

Lifelong Love

David VanNuys Ph.D. interviews Phyllis Koch-Sheras, Ph.D. & Peter Sheras, Ph.D.

Dave: My guests today are husband and wife team, Dr. Phyllis Koch-Sheras and Peter Sheras. We'll be discussing their work on "Lifelong Love". The authors have been working with couples together since the mid-1970s and have been training other therapists for 35 years. They have been married for nearly three decades and have two adult children. Dr. Sheras and Koch-Sheras are featured regularly on the radio and live in Charlottesville, Virginia. Peter L. Sheras, PhD, ABPP is a clinical psychologist and a professor in the University of Virginia's Curry Programs in Clinical and School Psychology. He has been in part-time independent practice for nearly 30 years and has authored publications on couples, parenting, youth violence and adolescent development including "Your Child: Bully or Victim? Understanding and Ending Schoolyard Tyranny" and "Clinical Psychology: A Social Psychological Approach".

He holds a diplomate in Clinical Psychology, is a past fellow of the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists and past President of the Virginia Psychological Association. He appears frequently as an expert in the media on topics of couples, adolescence and families. He received his doctorate from Princeton University. Phyllis R. Koch-Sheras, PhD is a practicing clinical psychologist and co-author of several books on dreams and couples including "The Dream Sharing Source" book. She is past president of the Virginia Applied Psychology Academy and the Virginia Psychological Association. She received her doctorate from the University of Texas and has worked in state hospitals, university counseling centers and independent practice. She was previously the Director of Training for the University of Virginia Counseling Center. Dr. Koch-Sheras is a Bon Buddhist practitioner. Now, here is the interview.

Doctors Phyllis Koch-Sheras and Peter Sheras, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Phyllis: Thank you for having us.

Peter: Thanks for having us.

Dave: You're a couple of psychologists and a psychologist couple.

Phyllis: Yes we are.

Dave: How did you get interested in working with other couples?

Phyllis: Well, we actually met on our internship at the VA hospital in Palo Alto. We were fortunate enough to be able to work on the family study units with some of the people that were really on the cutting edge of working with families and couples. It was so exciting and so rewarding that we continued to do it in our careers for over, I guess that was over 40 years ago.

Peter: We actually had back to back locations. Phyllis was first and she saw some couples and treated them and then she transferred all those cases to me.

Phyllis: No, only the one that I didn't cure.

Peter: Yes, the one that you didn't cure which ...

Dave: Uh oh, we have a couple fight already.

Peter: ... which I of course did cure but ...

Phyllis: Oh, did you? Okay.

Peter: We had an opportunity to interact but we also were together in this intern's groups so our relationship sort of sprung from our being together in a variety of different case conferences, a variety of different settings. That was really how we got to know each other.

Dave: I'm trying to think of some of the names that might have been associated at that time with that center. Virginia Satir comes to mind.

Phyllis: Yes, Virginia Satir and Watzlawick, Weekland and ...

Peter: The people at the Mental Research Institute were affiliated and then also just some folks who worked on the family study unit at that VA Medical Center.

Dave: Yeah, those are all very familiar names to me.

Peter: Yalom, a variety of different people.

Dave: Yalom was there, too. I've interviewed Yalom ...

Peter: He actually ran the growth group for our interns group.

Phyllis: Yeah. We had a collaboration with Stanford University.

Dave: You two fell in love about thirty-five or forty years ago. What can you tell us about the beginning of your love story? You just mentioned where it happened but give us a little bit of the flavor of that.

Phyllis: We've written in our book "Lifelong Love" about our two versions of this of love.

Peter: There's always two versions.

Phyllis: My version is that the first day of the internship when I sat down at this long table, the person that was sitting across from me was Peter. We talked about something in family therapy called the laying on of eyes. As soon as I laid my eyes on him, I was like, "Oh, I think this is going to be a good interview."

Dave: Great.

Phyllis: We actually didn't have our first date until the intern Christmas party because I was playing the field a little first and I think Peter was as well but we were very drawn to each other.

Dave: Yeah. Peter, what's your version of that story?

