

The Rain Doesn't Fall Straight Down

BY WILLIAM MORROW

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INTRODUCTION

These essays were originally feature articles written for a weekly column, *Relationships*, in my local newspaper over a period of four years. I started writing because I wanted a wider audience for the thoughts I had about how couples could get along. As a therapist, I usually did not take the opportunity to advocate general truths with individual couples, but would often be inspired in the middle of a session to utter some obvious “rule of engagement”. With these essays I had the chance to preach my observations to the reading public. It’s true that most of the people who get divorces have never gone to a marriage therapist. So, if they wouldn’t come to me, I would go to them. What I have written applies equally to persons who are in second or subsequent marriages. The problems are similar, even if the desire for solutions is a bit more urgent. Most of what I have written applies to couples who have been together long enough to realize that relationships take some thought and some maintenance.

The essays, as they appeared in the column, were isolated reactions to what was affecting me at the time. Now I am organizing this collection of writings in hopes of putting it all out there (somewhat logically). I know there must be yet more people who believe there are some universals about coupling which bear reflecting on. The idea of the rain not falling straight down suggests that there is time for the relationship-involved to think through their troubles before the storm arrives. As I say it in the lead essay, it is this re-thinking time-period that I have repeatedly addressed myself to in the subsequent pieces. There is a kind of opportune hiatus between the onset of glimmering awareness of problems and the possible dire consequences of those problems. And, during this time, I believe people can, by expanding consciousness, lift themselves up into a better place in their relationships. That process begins at home (hopefully with getting some ideas from the essay presented) and may or may not need to continue with the help of a professional therapist.

Although the general subject matter is relationships, most of the essays are about marriage relationships in particular. My purpose in writing them was to translate a clinical psychotherapy view of marriage and family interaction into something that the newspaper reader would see made common sense. I found that dynamically complex subject matter could be presented with a little lightness that made it more palatable. I also wanted to present the element of hope to those people whom I believed had become jaded about prospects for a more satisfying marriage.

I sincerely believe that a positive approach to the difficulties of sustaining a relationship is a powerful force for change. It was interesting to me that the newspaper editor originally captioned my article on “Chuck’s Universe”, as “Optimism Necessary for Utopia”, as if she thought optimism’s influence on relationships was not really practicable or possible, and was maybe a bit farfetched. And so, I have learned, both in print and in the counseling room, to introduce some healing element into most every difficulty presented. It is also positive to approach many of the universal marriage and family predicaments with a humor that does not detract from the seriousness of the problem presented, but, in fact, captures the reader (or the counselee) and turns him/her toward optimism. To show that we can all laugh at ourselves, I have included a few vignettes drawn from my own family functioning, struggling, and dysfunctioning. Having gone through a few of the stages of the adult life cycle myself, I learned how

to keep hope alive.

The reader will notice not only a positive-attitude element in the essays, but also occasionally a spiritual element showing through. Both of these influences come from my pastoral background. My affiliation with the pastoral counselor profession has been equally strong as with the marriage and family therapy profession throughout my career. If there is any underlying theology in these writings, it is largely interfaith, and certainly favoring some fundamentals like forgiveness and reconciliation in relationships. There is no doubt a bias toward unconditional love. Additionally, one could observe that I place a lot of emphasis on the importance of whole individuals as the essential building blocks of an intimate relationship. To be “whole” involves an ability to look inward for relationship resources, to take time for meditation and being with oneself in the deepest parts of the soul. So, while I resist the urge to make an essay into a sermon, I hope I might be accused of “building up the spirit” of those who struggle in relationships.

In Part One, I have gathered those essays that give some insight into how therapy and therapists work. They are more about process than content. In Part Two, I collected what I had written about family relationships outside the marital dyad: relationships to children and adolescents. There is an advocacy here for the needs of children that can get neglected while Mom and Dad (or Stepmom/Stepdad) work out their lives. In Part Three the focus is on the couple, with a trip through the life cycle of the marriage where I mostly want to normalize the temporary departures from couple satisfaction. Part Four is devoted to an assortment of essays that were written to tie in with special events in married life. Part Five contains essays on the dark side of relationships (divorce) as well as some other more positive words to leave the reader with.

