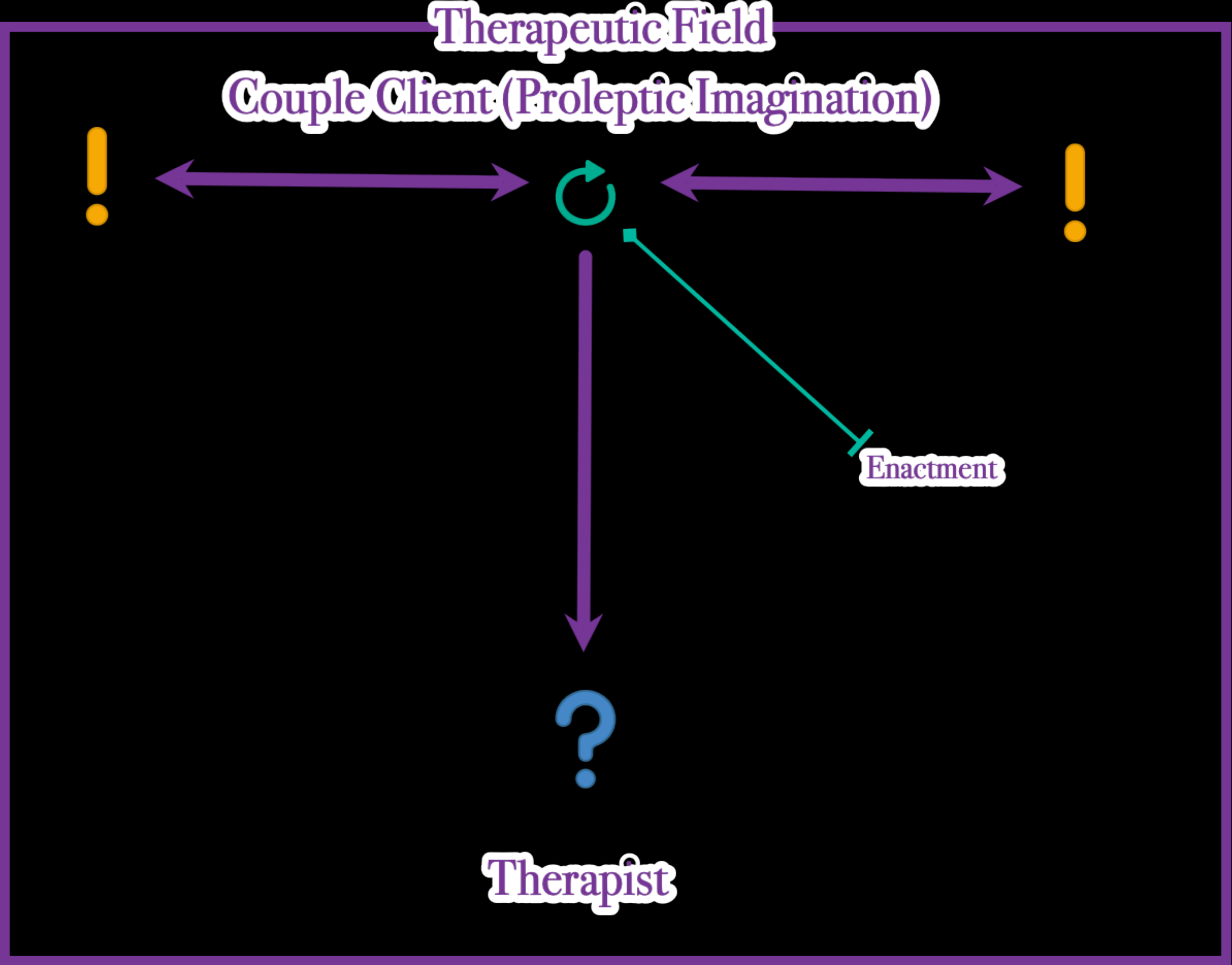


# Transference/Countertransference

## Psychic equilibrium or balance in therapy

- TRANSFERENCE is conceptualized as the projection of a living inner world into a current situation. This is persistent throughout life.
  - Inner world is affected by experience of the outer world.
  - Outer world is experienced in unconscious fantasy through the lens of the inner world.
- COUNTERTRANSFERENCE is the therapists unconscious response to the client's transference. We are cast in the role by the client.
- It is experience beyond the use of words which we can often only capture through the feelings it invokes.
- There are two directions of equilibrium in this therapy: That which the therapist observes and that which the therapist experiences.