Peter: My version was it was not love at first sight for me. That in the kind of swirl of events I noticed Phyllis attracting a lot of attention. My style was to back away from that. I really got to know her and her work as time went on. In the beginning, I think I remembered what she was wearing that day, that she was physically attractive. I was too scared about everything else going on in my life at that point ...

Dave: I can identify with that.

Peter: ... to be paying much attention until the 7th of December, which is Pearl Harbor Day, which was the day of the interns Christmas party that we actually had our first date. We came separately and left together from the interns Christmas party.

Phyllis: Since that day, Peter has remembered the anniversary of our first date every year and I've remembered it about half the time.

Dave: Okay. Pearl Harbor Day though that doesn't sound terribly auspicious.

Peter: Yes. Well, it helped me remember. It was also a significant day in the life of my family so it was easier for me to remember.

Dave: In your book you point out that falling in love is easy and I will attest to that. The hard part is making the love last. Why is that such a challenge?

Peter: There are variety of challenges for that keeping relationships going. One is the culture in which we live. We talk a lot about the cultural variables of individualism and individual achievement and being rugged and independent. There are also a lot of other factors like we don't have a history now, we're in generations where half of our parents who were from divorced households. There are a lot of temptations in the media. There's a lot of things like laws that discriminate against actually being married for people who are in love. It seems like there are lots of ways out of relationships. One of the things that we talk about in the books that we write is that it's not that relationships are bad or even going badly. It's just that people give up a lot earlier than we would like them to.

Phyllis: That whole notion of commitment to someone and something becomes too scary, I think, for a lot of people to be willing to take on. There's always going to be ups and downs in a relationship. If you're not willing to commit through the hard times then, as Peter said, the easier way out is to just end it. With so many people in their families and their friends all around them divorcing there is more of a cultural of divorce than there is of commitment. I just saw a couple yesterday where the young man said he really wants to work on the relationship but he cannot be committing to a marriage or lifelong relationship because with his parents and everyone within the family, all he saw was hardship and agony over relationships and divorce. Right now I think we're in a culture where it's even more difficult.

Dave: Something you said Phyllis made me think of the fact that young people these days aren't dating. They don't use the word dating. They don't say, "You want to go on a date?" as we did in times past. What I've heard from students is hooking up.

Phyllis: Yeah, they hook up.

Dave: Yeah, that they hook up which ...

Phyllis: Even without that it's unusual on this case that this woman didn't believe in having sex before marriage, but even with that, the notion of committing seems to be the hardest thing for people to get past. To make commitment not something like you think of where you're going to be committed to an institution, you know?

Dave: Right.

Peter: I think it was H.L. Mencken said, "Love is a wonderful institution, but who wants to live in an institution?"

Phyllis: Right.

Dave: Right, right. Now there's scads of books out there giving marital advice and advice on relationships and yet you say they fall short. How so in what way?

Phyllis: All of these books that we've seen talk about committing to the other person. That's all based on the individualistic philosophy and culture. That's going to break down at some point because people change. If you're just committing to a person, then that's a shaky ground.

Peter: You're always looking for, "How are they doing? How am I doing? What should I be doing? What shouldn't I be doing?"

Phyllis: What's different about our work and our books is we talk about committing to the relationship, committing to a vision for the relationship that you both stand for, that you both commit to. From there then you take everything out as a team. Everything. Even if the individual has a project, like we worked with a couple where she had a dissertation to complete, the couple took it on. They created a way to work on it that she felt supported and he was able to get support for the work that he was doing at the same time.

Peter: One of the problems for people getting into relationships is that they are constantly concerned about what they're going to have to give up. Am I going to have to give up autonomy? Am I going to have to give up my hobbies? Am I going to have to give up my free time?, rather than seeing a relationship isn't necessarily an obligation but it's an oasis. It's actually an opportunity to have help and support for what you want as an individual. As long as there's some agreement, the relationship becomes like your child. What's in the best interest of the relationship and love comes from that and everyone's individual needs get met through the power of the relationship.

Phyllis: Most of the books about relationships focus on what's wrong and how to fix it. That's not what we're about. We're talking about a designer marriage that you get to create and have a positive vision that you come from that allows you to stay on course without having to fix something that's wrong but keep your eye on the prize.