Part One

*What Marriage Therapists Do When They Are
Cookin'*

The Rain Doesn't Fall Straight Down

The crisis I am hearing on the phone makes it sound as if I should jump in my car, get out the quick-attach car top flashing light, and zoom down the street to the rescue. The call is from a frantic husband who has been abandoned, I mean scuttled. “This was a sudden thing”, he tells me. I can hear his subdued manner, his voice is trembling, and, as he talks, it sounds as if his face has fallen into his shirtfront. He tells me that his wife has left him without warning and that he is desperate to get her back.

His surprise seems genuine, but I am quietly making a little bet with myself that, when I get to talk to his wife, she will tell me this has been coming on for months, maybe years.

The thing is, rain never falls straight down. Trouble, when it creates a disturbance in a relationship, doesn't hit suddenly. There were likely little signs of problems that were there, if anybody cared to look, I mean really look, at them. The kind of relationship trouble I am talking about nearly always, like a weather prediction, gives its victims time and opportunity to realize that things are a bit out of tune, barometers are buzzing, and problems are headed their way. My new patient probably had received some “weather alerts” from his wife, but had hoped it would blow over, and he wouldn't really have to deal with it. Forecasts of great downpours can be denied for only so long. When they come, and you're unprepared, you get drenched; possibly you drown.

Maybe I will eventually find out that his wife couldn't stand facing the tense time it would take to clear up the problem, so she wasn't very direct with her mate about what was bugging her. It could be, that for her, it was easier just to act it out by leaving.

If couples would be alert to the early warning signs, such emergencies would be less likely to happen. Then marriage counselors could close down their crisis response facilities and work with regular tough cases. Yeah, I know, “into each (marriage) some rain must fall”, but it doesn't necessarily have to catch our family havens off guard.

With an awareness of impending trouble, there is then time to reflect on the symptoms, and move the whole situation up out of the primitive brain (his and hers) into the higher realms of human discourse. And eventually into the rational, problem-solving modes.

Now you know what motivates me: It is for just that “let us reason together” time period that I write this stuff. There is no need for couples to fall back on the default (primal) reaction to a bad situation when there are better choices to be selected from the pop-up menu in the neo-cortex of the brain. Conscious consideration also means that actions and reactions are more likely to be purged of the deadly ballast of the unconscious before someone takes a disastrous action.

Survival is a two-step dance of the relationship. Step one: Get informed. Step two: Talk it over. While there is still time.

My Life as a Relationship Columnist

The job of a relationship columnist is tough. Because not only do I have to make sense of the world of love and marriage, and then write it down, but I also, as a marriage therapist, have to fly into the eye of the storm, like a hurricane hunter. I go into places within the turmoil of a relationship that are risky, looking for lost perspectives and forgotten solutions. Or, maybe I am simply a psychological Indiana Jones. Uncertain of my true identity, I pitch my tent between the battlefield and the word processor.

I have to report on the near-death experiences of good relationships gone bad. I say near-death because I also investigate the rehabilitation and recovery. This is what I do: my beat is the Edge of the Cliff where people in marriages and other entanglements nearly get wiped out and come near to falling into oblivion. It is not usually a calm place, but from my vantage point at the precipice, I can see through the gloppy stuff and bring a little light to the process. Yes, harrowing experiences, but survivable.

I have this job because troubles in a love relationship are not always what they seem. When the tension peaks, the lovers are so intensely involved in the turmoil that they see and feel the wounds most of all. An emotional flood oozes onto the scene like Jurassic mud. People forget the long-term benefits of staying together. After a major conflict, the state of the relationship looks discouraging, disappointing, and there is a lot of free-floating negative energy fogging up the picture. Resolution and the possibility of getting things back on track seem far away. Crushed lovers run for the hills and hide in their caves.

But at this very time, unbeknownst to the hurt and angry mates, there is another parallel universe, which, although temporarily hidden from their sight, puts things in perspective. Of course, you can't see it, because emotions have a way of temporarily closing down the rational brain. Anger, especially, has the instinctive ability to hijack the realistic thinking that it takes to put everything in perspective.

Sometimes I think that if the troubled couple could only see what I see, they would realize that relationship difficulties are inevitable and, what is more important, are opportunities to grow and strengthen the relationship. No relationship is going to progress in a straight line. In fact, I don't think it should.

So that is why my job is strenuous. In the face of the blinding forces of stormy relationships, I have to keep my eye fixed on the healthy parts of the marriages, and live to tell about it.