# Phantasies, Contracts, & Shadow Vows

*How the couple's Projective  
System is shaped by their  
shared unconscious*

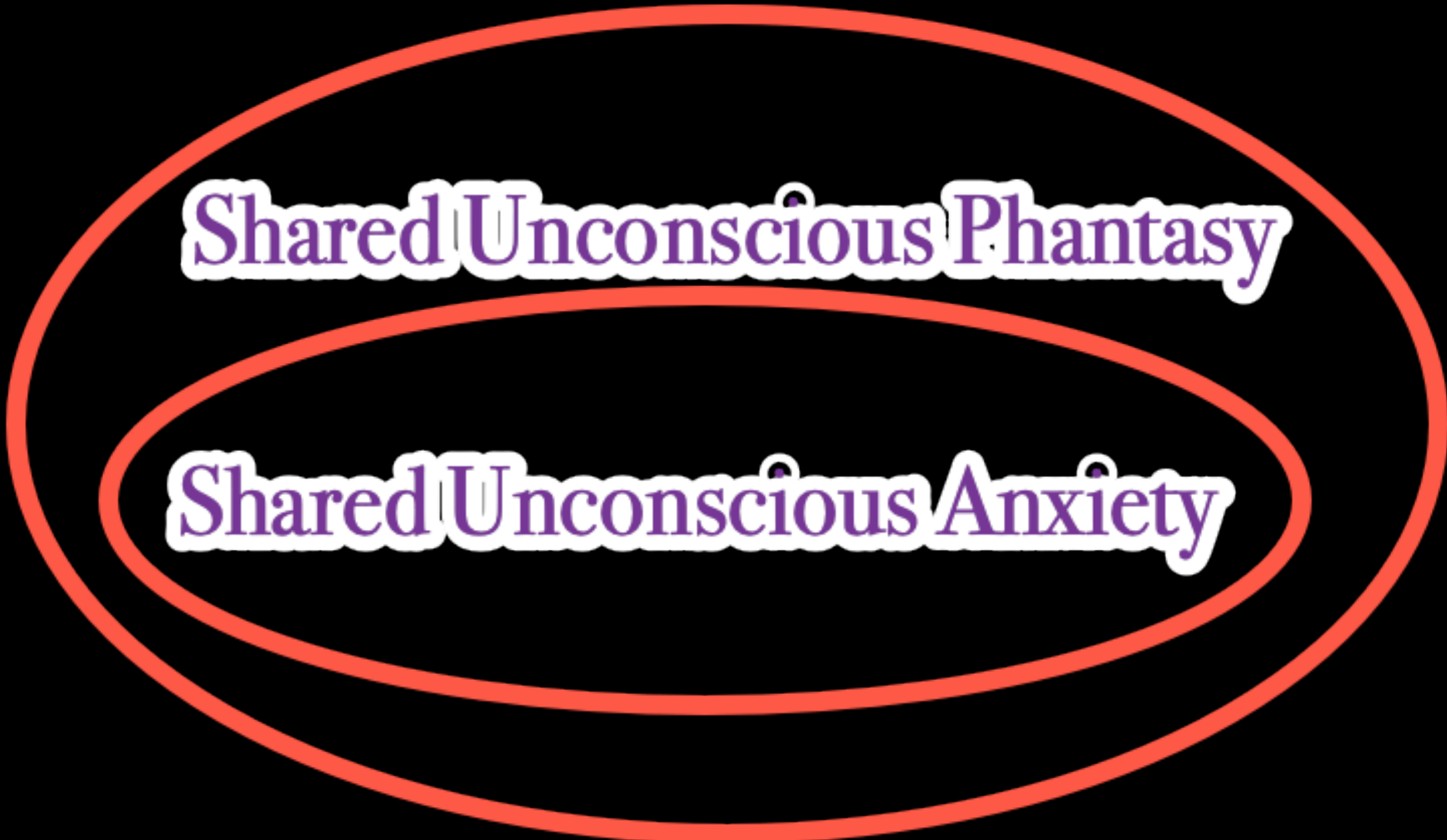






Shared Unconscious Phantasy









# The Projective System

Shared Unconscious Phantasy

Shared Unconscious Anxiety

Shared Unconscious Defense



# The Relationship The Projective System

Shared Unconscious Phantasy

Shared Unconscious Anxiety

Shared Unconscious Defense

**A Couple State of Mind**

**The Relationship**

**The Projective System**

**Shared Unconscious Phantasy**

**Shared Unconscious Anxiety**

**Shared Unconscious Defense**



*If only we were more separate, we could stay together.*

**Douglas Woodhouse**

There is no impulse, no instinctual urge or response,  
which is not experienced as unconscious phantasy.