Dave: You're re-framing it and I realize when that term came to mind that that comes out of that Palo Alto group.

Peter: Yes, exactly. Yeah, it does.

Dave: You're re-framing it in a more positive way and going against the tide of individualism that you spoke about before. You actually have coined a term, coupleism.

Phyllis: Yes, because we don't have a language even for how a couple can be in the world and have a powerful relationship. We're having to make up this new language. Individualism is all over the place but what about coupleism.

Peter: Most people think of a couple as two people. We think of couple as one couple. We had a conversation with a friend of ours once who is a member of Congress. We jokingly said that we were thinking of running for Congress as a couple. He said, "Oh, that would be great. You could share the work. It's a lot of work and you could each do half." We said, "No, that wasn't what we were talking about. We were thinking, what would it be like if we took on legislation looking through the eyes of a couple? What would it be like if the Middle East negotiators brought their spouses to the negotiation? What would it be like if we looked through the eyes of families and relationships and what we're trying to accomplish?"

Dave: I seem to recall that, and I don't know if this is just me and I'm projecting, but I seem to recall that there's a little bit of a negative connotation with couples that were too tight and had lost their individualism. Do you know what I'm getting at?

Phyllis: Yes, sure. There has to be space within the couple in the entity for both people to thrive as the individuals that they are. The kind of coupleism that we're talking about supports the individual through the couple. You actually have couple as the source for enriching the individual. There's many accomplishments that I have had. I have an art exhibit up now in a restaurant in Charlottesville that wouldn't be up there if I didn't have couple to support me hanging that exhibit. Peter doesn't do art but he gives me the space to manifest that as an individual by his supporting me.

Dave: You call your approach 'couple power' and you've been teaching this support to countless numbers of couples over a period of years. Why do you call it 'couple power'?

Peter: We call it couple power because we see it as an approach to empower the couple. It's actually getting something out of the way. Spending less time worried about what's wrong and more time thinking about what's possible as a relationship. There are a couple of components. One is just when you operate as a team, sometimes the sum is greater, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. When you put two people together there's something else there than just the two of you. The other component is there's something really possible. Human beings were born to be in relationships where we live in herds and

groups and villages. There's something else that's possible when you're truly in a relationship that's miraculous and marvelous. Most people come to see us trying to get out of pain. We say, "What would you like in your couple?" They say, "We want to stop arguing. We want to communicate. We want to stop hurting each other." We're talking about getting from minus five or minus six to zero. We're talking about what's between zero and ten? It's a relationship where the power of the couple is really evident.

Phyllis: Our latest blog for *Psychology Today* is all about this, about when a couple takes on dealing with a challenge or a tragedy that's occurred in their lives or in their community. There's a lot more power and possibility and strength then, working together to make something happen. We give several examples of how couples have done that. Our homeopathic physician wanted to have a health center in India. It was his dream for many years. It never happened until he married and they created a joint vision for this health center. Now they have this fabulous place that people can go to get healed that wouldn't have happened without couple power.

Dave: You guys are great salespeople for this. I seem to recall some negative research findings from some years ago. See if this rings a bell for you at all. That a study that seemed to suggest that marriage therapy didn't seem to be that effective if the measure was divorce. In other words that a pretty significant number of people who had gone to see marriage therapists ended up getting divorced.

Peter: You can imagine when you work with people ... We'll talk in a minute about what are the elements of creating this couple power, this entity that we call a couple. We're not saying that everybody in every relationship ought to be together or stay together. A lot of times we don't know much when we go in and we learn things subsequently. What we are able to say are the therapies that work on diagnosing the problem usually come up with lots of problems. Therapy is best looked at possible inventing of things you hadn't even thought about before. We're talking really about a paradigm shift in how we look at working with relationships. Not like, "Is there enough for you Dave in your relationship? Is there enough for you Phyllis in your relationship?" It's like, "What's your relationship? Who do you want your relationship to be like? What do you want it to be like so that together you can both get what you want?"

That's a real difference in how we look at it. A lot of Neil Jacobson early research, I think you were referring to, in the late '90s that said "we might be doing more damage in couple's therapy than not" was probably right on, but it had to with the approach that people took.