I'm Not Writing About You

I'd like to report that there's a new emotional condition. It's called "scriptophobia", and, like other phobias, it's an irrational sort of fear, not rooted in reality. This particular one shows up in people who have read this column and then come in for therapy on their relationships. These symptom-bearers are afraid that what they read about is personal material that was shared, and, what's more, I was paid to keep quiet about. "It's just a coincidence," I reassure them. And then, for symptom relief, I talk to them a little about what is fortunate here. So many relationship problems are like other problems people have or have had. What I have to do to clear things up helps to put everyone concerned on a level footing with the rest of the human race. However, my client, Sally, was a bit skeptical. This attitude necessitates my sending her an open letter. I'm sure she won't mind the rest of you knowing all this stuff, since I have cleverly disguised it:

"Dear Sally, (not her real name)

I just wanted to explain that when I wrote that bit about the couple that accidentally sent an extremely personal videotape to "Funniest Home Videos", I wasn't talking about you and Greg (not his real name). The reason you thought you recognized yourself is that many of the relationship problems between mates are universal. They happen to everyone. When the two of you came talking about problems in your sex life (not the real problem), I knew right away that this was a matter for extreme confidence and anonymity. If I were ever going to use your story as a basis for helping another couple, I would have to camouflage it in such a way that your and Greg's identity would be protected. I hope you would give me some credit for creativity here. It took a lot of creativeness to get the two of you to look at the real problem that we eventually discovered lurking in the background. So why would you think I would be any less sensitive about disclosing personal material? Creativity is as much of a beneficial skill in therapy as it is in journalism. Someone defined creativity as the art of knowing how to hide your sources. Well, that's true of someone like me who draws on the nitty-gritty stuff of the counseling pit to demonstrate to the reading public what makes for better relationships.

When you told me about your mixed-up parents (not your real parents) and shed some tears (not, I thought at the time, real tears), I could have sworn you were talking about some of my relatives (real relatives). How did you know? The resemblance gave me a new spurt of bravery to write more about my own (real, if slightly embellished) family. Those skeletons in the closet aren't so crazy when you've heard how it's the same stuff most ordinary families are made of. Usually, people don't talk about it, so everybody assumes their situation is the only one on the planet. Embarrassment runs high; so does guilt. And then, when you have to hide the family secret, it begins to fester and create new problems. It's like the way my great-grandfather fell off the porch and died. Not talking about it infused several generations of my family with a lowered self-esteem. From now on, when I write about my own and other's situations, I hope you will be understanding, as you glimpse some resemblances to your own family.

Sally, you have to know, that although all relationships are as unique as the people in them, there are some patterns that are universal. That is why I have been able to help teach other marriage counselors. Our profession indulges in specialized clinical training, learning to recognize some of the characteristic fashions by which intimates whirl and twirl with each other. No matter what face you put on them, you will recognize yourself and Greg in some of these couple's Great Adventures that I write about. So, in a way, you could be happy that there are other people with the same deep-down quagmires of their relationships. I trust that by now you and Greg are enjoying your relationship more than you were last year at this time.

Sincerely, Your Therapist."

What You Can Learn From a Turkey

According to Garrison Keeler, turkeys are, by themselves, fairly intelligent creatures; yet, in groups, they become irrational. Individual turkeys are wary enough to avoid capture in the woodlands or in the barnyard. They take care of themselves and their young brood. But join individual birds together in a flock, and you immediately have a problem on your hands. They defy logic and seem to lose their wits. There is then no predicting what might happen! Now, if you can make the stretch from the holiday bird into hard science, the mathematicians tell us that people are like turkeys when it comes to group psychology. The theory of mathematical transitivity says that if John likes pretzels better than potato chips and also likes corn chips better than pretzels; he will predictably like corn chips better than potato chips. Got it? So far, so good. Seems simple enough.

But put John and the food trays together with his buddies (say, for example, all of whom are Raiders fans) and then nobody can really tell what they will want to eat. It's that group thing. Irrational. Unpredictable. The instincts of the herd.

There is a lesson here for couples: You think you know someone? Right. But put that person into a significant relationship with another person, and Whammo! This new two-person grouping starts behaving funny. Now it's not just food preferences that are at stake. Relationships seem to bring out the irrational in otherwise rational persons. You would think that two intelligent persons put together would create a really intelligent relationship, but marriage can leave spouses scratching their heads about the mysteries of that other person's way of thinking. "What ever happened to logic?" they wonder.

