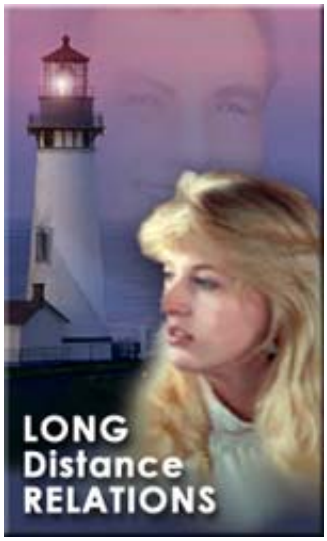
LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

HOW TO DO IT, SUCCESSFULLY

By Laura Dawn Lewis



Ideally, we would all meet are future spouses, live in the same town, date for about a year and get married in two and never be separated again, ideally. I have friends who've done this successfully and then there are people like me. The best laid plans? Reality somehow interferes with. The easy way everyone else seems be blessed with, my road will traverse the toughest. Currently I am in a three and a half year relationship; for the past twenty months, it has been long distance with me in Oregon and he in Southern California and Paul and I are not alone.

Take Loretta Lynn, country-singing legend for example. Two thousand miles separated her and her husband, due to financial issues in the beginning while he made enough money to bring her and his family out to the Pacific Northwest. My best friend from junior high met her husband of eighteen years now on vacation in Canada when she was fourteen. They corresponded by letters and phone for six years before marrying. Today she's a Veterinarian and he's a successful businessman in the San Francisco Bay area. They have been together ever since. Both of these instances, Loretta and my friend occurred during financial hardship, which prevented them from seeing each other. Their love and relationship grew and strengthened without money. This is important.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Paul is my second serious long-distance relationship; fortunately we enjoyed nearly two years together in the same area before circumstances consisting of financial issues, serious illnesses in both our families, September 11th and business concerns mandated separation for what seems like an eternity now. That foundation, the two years together represents one of the key factors in our staying together. We have the history to fall back on when loneliness and both our Mother's insistence on "When are you getting married and when will I see grandchildren" sets in. Next week I'll be thirty-eight and next year he'll be fifty. Our mothers do have a point, even though he's already given his Mom two grandchildren, boys today seventeen and twenty-one from a previous marriage. My only prayer is I'll be a mother before a grandmother!

My first long distance relationship, neither strong nor fulfilling though at the time I convinced myself I was twiterpated beyond belief, lasted eleven months beginning over a separation of three-thousand miles and ended within ten weeks of us both moving to Los Angeles in 1996, for different reasons. He was in the entertainment industry and I was in

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the media. It turned out the idealism and fantasy we enjoyed in separate states and on the occasional weekends he flew me out to South Carolina failed the Litmus Test of close proximity with its day-to-day contact.

In retrospect everything was wrong with this first relationship. We had physical, aesthetic and recreational intimacy and based the entire relationship on that and sexual intimacy. The meat, the substance of the relationship found in intellectual, spiritual and emotional intimacy, never materialized. By the time we split, he'd been cheating on me for six weeks with a girl he'd met in a Hollywood nightclub, and she had already moved in with him. As humiliating as the experience felt, the lessons of it taught me well. These lessons serve as guidance today.

To understand what makes a long-distance relationship work, you must also understand what causes them to fail. Like any living entity, and I do consider a relationship a living entity, it requires care, consistent attention, openness, honesty and a will to stick it out even when it gets tough. The physical affection must be replaced with mental affection coupled with an openness to reveal fears, hopes, joys and sadness unencumbered and raw. These are the caresses, without substitute that sustain over distance. TOP

THE HARDEST PART: NO TOUCH OR SEX

The hardest part of distance revolves around sex and the absence of all touch, which is sexual intimacy. When Paul asked me what I wanted to do first upon arriving in Southern California last month, the answer was easy: I wanted to lay on his lap on that big brown couch, having him hold me, play with my hair and lightly caress me while we watched movies. This is what I miss more than anything else. Not sex, not going out, I missed lying on his lap to watch movies. Surprised?

