Could it be that the most important building block of civilization is a pair of committed individuals building a life together? As a Marriage and Family Therapist, I work daily with individuals, couples, and families exploring ways to enrich and better their lives. My hope in writing this column is to challenge and encourage you and your partner to deepen your relationship and expand your personal growth.

I value the power inherent in two people committing themselves to each other. Best friends, lovers, partners, whatever you call it, Coupling calls forth our weaknesses to be strengthened and our best traits to be refined.

This column will attempt to describe the traits of a healthy couple. If I can raise your awareness of how the two of you work together, if I can clarify some of the common problems and traps to avoid, then we’ll have happier, more effective relationships.

Divorce rates continue to be high and more and more people take the option of not marrying. But love still pulls us together though the form may not be traditional. As long as opposites attract (and they do!) couples will have differences of opinion, different needs, and different interests.

One of the wise men in my life, Bruce Carstarphen, once told me, “Love is a misunderstanding between two fools.” I think he’s right on every point. The blindness in the beginning is universal. We never know what we’re in for when we fall in love. Love is an irrational, indescribable feeling that we try to place in our orderly world. And yet, the love that binds a couple together forms the basic building block of our society.

We get at cross purposes when we try to fit love and the art of coupling in our world based on hierarchies and survival. A couple is more flower than business. It wants to be nurtured and appreciated. Force doesn’t work.

Love will prevail if we can only get our worst traits out of the way. The character defects of fear and pettiness, control and avoidance hold us back like a bad cold in a committed relationship. They can drag us down or we can let the power of love wash them away.

Surviving is common but thriving in a relationship calls forth our best effort. Coupling requires us to be better people. Courage, creativity, and commitment will yield a life of joy. Or there is another option; some couples live in a grueling, daily struggle for control or avoidance of conflict. This road becomes narrower and rockier as we go. We end up having to repress our true desires, our true self. We end up depressed and angry, usually blaming the other.

A relationship built on trust and service yields quite a different outcome. The opposite of depression is expression. In the safety of a healthy relationship, we grow. We learn more about ourselves. We have more to give to each other and those around us. With faith, hope and love, I believe we can build happy lives together!

Join me as I try to explore and expand on the art of Coupling!