**Isaacs**



# Is it real?

## Phantasy and Fantasy

- Convert unconscious phantasy into conscious thought.
- Unconscious Phantasy is underground communication, and it feels real.
- Psychic reality impacts perceptions of reality.
- A note on conscious fantasy.

# Shared Unconscious Phantasy

- Part of the couple's ordinary life.
- Shared phantasy and illusion exist in all marriages.
  - Less anxiety and more flexibility equals adaptation.
  - Modification of collusive interactions.
    - Reality of the Other.
    - The external world.
- Reality is always being interpreted through unconscious phantasy.
  - Don't take a client's history as a collection of facts.
- The capacity to acknowledge experience is to acknowledge that it is emotional experience, it has emotional meaning.



# Unconscious Phantasy vs. Belief

## Differences are destructive

- PHANTASY - Everything you say to me feels like an assault.
  - Can be altered by external reality.
  - Can be altered by experiencing the other in a different way.
- BELIEF - Everything you say to me is an assault.
  - It is a fundamentalist state of mind.
  - Interpretations are seen as “missing the point.”
  - No curiosity about the other, for you already know them.
  - In the unconscious, a belief is experienced, not as a belief, but a fact.

**Think of unconscious phantasy as a HYPOTHESIS and unconscious belief as a DELUSION. A hypothesis is PROVISIONAL, a belief is EMOTIONALLY TONED. Hypothesis changes with DISCOVERY, belief requires a CHANGE OF HEART AND THOUGHT.**



# Phantasy

## Some key points:

- As a therapist we should endeavor to limit initial information by the partner who called for therapy. Bring in any information that was shared prior into session.
- Be aware of our avoidance to help the couple face their destructiveness fully and begin to mourn it. It can be difficult for us to remember that **sometimes GOOD must be set aside so that anything destined to be better first appears in EVIL form.**
- Therapy will drift if the therapist who holds the couple state of mind is being internalized by the couple in the relationship. Pay attention if you are losing your “Otherness” with the couple.

Shared unconscious phantasy has many facets and has many layers. It acts intrapsychically and interpersonally. It bridges or encompasses “marital fit” and “shared defense”. It is affected by external events. It is recreated in the transference relationship and is mainly known clinically through the countertransference. We work with it by focusing on the relationship, not the individual. We keep the couple in mind. We note how the partners relate to each other and to their marriage, and how a couple relates to us.

**Hewison**





# Unconscious Fit

You are the same as me



# Why we seek relationships

- We seek others who may be able to meet or respond to our REPRESSED NEEDS.
- RESONANCE with another allows us to understand our inner world.
- We need a MIND to REVISE our own.
- Relationships ORDER THEMSELVES on PAST PATTERNS.
- EXTERNAL relationships promote INTERNAL capacities.
- We DEVELOP our parts through PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION; We remodel the emotional parts of the people we love.
- Contrary to cultural leanings, healthy humans are not loners.





# **We bring it into relationship**

## **Unconscious Phantasy for Unconscious Fit**

- Separation/Fusion
- Dependence/independence
- Rejection/incorporation
- Idealization/degeneration
- Love/hate

# **The couple's coming together is a significant event**

## **These things are crucial to an unconscious fit**

- The present and live relationship can create a new unconscious shared phantasy. Unconsciously recognizing parts of the self in another (transference/attractors).
- Potential to get into closer contact with distant parts of the self (projective identification).
- Sex and co-creation. A mother could not mirror our sexuality as infants; thus, it remains a mystery and an enigma to explore (tied to first love object).
- Two people can create something together that they could never have created alone (fit for expectations).



# Relationship

As a psychological container



# Containment

## Guiding Principles

- They need a sense of containment to function creatively. In this way both partners can relate.
- Predefined material in the shape of the couple's psychic expression.
- Couples define between them the limits of what can be expressed within the relationship.
- If containment is not possible, the relationship will end.
- If containment is not possible, therapy might be the defense.

# Defensive containment

## When a container becomes a claustrium

- Sealing off of a problem rather than creating space to work with it.
- There is an attempt to make one partner the container for the other.
- The containing partner desperately seeks containment outside the marriage or relationship.
  - This can sometimes lead to an affair or therapy.
- It is important we pay attention to what is going on with the couple, which means an affair in the relationship was carried out by the relationship.