Finding substitutes for sexual and intimate touch, the simplicity of stroking your lover's hair, holding hands or snuggling on the couch, even just flirting and being told you are beautiful or desired, these impact and cannot be ignored. Seeking solutions often manifests into a full-time job. Some people use exercise, work and public activities for distraction, others like myself seek other avenues of distraction and fulfillment. People, regardless of age, ethnicity or sex need to be touched and those with children in long-distance relationships enjoy an advantage over those without. Though not sexual, hugs, kisses and touching provide the contact with others and an outlet for expressing love toward another a childless person must go completely without. Children also provide a distraction and positive outlet with reciprocal affirmations of affection.

When touch evaporates, given time we gravitate toward those who give it. Add a few mind-altering refreshments, and often we'll find ourselves facing an activity for temporary relief that if acted upon may destroy a potential lifetime of happiness. For me, this has been the most grueling and challenging part of being separated. Shortly after arriving in Portland, I frequented clubs simply to be around other people my age and talk. The absence of my LA based urban tribe weighs heavily and I often feel quite

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lonely. I refer jokingly to Portland as my own personal purgatory. My memories of my teen years in this town fall short of ideal and even shorter of happiness. TOP

After a time, my very flirtatious nature kicked in. Shortly thereafter I realized, as long as my boyfriend resided so far away, if I were to stay faithful, going out by myself eventually leads to disaster. This must end. The men I flirted with held no consequence. I saw only my lover in them and in reality it was only he I wanted to be with. Still, I needed to be told I was still attractive, still desirable, still sexy and let's face it, still wanted. Distance often manifests in a pilferage of mind games, strengthened by experience for those unfortunate victims of prior infidelity. This craving of attention and affirmation is a shortcoming of my own personality and insecurities, but a need all the same. Finding a solution to this proved daunting.

Circumstances kept us apart for thirteen months straight and then another nine and now another five before we'll be together permanently. Old boyfriends started looking really good, familiar and suddenly very available. Any man in general started looking good. I missed being held, being touched, going out, being treated like a lady, enjoying male companionship and conversation, even the irritating differences men bring to the table we women often find annoying. I missed men, but mostly I missed him.

SOLVING THE ISSUES OF A TOUCH-STARVED RELATIONSHIP

To solve the touch factor, I treat myself to a full-body massage whenever I can afford to. If finances are low, I pay the three extra dollars at the nail salon for the ten-minute foot massage and massaging chair or shoulder rub. I've also become addicted to our French Almond massage oil, which I used on him during our last three-week visit. Massaging it into my legs and arms, it creates a friction of heat and it is almost like he's touching me. Then before going to bed and falling asleep, I cuddle up in one of his shirts surrounded by the scent of our last encounter and lots of pillows where his body should be. Silly yes, but I find it comforting. TOP

As for sexuality, abstaining fully is not an option, at least for me. I relish all aspects. Fortunately achieving such liberation today does not require cheating. An electrical outlet, hand or batteries and quickly the sexual tension paired with lascivious intentions melt away. Though far better and more gratifying with him, as a temporary fix these suffice and cure my wanderlust intentions, while preventing me from seeking fulfillment elsewhere.

Sex is big part of a romantic relationship, though going all the way illustrates a minute portion of sexuality. The trick to long distance relationships revolves around keeping the sexuality, flirting and innuendo alive…and not expecting too much when you finally do see each other physically again!

EVEN RELATIONSHIP EXPERTS CAN BE CHILDISH

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Case in point. When Paul and I were finally able to see each other after 13-months of physical separation, it was for my sister's thirty-fifth birthday, planned 3-months early for the wine country. We met in San Francisco for the destination party, but I didn't plan it so the dates included the only three days out of a month I don't want anyone touching me romantically, no matter how long it has been. Nothing he could do would change that fact. I know the ladies know what I'm talking about. For him too, the pressure of my entire family, our best friends and my sister's friends created such a tension. I now know we should have spent a few days alone together first. This was too much and it almost broke us up.

That first night, I mistook his stress (he had a lot going on he was withholding as not to worry me) for rejection. My fantasy of our time together created expectations even the most trashy romance novel fell short exploring and I was in no mood to deal with his problems; I needed to impress everyone else with this guy I'd been seeing nearly three years and in my opinion he was being unsociable and a brat. Plus I had a little too much to drink, which gave me a self-righteous indignation. Mood swings, hormones, pain and alcohol, not a combination I'd recommend for a reunion.