See, if people just didn't have this desire to be in a relationship, they wouldn't get downgraded to the state of being flabbergasted with one another. It's more than the planetary thing between men and women. It's the brain chemistry of the herd instinct. It's about mutual influence and reacting to reactions. Perceptions and misperceptions. Some people give up and resign themselves to the single life.

O.K., so what can be done about this? The usual first line of defense in a couple's impasse is to exclaim to the mate, "Be reasonable!" This intervention is about as likely to work as telling your pet turtle to turn flip-flops. It's too late. The brain has already gone abuzz with relationship logic. You don't know what is going to happen next. It makes you understand the macho bumper sticker I saw on the back of an old pick-up truck: "I face danger every day . . . I'm a married man". And this is just the husband's view of the mystery.

But really irrationality isn't all that bad, if you are ready for it. See, once the otherwise happy couple has slid into the herd mode, there is a whole new territory open for problem solving. Logic probably wasn't going to do the trick anyway, so I say you should welcome the creativity of the non-logical side of the brain. I'm not recommending destructive warfare. I am suggesting the constructiveness of "brain storming" The true salvation of a relationship lies in the creative solutions born of two individuals who know that they don't always behave reasonably. In point of fact, trying to be logical stunts creative

solutions. What we know is that the tension of a couple at odds with each other can resolve itself with a crisis that helps the relationship to grow to a new and previously unrecognized level. Tension will relieve itself as surely as an involuntary sigh relieves stress in the pit of your stomach. It can be creative or destructive of the relationship. Tension relief by divorce is only one of several options available when there is an impasse of failed logic. Check out your other options.

Refereeing

As I picked up my whistle and ran out onto the field, I could see that the two teams were ready for the skirmish. One team called “husband”, the other called “wife”; they glistened with the sweat of battle tension as they anticipated the next round of the contest.

Although I was a mere psychotherapist, I was imagining myself as a striped-shirt referee in a major sports event, where, although I couldn't control the outcome, I could see to it that it was played fairly. I knew my job was to remain objective and provide a playing field where both teams could do their best. Despite the occasional distractions of “Greek choruses” cheering one side or the other from somewhere in the back of my mind, I scurried here and there in order to observe both teams impartially and equally. Whenever there was a foul, I knew I could promptly blow my whistle in order to keep anyone from getting hurt. If I had to, I would deftly send a team member into the penalty box to think things over. My objectivity was, after all, why team-wife and team-husband had come.

In the pre-game hype, there is frequently enough steam on each side of the field to generate a nasty desire to be the winner, put the other spouse in his/her place, and confirm their own personal analysis of blame and fault. In other words, somebody wins and somebody loses. But, where there is a referee, there is a different atmosphere in the sport of marital differences: Play hard, but play by the rules. When I am (mostly) in charge of the game, things are calmer, safer, cooler. No sniping, no sarcasm. When things heat up from too much conflict “off the field”, couples need a place to channel their energies, say what needs to be said, and trust that they are being heard. In my arena, if I take pains to make sure I am hearing the position in question, it is much more likely that the other spouse will hear it, too. If I patiently slow down the action, the defensive players get less time on the field.

Some couples come thinking I am going to hear both sides, see the convincing truth of one or the other position, and award the one who is right with a gold cup. Sometimes I think they are so convinced that they will be determined the winner that they are willing to come to my playing field just for the sake of vindication. But it doesn't work that way, because, I believe that someplace within them, they have a basically held instinct of fair play. They have to know that the outcome will be decided by productive interaction, where facts and feelings are put into play. When things get rough, they really, deep down, want a referee, not a judge and jury. I count on the idea that they want to work it out between them so that the outcome is win/win.

As I go back onto the field, I am ready to see this game to a hopeful conclusion where everybody wins and feels good about it.

There Is No Correlation between Hope and Advice

Divorce is the evidence that there are plenty of people with relationship problems. Not to mention all the break-ups and lost loves that are going on every day, and often written about. If we are to read the Advice Diva's report as any indicator of what is going on in the troubled realm of relationships, there is a battlefield strewn with the corpses of love tangles that have died terrible and tragic deaths. And Diva is doing her best to stop the carnage and to keep the mating fish out of troubled waters.