# Containment

## Outcome of a therapeutic container

- The therapeutic container provided by the therapist is borrowed by the couple.
- The therapist maintains the boundaries of the container.
- Success is found in the dissolution of the therapeutic container.
- There is always risk in holding the container - Atrophy.
- Therapist containment may be used as a substitute.
- The failure of containment in some sense is the failure to integrate good and bad.
- Bear in mind that sometimes a good outcome to couples therapy is one partner seeking individual therapy.

# The Projective System

Projective Identification as a system of growth



# The Projective System

- It is helpful to understand how unconscious phantasy is always in *PARALLEL* with projective identification. Together, there emerges an unconscious drama played out between the self and Other.
- One's sense of self is determined by unconscious phantasy and projective identification operating together.
- The projective system is a way of understanding why some individuals have to seek therapy as a couple, as *PART OF EACH PARTNER IS LOCATED, AND ONLY KNOWN ABOUT, IN THE "OTHER."*
- Projective identification affects one's perception of the other, and they relate to the other distorted by this projection.



# Projective Identification

## Sequence of Projective Identification

1. The phantasy of projecting one part of oneself into another person or that part taking over the person from within.
2. Pressure exerted by interpersonal interaction such that the recipient of the projection experiences pressure to think, feel, and behave in a manner congruent with the projection.
3. The projected feelings after being “psychologically processed” by the recipient, are re-internalized by the projector.

# Projective Forms

## Forms of Identification

- **ATTRIBUTIVE IDENTIFICATION:** “*You are me.*” Some aspect of oneself is attributed to the other. Sometimes an attributive projection is taken over as an acquisitive projection by the recipient.
- **ACQUISITIVE IDENTIFICATION:** “*I am you.*” The projective phantasy involves entering the other to acquire some attribute that the other is thought to possess. The more omnipotently this is done, the more delusional the result.
- **EXTRACTIVE INTROJECTION:** A procedure in which one person invades another person’s mind and appropriates certain elements of mental life.
- **INTRUSIVE IDENTIFICATION:** An unconscious omnipotent phantasy and mechanism of defense.
  - Entombed inside the other partner.
  - The interlocking adhesive and intrusive dynamics function in a narcissistic way.
  - It is often about anxiety over separateness and difference being controlled. Reintrojection is very difficult and leaves no space for the imagination.
  - There is a pseudo-intimacy which is actually a narcissistic form of relating.

# Imagination as a pathway to intimacy

## Meltzer

- Richness
  - Receptiveness, generosity, aesthetic reciprocity, understanding, and all possible knowledge; the locus of symbol formation, and thus of art, poetry, imagination.
- Experienced from the inside and influenced by motives of intrusions
  - Generosity becomes quid-pro-quo
  - Receptiveness becomes inveiglement
  - Reciprocity becomes collusion
  - Understanding becomes penetration of secrets
  - Knowledge becomes information
  - Symbol formation becomes metonymy
  - Art becomes fashion.



# Defensive Choice of Partner

## The Fixed Transference Dimension

- Repeating partner choice.
- The influence of unresolved transference.
- A partner is repeatedly chosen but nothing is worked through.
- This is an example of an unconscious belief which states this is what relationship is.

# Projective Gridlock

## A Darker Form of Oneness

- An agreement does not mean the same thing as understanding and understanding does not mean the same thing as agreement.
- The higher the need for argument, the lower the need for understanding.
- The more unpleasant the relationship the more likely the therapist is drawn in as a protector.
- It is difficult to see where the real power is in a sado-masochistic alliance.
- An example of this is M. Scott Peck's "*People of the Lie*" and the case of Sara and Hartley p. 108.

# Conflict in Identification

## When the system fails

- The more at war one is with themselves, the more they may project into the “Other.”
- Inevitably this creates dependency on the other to contain their projections.
- What at first attracts is later complained about.
- A projective system that is defensive or controlling can manifest something very narcissistic and anti-developmental into the relationship.
- Projecting can deplete the ego leaving a weak sense of self.



# A Healthy Projective System

- Each feels the other to be a part of themselves.
- The projective part can become processed by the other into a new version of the original projected feeling.
- Witnessing the others capacity to manage feared aspects of the self enables the projector to reintroject aspects of the self as they become less feared.
- In all but the most narcissistic couples, the projector needs some evidence that the projection has been felt, experienced, and identified by the other.
- As therapists, we know that there must be a certain degree of identification to make conflicts manageable. In order to be creative, the foreign aspect of the Other has to be engaged with.
- Conflict is healthy and its potential for growth is dependent on the couple's capacity to regulate conflict in relation to their individual and shared internal worlds.