Phyllis: The approach that we take that is different and that is partially based on the work of Neil Jacobson, who unfortunately passed away at a young age, is that

you don't necessarily want to start with people communicating everything that they feel and everything that they think is wrong.

Dave: Okay, we're going to come to some more about that in a bit. Now you write about four types of couple personalities. Maybe you can take us through them.

Peter: We think just from our experience there are at least four ways that people present, kind of models. There's nothing wrong with them. The issue is sometimes people get stuck in models. The first model or the first personality is what we call the romantic or the romanticized relationship, where people are very much in love with being in love and everything that's attendant to that. They love being together. It's the kind of time in your relationship you might remember when you fall in love.

It's like, "This is great. I'm really in love with this person but I gotta get some sleep. I gotta spend some time at work or something." When Phyllis and I were falling in love I got mono. I think I went to meet her parents I was already completely physically exhausted but the concentration is on the chemistry and the love and the physical intimacy. Which is all very great but for some people when that begins to change they abandon the relationship. Then they say, "Well, I'm not getting that from this person now. Now I need to find somebody else."

Dave: That would relate to "falling out of love"?

Peter: Yes, it could definitely relate to that.

Phyllis: We're not definitely pooh-poohing romance. You want to keep romance alive in your relationship. It's when you get addicted to the romanticized part of the relationship that it can be a problem. You don't have the flexibility to change and adapt as your life proceeds.

Dave: That makes a lot of sense to me. What's the second type that you talk about?

Peter: The second kind of relationship is one that we would call a ...

Phyllis: Traditional.

Peter: ... a traditional relationship where there's sort of traditionally defined roles for each member of the couple. One is the hostess with the most-ess or one is the big support or one is the one who works while the other goes to school. Then there's a certain point in that relationship where that agreement might begin to fall apart. Like, "Wait a minute. We decided I was gonna put you through school. Then when you got settled, I was gonna go back to school." Now that hasn't happened so people get caught in particular role that they don't ever get to

renegotiate. It's sometimes years, decades down the road, people get angry and resentful that they never got to get the thing that they really wanted to have.

Phyllis: For some couples it may work fine and that's great. We're not suggesting that people have to change. I said before, it's a designer marriage. You get to make it the way you want it. It's just for a lot of people, like Peter was saying, if they don't deal with the resentment that's behind it, then it can start to really eat away at the relationship.

The third one we call the self-focused couple. That may be the most prominent one of our age, where you have people in the individualistic culture focusing on themselves and losing sight of where couple is a part of their life. How a couple can be supported and they can get support from the couple.

Peter: You have dual career relationships. For instance, where everybody is working very hard and then in addition to that you may have family responsibilities. What happens is you're so focused on what it is that you're trying to accomplish, there literally isn't enough time to be in a relationship because you're so busy doing all of those other ... This Hollywood relationship are often common. Not just the star quality but the busyness factor of how is it that you actually get to spend time in and on your relationship when you're spending so much time doing something else.

Phyllis: It's very difficult for the normal family, especially with young children. A lot of the people we see who come in who are in trouble have worked out the logistics of their family okay, where they do a tag-team thing taking care of the kids, but couple gets lost in the shuffle. They don't have any time set aside to be with each other, have fun with each other. They get focused on managing themselves, well they may put the kid, but their self first and the couple is last.

Dave: Each of the three patterns that you've described so far seem very familiar. I think it's a good categorization scheme so far. What's the fourth one?

Peter: The fourth one is more ... Because you probably want to know if these are some difficulties. Is there some better way to do that or some ideal? It's not really an ideal but some form of relationship that has some flexibility to it, because it's of the three things we mentioned has its merits. Couples do a lot of these things sometimes in order or as they get older. The fourth type of relationship is what we call a co-creating relationship.

Phyllis: We also call it the dynamic couple because it's constantly changing. That's what a dynamic is, so you're creating together. A co-creating couple is a dynamic couple. You're creating together what your life is going to look like from day-to-day.

Peter: Phyllis wants to vacation at the ocean, I want to be in the mountains. What a co-creating couple would do is look for something, a third thing. A friend of mine once said, "Are you a glass half empty or a glass half full person?" they said. "I'm let's get a different glass person."