When we returned from the celebratory dinner, (which he graciously acted as the designated driver for six) we fought about something I said. I think my teasing him publicly for his whiplash reaction to women in the EE category, which I find amusing since I'm not exactly flat and a double letter myself; I spent the night in the bathroom crying with the door locked feeling sorry for myself and threatening to leave. Problem was he had the car and my ticket wasn't good until Sunday. Portland is a long walk from Napa. Realizing I was stuck for the duration, I finally returned to the bed; we assumed the classic cliffhanger position, both of us as far to our side as we could get. No way was he going to touch me or me him! TOP

Childish yes. The one great truth about relationships between men and women is they can turn the most logical, level headed human being into a born again five-year-old. Consider movies like *The War of the Roses*; the movie exaggerates the emotions we all encounter when our feelings are hurt or our expectations not met. Anyone who has gone through a break-up or divorce can attest to stooping as low and behaving so illogically. And like Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner in the movie, I may be CEO and a relationship expert, but I'm not above being juvenile on occasion, especially when my feelings are hurt. This can be deadly in a long distance relationship since time together is often limited, meaning many of the issues being withheld can percolate to the surface subconsciously or through passive-aggressive behavior, especially if alcohol or other substances are added to the mix.

Unfortunately for me, he'll have nothing to do with it or my tantrums, which generally infuriates me further. They always worked on my dad when my mom used them. It is really not fair they do not work for me! That's the problem with dating a guy with a doctorate in psychology, among other degrees. He sees manipulation from a mile away. It really takes all the fun out of being a conniving, manipulating and self-centered woman! TOP

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The moral of the story? First, talk (or put them down in an e-mail which is how I broach serious subjects) about any issues, apprehensions and expectations you both have prior to seeing each other again. Get these out of the way before you meet. Second, schedule reunions that are physically advantageous and make them private for a few days if you've been away from each other for more than a month or two. And do not expect too much. This IS life, not a fairytale and you really need time to "get to know" each other again, sans spotlight.

Fortunately our time together nine months later proved eminently better and more loving. He sent his youngest son off to the neighbors for three days while we got reacquainted and accustom to each other's rhythms. We discussed this prior to my arriving; I did not want a repeat of October. This time we were together under one roof for three weeks, and I realized, not only did I have my boyfriend back, I discovered I truly do love him very deeply and never want to be separated from him again. As yet another storm begins obscuring my view of Mount Hood and lightning charges across the sky, I think of him in sunny Southern California without me. November when the obligations keeping us apart cease to exist cannot come soon enough.

OTHER METHODS
OF KEEPING THE RELATIONSHIP ALIVE

From my end I use my gifts: writing, art, photography, music and that sloppy sentimentality women do so well. TOP

WRITING AND READING

Writing encompasses e-mails, stories and the erotica I make my living on. I've written eighteen stories, the first six published in Sensuality Volume One, a bestseller on Amazon--the rest to be published in additional volumes. Paul and I both are intellectuals with a strong appreciation for thought and composition. I feel rather silly speaking dirty or sexy, it goes against my lady-like nature. But I have no problem writing and reciting such from script; so I wrote my own in the metaphoric style of my favorite author, DH Lawrence. The truth is, men do like a virginal woman in public but prefer their own personal harlot behind closed doors. This is the sexiness no one but they know; a private joke on the remaining male population. Men revel in this private joke. My erotica lets that side of me out, surreptitiously in an intellectual fashion. It also lets me tell him what I'm too shy to request, as it is hidden in story format. It's a form of seduction, intellectual foreplay to which no man is immune. Trust me, unless he's gay, no man is immune.