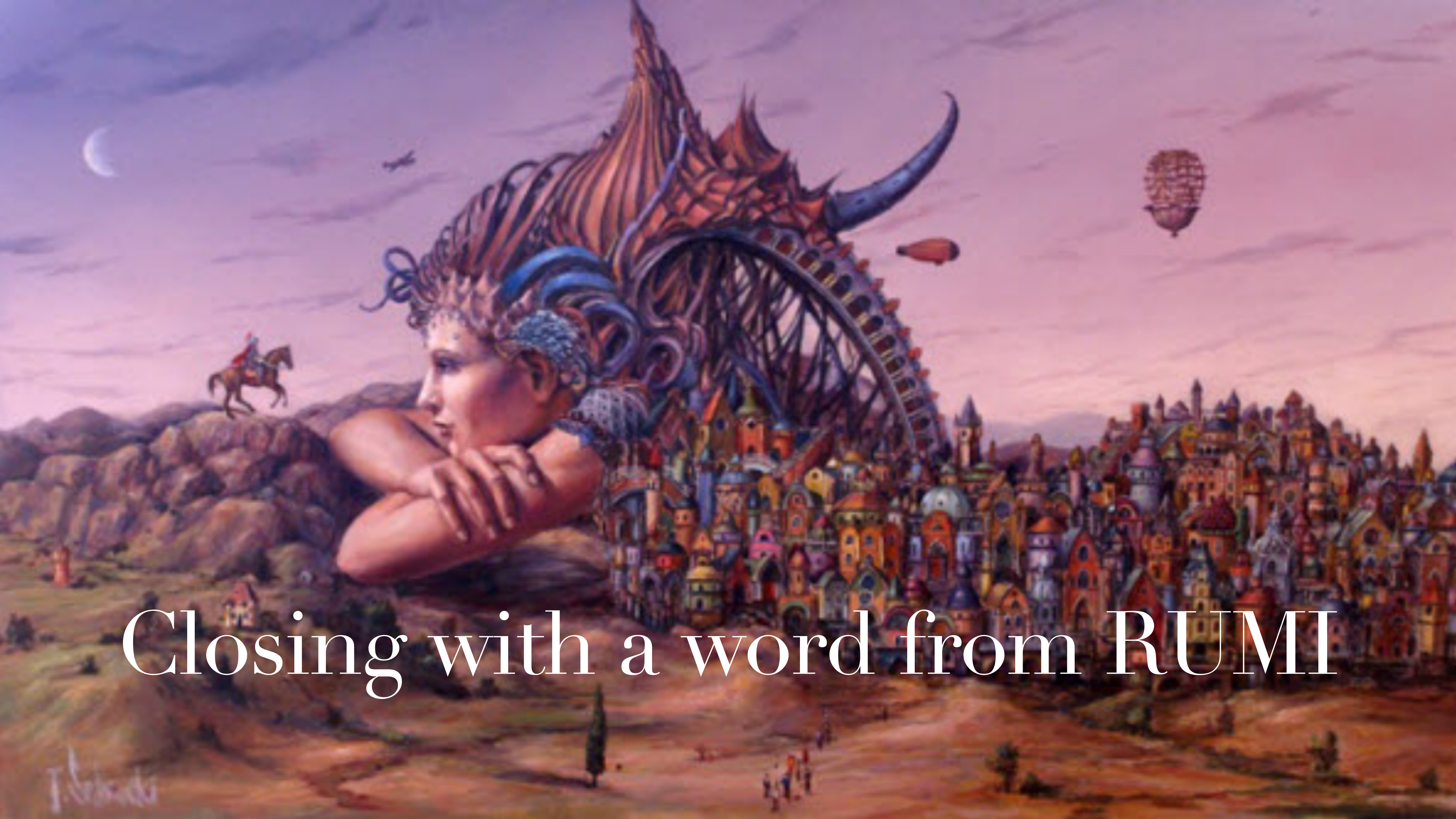


# Conclusion

- People never give up trying to put things right for themselves and the people they love.
- We are aware that relationships often pass through the same phases and reach the same conclusions.
- Accepting the otherness of the Other is a major developmental achievement!
- The opposite of love is not hate, those two always co-exist in the relationship. The true opposite of love is indifference.







Closing with a word from RUMI

J. Norwood