Dave: You seem to like the number four because you also talk about the four Cs of building lifelong love, commitment, cooperation, communication and community. Maybe we can step through these. The first one is commitment. Commitment to what?

Phyllis: Commitment is the basis, it's the foundation for everything else you're going to do in your couple. If you start trying to commit or even cooperate on a project together before you've got a commitment to some vision that you're jointly committed to, you are going to be walking on thin ice. Commitment is always the first part and its commitment to the relationship. Commitment to the vision for that relationship.

Peter: Because we're really talking about couple as an entity in and of itself. You're committed to the success of that entity and when you are able to be committed, the question is, "What does that look like? If we're going on a trip, where are we actually going?" We work with couples in inventing and creating those statements of their commitment. We get married, you have vows, that's a statement of commitment. Most people never revisit those vows or say them again or even experience them being as alive. For us what's important is the commitment is alive in the moment. That has to do with having that vision in front of you.

Phyllis: The way we do that is through a technique we call creating a couple proclamation. Just like the emancipation proclamation states what the visions were, all men being created equal is. We have each couple create every two months to update a couple proclamation of what they're up to. We've been doing this for probably twenty-five years we've had probably now hundreds of couple proclamations. For example, the one we have now is and ...

Peter: We usually say them together.

Dave: You yourselves in your relationships have had hundreds?

Peter: Hundreds.

Phyllis: Oh yeah.

Peter: About a hundred.

Dave: Oh, interesting.

Phyllis: The one we're doing now is "We treasure our pleasure."

Peter: "We treasure our pleasure."

Phyllis: By saying it every day and taking a stock at the end of the day what our pleasures were for that day, keeps us on track of really keeping that vision in place.

Peter: It's not always so serious. We've had proclamations like, "We are cute," or "We're on fire," or "We're a powerful couple," or something like that. We say it literally almost every day, almost like an affirmation to remind us that we're a couple and that we don't say it when we're feeling good, we often say it when we're not. That really comes in handy.

Phyllis: Couples often say, "Well, but I don't feel like it now or I don't believe it." I say, "Well, that's okay just fake it 'till you make it."

Dave: Now I'm picturing the two of you gritting your teeth being angry about something and saying, "We are cute."

Peter: Yeah ... in our book "Lifelong Love" we have lots of examples in our life and in the people we've worked with who talk about exactly that sort of thing. That this is the last time in the world you would expect that to be there, but just by speaking it, putting it in language it makes something possible. That's in C, number one.

Dave: I'm still very interested in this. I've worked on cooperate kinds of visioning projects where ...

Phyllis: Right, right. Very similar to a mission statement.

Dave: How did you guys come up with this anyway?

Phyllis: We've been developing these concepts for a long time and we started working together with a group of people, who we will talk about it when we get to community, have developed a community called Couples Coaching Couples. In developing the distinctions for this organization, we started to see that we need to declare what we're up to. The genesis of the couple proclamation is very similar to what Couples Coaching Couples talks about as a declaration.

Peter: We've also had some business consulting experience. We've worked in academic departments, counseling centers, groups where this kind of creation has been extremely powerful. I think it's really developed over a long, long period of time.

Dave: I really like it.

Peter: We know as therapists, and most people as therapists know, if people aren't really committed to something, there's no sense seeing them. We ask that question, "So are you committed to this relationship?" The answer is yes, no or maybe. If it's no for either you then we really don't need to go any further. If it's "yes", then we'll proceed. Even if it's "maybe" it's like, "Okay, let's proceed." Then we begin to proceed to the second C from the first C of commitment.

Dave: Yeah, let's go to the second C which is cooperation. Cooperation seems so obvious on the face of it but it's not necessarily easy to achieve so what's the secret to developing cooperation?

Phyllis: One of the secrets is getting that cooperation is distinct from compromise. Compromise, somebody is always having to give something up in order to get something. In cooperating, you work together as a team for a joint goal. Keeping on going until everyone's needs are met and the goal is met by the couple working together. For example, Peter was saying, as long as you're willing to commit to something. This young man who was not willing to commit to marriage, was willing to commit to a two month process of working on their sexual relationship through sex therapy.