For Paul, I personally read each story into a recorder and put them on a CD. He spends a lot of time in LA traffic; I figure the least I can do is make traffic eminently more interesting☺

Don't underestimate the power of your own voice reading a sexy story to keep him or her tuned into your frequency. For example, all I need to do is hear Paul's voice and immediately my mind goes to thoughts, both pristine and salacious of him. Stories read

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by you onto tape can be anything from a favorite childhood story like *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,* to the sonnets of Shakespeare or poetry of Frost. I prefer sexy stories for long distance flirting. Obviously I recommend my own and I'll give you Seduction's Sun for free, (The first story from Volume One). But try any short story by DH Lawrence, or write your own. DH Lawrence is the master of intellectual foreplay and it will make for a ride home he or she will never forget. Especially in a long distance relationship, reading sexy stories to each other at least allows you to feel a portion of sexual intimacy, even if you cannot feel each other. It also tells your lover you are thinking of him/her and you think he/she is incredibly sexy. Of course if it's over the phone (*hands free devices are a godsend)*…nobody says you cannot act it out together! Never underestimate the power of phone sex. That's why those 900 numbers make so much money! TOP

Men appear without sentimental feelings on the surface; they hide it well, but ultimately men tend to be much more sentimental then women. I was shocked to find my boyfriend archives every single voice mail I've left him! I do not have the equipment or server space for that.

For my boyfriend's first birthday with me I spent the 90-days prior filling out a diary of my thoughts about him, what I wanted to do with him and life in general. I wrapped this diary in twine from a present he gave me and a rose bud from the first Valentines bouquet he sent me. Whenever he misses me today, he reads those pages and he's told me they bring him great comfort while we're apart. I also know in our old age, this testament to the first months of our relationship will be priceless. And it didn't cost me a thing.

PHOTOS

Aside from sharing the regular photos back and forth of family, friends and celebrations, snow on my porch, my cat sleeping in my in-box or a deer eating my flowers, having a little for-his-eyes-only fun is not uncalled for, if you've got the guts. TOP

He sent me a digital camera for my birthday last year. In my room I have a full-length closet mirror, which covers a full wall. With the two I managed to take those X-rated photos men seem to like, a few rather risqué. This ended up being therapeutic for me. See, I'm not reed thin, and though 5'10" tall and within the afforded BMI, I could easily lose 35 pounds so I'm a bit self-conscious about my weight. Unfortunately, I like to eat. Giving up pizza, cheesecake, Swiss chocolate and wine isn't worth it. To my surprise, I'm pretty sexy in those pictures. Damn sexy in fact, which gave me a lot of confidence when I finally did see him in May. Of course he wants more pictures…we'll see. A note on this though: Make sure you really trust him or her first. Should you one day become famous in the wrong hands those revealing pictures could end your career. On the other hand, when you are eighty, you'll appreciate them!

The point being ladies and gentleman, each of us is our toughest critic, don't deprive your lover of the gift of you and this includes ordinary snap shots. Our lovers don't care. I am convinced love truly is blind. How else could he miss the cellulite? He's worried about

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his grey hair. I think it's sexy. He thinks he's overweight; my question is where…seriously where? I'm worried about my non-six-pack abs and the fact I'm two inches taller than he is. He doesn't care...unless I don 4-inch heals which he considers an exaggeration. But since I'm short waisted, he's still taller than me sitting...that's a plus. He thinks I look like a woman should look: voluptuous, round and soft in all the right places. He's dated Playmates of the Year®, country superstars and A-list Hollywood actresses, not flings but actual year-plus relationships… Talk about intimidation! And he's with me and he thinks I'm gorgeous…not beautiful, gorgeous. He loves me even though compared to these ladies I'm totally out of shape, way too tall and an emotional basket case at times. True, all women are emotional basket cases at times, but heck…a Playmate. Yikes!

MUSIC

With music, this is one of my favorite parts of dating because each man I've dated introduced me to new music. They may be history but their music remains. Brian my first mistake introduced me to Country. Rogêrio ingratiated me with Samba and its rhythm. Manuel, opera, Stuver acoustics and George Winston, Greg, Cheryl Crow, David, The Counting Crows and Paul, Paul introduced me to Diana Krall, Middle Eastern Music and talk radio. I in turn introduced him to Italian, Brasilian and Spanish pop with the classics from Bach to Montovani, (though I still love my Zeppelin, Sammy Hagar and Eagles totally cranked). He flipped when he realized I play the piano and compose my own music. TOP

Another way of keeping close while apart, I create custom CD's of my favorite artists, interspersed with commentary about what my favorite songs mean to me. Computers today make this easy. For my talent, he bought me a keyboard. Pianos don't work well in apartments so I haven't had one for a few decades. Soon I'll play the concerto I wrote for him, Paul's concerto. Writing your own song or making your own CD of your favorite music is a great way to bridge the distance. If you don't have the equipment to burn your own CD, write out what each song means to you then record them on a basic tape deck. You'll accomplish the same thing and make a very special, personal gift. It also gives him or her something to listen to when he or she misses you.