He was very clear that he was willing to do that and she was willing as well. They are going to cooperate to work on their sexual relationship in a way that meets both of their needs. They're going to be a team about it. Cooperation, a lot of people, like you said, it seems obvious. They think they cooperate well but they probably are not. They're probably either compromising or demanding and not making the kind of requests and agreements that keep a cooperation working well.

Peter: Dave, you said it. We think we're pretty good at cooperating. If you ask me, I think I'm great at it, it's just the people around me aren't so good. That's because they don't do what I ask them to do. The nice thing about cooperation, the notion obviously is like having a team. You write national championship on the blackboard in the locker room on the first day and then you support each other in doing that. It creates the possibility of some diversity. One of the issues we hear a lot about is, "I'm incompatible with my partner. She's an extrovert, I'm an introvert. She's intellectualize, I'm feeling and blah blah." Usually we see that as something that divides us. In the context of team, it actually gives you versatility. It gives you diversity. Phyllis is the extrovert in our relationship, I'm more of an introvert. Between the two of us we get to go to a lot of parties because Phyllis arranges that. Yet I'm the one who does the packing for the camping trips because I am the one who remembers everything because we're very, very

different. Now all of a sudden one of the obstacles becomes one of the strengths of your relationship.

Dave: The third step is communication and we've all heard that communication is important and that couples need to work on the communication. A lot of the books and so on seem to be organized around you need better communication, but you suggest that certain kinds of communication are helpful at certain times but not so helpful at others. Phyllis you started to say something about that earlier.

Phyllis: Right, it's important that communication be the third C. If you start at that place, that's what the research shows, is that people will actually sometimes make things worse by telling each other everything that they think is wrong with the other person. It convinces them that they shouldn't be together. You want to keep communication on hold until you've gotten commitment and cooperation clear. I've even sometimes given people the homework of stop communicating.

Peter: "Well, dear, now that I feel completely free to say what's on my mind I can finally tell you that I found you revolting and disgusting for the last ten years," is not a good place to start. If there's a grounding of commitment and now a little bit of a capacity to cooperate, now communication's really important because you want to be clear, when you're asking for things or giving things, what exactly is going on.

Phyllis: Still the communication is in service of the joint goal. Each person, we like to say out of cooperation, is a hundred percent, a hundred percent accessible. You don't spend time figuring out which fifty-fifty part of that you're responsible for. Both of you take on full responsibility for the communication and for what happens in the relationship. If you don't like the kind of communication you're getting from your partner, you take on equal responsibility to correcting that.

Dave: That makes sense to me. It certainly fits with some other ideas that are out there that I've been exposed to. Now the fourth step you describe as community and if there's anything that describes contemporary life, it might be the loss of community. What community are you talking about here?

Peter: We remembered from our days in in-patient treatment when we would work with people who would make fantastic gains in therapy and in treatment, we would send them out into the world and they would be back in a couple of days because there was no space in the world for them to use the new skills they've learned. For a lot of people this is true about how the world is about being in a relationship. It's not very relationship-friendly. Part of what we've begun to look at is where are the communities that you can go into that really respect family, that respect couple, that respect cooperation and aren't just into individuality.

There are two kinds of community at least. There's the vertical kind, the kind you have with your parents and grandparents and children and maybe grandchildren, where you help each other, support each other and work with each other to support being in the relationship.

Then there's the kind of horizontal community, your peers, your siblings, where you actually are in community. It's in that area we have found most of community is lacking. That people come to us, they say, "Wow, we've had a breakthrough in breaking up what's been going on in our old ways and now we're into some new ways but nobody we know understands that." We actually encourage them to find or create communities. We'll have an assignment go make friends with another couple. Not an individual with a spouse but actually another couple.

Phyllis: Even when they do have couples that they're friends with ... I have a couple I've been working with for a while now who's about ready to complete go out in to the world. They said that they've started telling these couples what it is they've been doing and what impact it's had on them. Rather than just getting together and shooting the breeze, they're actually now able to talk about issues that really make a difference for them and to support the other couples as well. If you don't have that kind of thing in your life, like Peter was saying, it's a slippery slope. We talked about maintaining the relationship, maintaining lifelong love. That's the real challenge of our age.

Peter: Find people, find communities, there may be religious communities, you're in a church or a synagogue or a mosque. It may be a neighborhood group that you're with where you can interact as people in relationships. Talk about that view with ... It can be an immense amount of fun. When we treat couples sometimes the follow-up treatment for them is to put them in groups with other couples where they can create a community. The third thing that we've done, as Phyllis has mentioned before, to create this national nonprofit organization called Couples Couching Couples which are people from all around the country who take time and spend a little time supporting one another and coaching each other in their relationship.

Phyllis: Each city has one of more of what we call circles or groups of couples who get together every few months to report what they've been doing in what we call the quartets of two couples coaching each other. Then every few months we switch who you're going to be coaching with and you get a fresh start on creating and recreating your couple newly. Once a year we have a national convention too.

Dave: That sounds fascinating. I'm assuming that there would be information on your website?

Phyllis: On our website couplepower.com and there's also a CouplesCoachingCouples.org website.

Dave: Okay, good. You were talking about the religious connection, the role that the church has served I think maybe more so in the past than these days or at least more people were involved. I had some friends years ago who were involved in workshops that sounds a little similar to what you're doing. I seem to recall it was called Marriage Encounter and it was sponsored by a Catholic organization. You sound like you're familiar with that. Do you have any opinions about that?

Peter: We think it's a very powerful program and a powerful start. The difficulty that some people may have is in really creating an ongoing participation. The thing about Couples Coaching Couples is something you can do on the telephone ...

Phyllis: Weekly.

Peter: ... weekly for thirty to forty minutes. Then it continues to actually become part of your life. It's like brushing your teeth. You wouldn't say, "I just go from dentist appointment to dentist appointment without anything in between." For this it's what's the maintenance, how do you get present regularly to the beauty of your own relationship and the power that you have together? I think there are a lot of really good programs for people in relationships but it's the follow-up. For us, it's not even the follow-up, it's the ongoing relationship to what it is that you've invented.

Phyllis: It's not affiliated with any religious context. It has a moral base but it doesn't have that religious connection and ...

Dave: Which would be a turn-off for some people.

Phyllis: ... also you have that creating of a community in each city where you're involved in the coaching. Because it's not just a quartet it's the community of quartets that's so powerful.

Dave: How long has that program been going on?

Phyllis: We had our twenty anniversary two years ago.

Peter: 1991 I think that program started.

Dave: Yeah, good for you.

Peter: It's been around for a while.

Dave: You go on to talk about a fifth C. What's the fifth C?

Phyllis: Yes, we like to say once you've got the four Cs handled, then you are able to have couple consciousness, which is what we call the fifth C of couple power or lifelong love. That is being able to look at the world through this filter of couple, through the lens of couple. When there are difficult decisions to make, you have the filter of couple and what you're up to in the world to guide you. It makes a lot of the decisions easier. It may also, as I said like with my art exhibit, it gives us a way to support each other by relying on our couple to give us the extra juice that we need to keep things alive and viable in our lives.

Dave: Now I can see where this approach could be very helpful for young couples just starting out, starting out with a really positive vision getting off on the right foot, but what about couples who have been together for quite a few years perhaps and they already have a lot of bad history under the bridge?

Phyllis: The nice thing about this, and we see a lot of older couples, is that once you create this couple proclamation you have a whole new place to come from. It makes it easier to deal with all the garbage from the past because you're not wedded to that and tied to it. You're moving in a new direction.

Dave: Yes, Peter pointed out in the beginning, people tend to come to therapy because they're in pain. I'm guessing that probably it's not so much newlyweds that you're seeing but people who are in pain maybe after being married for some time.

Phyllis: Yeah, usually.

Peter: Sometimes they're just numb and then something happens, someone gets ill. Retirement is one of these things that happens as we go through the baby boomer generation, where we have people who are now retiring and living fifteen, twenty, thirty more years in their relationship. It requires some flexibility, it requires some re-thinking. A lot of people come in because they feel like they don't have the resources to manage it, when in fact they do. They're just not in touch with those.