STARTING A COLLECTION

We use e-mail constantly to share stories, usually on politics or comic relief. I also draw and paint so Paul now collects lighthouses simply because I love lighthouses and as I'm a sailor, he represents my safe harbor. He is my lighthouse, that pillar of safety and guide through life. I've given him lighthouse poems I've written, lighthouse watercolors I've painted, lighthouse sculptures, lighthouse lamps, lighthouse collectables and lighthouse Christmas ornaments I've made. See this is what happens when a woman enters your life. We give men hobbies they never knew they had. We found lighthouse dishes at Big Lots and he was ready to buy them for me. At the last minute I decided no. Where would I put them right now since everything I own is in storage?

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Lighthouses are my representation for Paul and my way to honor him. Find something that reminds you of your love and start a collection. My Dad now has an impressive collection of snowmen courtesy of my Mom, though I'm having trouble seeing the correlation between snowmen and Dad.

Collecting softens the blow of being separated a little because now you have a quest and a secret representation of your relationship. Paul is also collecting twirlies as I call them…wind chimes without the noise, optical illusions that spin in the sun. I just keep finding those I like and buying them for him. Since I do not have a porch and he does, he gets them. Currently eight grace his porch; each time he sees them blowing in breezes off the Pacific, he says he thinks of me.

I've been talking about all that I do, because what I do doesn't cost much if anything at all. He's got the money. I don't. He does spend it on me whether it is jewelry, experiences, trips, (he sent me to Hawaii for ten days a few birthday's back) or help with Couples Company. Most people cannot afford this, so my contributions are definitely more doable for the average person anywhere in the world. His are important to me, but not helpful to anyone else. TOP

'I LOVE YOU'

But money doesn't buy the most important thing. He continually asks me what I want. His idea being that to care for me meant solving financial issues, and as an entrepreneur, they are dynamic. I finally put my foot down last fall telling him the only thing I wanted from him was the words "I love you". No more money. No more jewelry. No more help until I hear those words. "Ditto" syndrome as Patrick Swayze used to say *'I Love You'* to Demi Moore in the movie *Ghost*, doesn't cut it. Neither does, "You should know. I shouldn't have to tell you" or "Can't you tell?" It took refusing several thousands of dollars in gifts for Paul to get the message. Amazingly, he felt guilty. He could not comprehend that without those words, all the jewelry, electronics, gifts and trips are meaningless; I might as well be Holly Golightly heading toward the powder room.

Any man can buy gifts and they are an essential part of a healthy relationship. However to buy a gift, this does not take intelligence, caring, intimacy or effort. What is the point if he doesn't love you? What is the point if he is not willing to say this? Without articulating this, things are just things. And ladies and gentleman, if you are in a long distance relationship, this is the most critical action you must take. Tell each other that you love each other, and mean it. Tell each other you miss each other, that you are thinking of each other and that you cannot wait to see each other again. Remind her of what you find attractive and beautiful about her. Remind him you respect and admire him. As long as a man or woman knows he or she is loved, appreciated and wanted temptation has little chance. People do not wander when they feel fulfilled within their relationship. They only cheat to find that which is missing. You can never give too much love, only too little. Those three words are better insurance than Lloyds of London and ultimately the dividends surpass any policy or gift you can give. TOP

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THE NUMBER ONE ACTION SUSTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

To Paul's credit, the number one element sustaining our relationship consists of his nightly phone calls. His voice is the last thing I hear each night and eleven to one now falls on my schedule as his time and only his time. Truly I look forward to these calls every night. When we first met in 2000, he got a toll free number for me so I could call him anytime, anywhere without incurring any cost on my side. Quite gentlemanly in my opinion. A notorious girly-girl to all that know me, I like that kind of thing.