Dave: One challenging problem for marriages, I have an upcoming interview on infidelity, which is probably one of the biggest challenges of all to a relationships. What success have you seen with that issue using your approach?

Phyllis: We've had quite a bit of success. Again, if we can get the couple to a place where they can see the value of the relationship as an entity and committing to the visions for that, then they work together on whatever they need to do to get complete about the affair or the relationship that they had or one of them had in

the past. I have a couple I just saw for a few sessions where that happened. The wife was about ready to call it quits but once he got clear that he was committed to this relationship and was able to communicate that clearly, then they could work together on how they were going to make sure that the trust was built up again.

Peter: We certainly don't work with people who are unwilling to give up that infidelity on an ongoing basis, but the future doesn't always have to look like the past. There's always things to learn from whatever failures or whatever circumstances has happened. We encourage people to look at that part of it rather than to dwell in what the past was. I think we've all of us worked with couples have had experiences that some people never recover from infidelity. Some people will recover from it just fine. You do have some choice in the matter and it often has to do with the re-establishment of trust. That's really very difficult to say, "How do you re-establish trust?" Part of it is a leap of faith. What Phyllis is saying is once you can recreate or create your commitment to a particular vision, then it's a vision that you can trust and commit to that.

Dave: You two met in a research program and I'm wondering to what extent has your approach as it's evolved been influence by research or by other psychological theorist. Are there any?

Peter: We've certainly been influenced by the Family Systems folks, Virginia Satir and people at the Mental Research Institute. We've also done some research. We're in the middle of a research project now which your listeners can also participate in. Can I give the website for that ...?

Dave: Definitely.

Peter: ... for that research. We have a study where we're looking at the 4 Cs and marital satisfaction and it's at www.surveymonkey.com/f/rprp, which is the relationship possibilities research project. We are involved in and have done some research in looking at the impact of the 4 Cs and showing that it does correlate with marital satisfaction. We're also looking at evaluating the program that we're doing. We based a lot of our work on Neil Jacobson's early work and we're also very aware of the work of John Gottman and Sue Johnson who are really looking at what are the factors that impact people's relationship. We like to think we're not so much looking at what's wrong all the time, but as what's new and what can be created.

Dave: Have there been any critics of your approach?

Phyllis: One of the blogs that we wrote on Psychology Today asked the question, "Do you really want lifelong single-hood?" This was based on some survey research

that had come out about how many people were now choosing to stay single for their life. We really meant to put it out there as a question and to be clear that what people's choice were. We got a lot of backlash from that that people might think that we're saying that being single isn't a viable choice. It is, if that's what you want, but as Peter was saying, so many people give up the idea or desire for being in a couple without having had the advantage of finding the kinds of things we're talking about as ways to maintain a relationship. There was some backlash in that regard but I hope that we cleared that up and people understand that we're not denigrating their choice. We want to give people every advantage.

Peter: Any time you challenge an existing paradigm there's going to be a lot of controversy about it. That's a good sign for us that we're asking people to think about things a little bit differently and so they are noticing that.

Dave: Okay, well, I think we've covered the ground that I had hoped to. Are there any final thoughts that you'd you like to get in here before we close off?

Peter: When we can encourage people to see their relationships in a different way, to come at it through this possibility. We are certainly available. We do workshops to train therapist, we do workshops for couples. That information is available on our website couplepower.com.

Phyllis: We've been doing recently what we call intensives, where a couple may come in for a weekend and it's remarkable how they're relationship can be ... they can clear obstacles and they can get clear about a proclamation and move forward in working several hours for a couple days and then with some follow-up there. There are many ways that you can access turning around patterns that have not worked for you. Either, like I say, if you've been married a short period of time or a long period of time, there's always possibility if you're willing to put yourself out there. We wrote this book, "Lifelong Love", so that people all over the world would have access to these ideas and these exercises. Hopefully people will take advantage of that and not just give up before they've tried.

Dave: That's a finally message there of real hope. I think just about everybody longs for lifelong love. For many it's an elusive goal, so you've given us hope and a sense of direction. Phyllis Koch-Sheras and Peter Sheras, I want to thank you two for being my guest on Shrink Rap Radio today.

Phyllis: Oh, thank you.

Peter: Thank you, Dave.