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

Our conversations allow us to talk, catch up on the little day-to-day issues and feel a part of each other's life, even though physically we remain apart. Generally our calls last a little over an hour, which is more time then the average married couple speaks to each other in the same house! In nearly four years, we never run out of things to talk about. We talk about important couple topics like what we thought or felt given the days' circumstances, our analysis, the benefits or repercussions given our respective companies, (we're both entrepreneurs, authors and inventors), parenting issues, the future, our fears and our dreams. We grumble about our Mothers' constant pressure for grandchildren and dread the day they are in the same room together, (We can handle one at a time but both together, Mary, Mother and Joseph!). We speak about what we are grateful for and we lament the time together we've lost due to circumstance. TOP

Of late, Bill O'Reilly constitutes our source of amusement. Prior to September 11th and shortly after, we were FOX fans and Bush supporters. The network, administration and O'Reilly's exodus to the neocon agenda provides us both with ample material to disseminate and disprove nightly, a phenomenal release of frustration. Politics is a passion for both of us, as we are advocates of small government, complete personal accountability and an end of propaganda, basically everything our government is supposed to be but is not today.

We also spend a lot of time talking about our faith and its similarity and differences with other faiths. We are both Lutheran and our doctrine strongly denounces dispensationalism, the driving rationalism behind the current Middle East nightmare. Our faith is central to our lives, one of the reasons copulation consists of a footnote in our relationship, though his willpower acts immensely more astute than mine. The part of Eve, I play well. For us, understanding our faith and discussing its impact on current events serves as a bellwether and BS monitor. Much of what is happening today revolves around faith misrepresentation of the three monotheistic faiths leading us to many discussions on what the Bible, Torah, Talmud and Qu'ran really say versus how each is being used to justify immorality and more importantly, what we each can do to stay true to our faith and not be misled. Current events have actually forced us to become more faithful and rediscover our core values while gaining an appreciation for the similarities and differences of our cousin faiths, Judaism and Islam.

WHEN PHONES ARE A LUXURY

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Phones are critical, but what if your lover is serving in the military or someplace where phones are a luxury? A friend of mine whose husband is serving in Iraq uses satellite pagers. Since he often cannot access a phone or e-mail, they text message back and forth throughout the day. Though short and sweet, these messages keep them acting as a team, a couple for the benefit of their marriage and their children. She also writes a diary like I described above and sends the books to him, with pictures and drawings from the children as each is completed.

Couples Company will soon be introducing an internet based service that will allow you to see, chat and hear the same thing anywhere in the world with up to four people at a time for around $10-$18 a month. Stay tuned. We expect this to launch in late July, early August. TOP

The reason I bring up these subjects find origin from the multitude of couples writing in saying they run out of subjects to talk about and in a long distance relationship, talk whether written or verbal, this is the relationship lifeline. Learning, a daily process and God's blessing to humanity, always provides venues of discussion, (what did you learn today about yourself, a subject or a policy?) and each of these subjects finds their origin in intellectual, spiritual and emotional intimacy. I'm consistently amazed by how few couples discuss faith, politics, sexuality, hopes and dreams. "Never discuss politics, religion or sex" only applies to dating and casual encounters, not intimate or close relationships and certainly not marriage. If you cannot test your ideas on your significant other, how will you ever be open to other points of view?

We all have flaws in our logic from time to time as our logic formulates through that which we experience and the knowledge we seek or are exposed to. Paul and I discovered in this crazy world buoyed by cognitive dissonance and exceedingly sowed and nurtured hate, debating these issues fortifies each as the other's Gibraltar of sanity, a safe place to speak, explore and disseminate issues and clarify our principles and positions without fear of ridicule or censorship. It also means the freedom to tell each other "You're logic is flawed and this is why…" without being offended or defensive. This too is a blessing, to be criticized without feeling dismissed or degraded. Such feelings can only occur between those of mutual respect once trust ensues. The opportunity to develop this trust-based intimacy, this becomes the true gift of a long distance relationship.

CONCLUSION

In summary, to make a long-distance relationship work requires one thing: Communication. To keep it together requires attending to your own physical and mental needs within the boundaries of your relationship. I've given examples of how I deal with the absence of sexuality and touch through distance. Perhaps our readers will provide more we can share. It also requires using the separation as an opportunity to deeply explore each other's emotions, hopes, dreams, fears, beliefs and positions. This time apart will either strengthen or weaken your relationship. Which occurs depends upon you. <END>

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