Yet I have to wonder about the real benefits of her advice. Like any advice, it usually doesn't go far enough, and does nothing for the ability of the advisees to learn from their experiences. I mean, what are we trying to do here: create more followers and advice-seekers, or help people to grow in their relationship ability? I opt for the latter, and believe that the object of the helping process is to enable the relationship-troubled to better listen to their own best advice. My unsolicited advice to the Diva, herself: "Listen to your own Higher-Self".

When people are hurting in a relationship, what helps them most is to retrieve their lost sense of hope. Especially in a relationship that is valued for its long-term benefits (isn't that what we all want?) When the sky is falling, people are more likely to ask me, "Is there any hope?" than they are to ask me, "What should we do?" With hope lost, any problem looks more difficult and beyond the reach of being solvable. Yet, in order to restore hope, giving advice does nothing. It is my belief that there is absolutely no connection between the amount of advice given and the degree of hope that a couple could feel about their ability to make it together.

I don't fault the Diva in particular here. She is only part of the larger culture that sees its role to be providing external guidance for the way grown-up people conduct their intimate lives. Sure, a lot of people ask for advice, and seem dependent on it. But so there are a lot of people living with little hope. Dominant parents, some churches, and numerous talk-radio gurus want to be authorities for others who are struggling with their love relationships. I personally would rather trust that, given enough personal growth in an atmosphere of hope, most people could make the right decisions from within. Right down to the specifics for current relationships.

In one book about hope, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, there is a Voice in our minds, and the Voice is of God. According to this spiritual philosophy, we can look for inner direction regarding a "real" perspective on the otherwise illusory world of love and relationships. Here is a Divine Diva that you can carry around with you wherever you go, to consult with whenever you need Her. It does require a little spiritual cultivation, but if you want a deep and lasting love relationship, you're probably going to have to expose yourself to some spiritual things anyway.

Lost in Space

O.K., let's say you're out and about one day, and you see two blurry objects whirling by. Hard to get a fix on them. Here's a clue: A troubled couple, headed for the therapist's office, is like a bad scene from Star Wars. Things are spinning out of control, with opposing gravitational forces pulling and tugging at them. Our hero and heroine are hurting and feeling unappreciated. They are in different orbits. The Starship they once knew and loved has gone off-course, and its passengers have lost command of their inner guidance system. These mates are anxious and weary of trying to correct things.

Once they arrive, I put on my flak jacket and go to work. One of the first things I do, to get them back in synch, is to help reconnect them, not only with each other, but also with themselves as individuals. As soon as I have heard their needs and gotten an earful of their unhappiness, I summon the wisdom of Dr. Spock, and begin the process of restoring the misplaced sense of security in each spouse. Get them back on course! I know they won't reconnect until their inner power source is restored.

In each joint session, I start off asking both to reflect for the moment on their separate lives. I stop the clock. I suspend the action, in order that there can be a meditative moment, a prayerful pause. I give them a safe place in meaningful time, apart from the mad rush to get this relationship straightened out.

I am determined to perform this operation, because it often happens that there have been so many external foul and vicious forces at work that they have drifted away from their Center. Whether you call this a spiritual or an emotional center, it is vital to each spouse's ability to reach out and emotionally contact the other person.

This centering move sometimes seems like the hardest thing that I ask them to do. They are so into the clash at the bleeding frontier of the relationship that they seem to have forgotten how to look inward at their own separate selves.

But, I have to say to all you people on the journey, if you are going to have a vital relationship with another person, you dare not get off center, out of touch with your intuition or your inner guide. Neglect your Center and you run the risk of having your universe collapse into a black hole. Danger! Red warning lights! So, maybe it means taking time for an imaginary trip inside yourself and visiting your inner self. "Hello, Self. How are you? How are we doing?"

It requires you to shift gears, swoop into inner space, and turn off the endless list of things you have to do next. Inward reflection is not part of the daily routine in the sense of just another thing you have to do, in a long line of items of demand and obligation. It's more like the weirdness of locating the vacant places between your thoughts. It's an injunction for any day in the life of two busy, stressed-out mates, who want an intimate relationship: Pull back and regroup.

To this couple from the lost planet, I say: "Take a moment to get in touch with the emotions of your

day that have nothing to do with your marriage. What feelings grow out of your reactions to things at work, things happening in your health, what you dreamt about last night, or life with your family-of-origin? (That last one is bound to get a reaction!) Ask yourself what mood you are in today?"

It is this moment of reflection that puts the space travelers back in a frame of mind to be at their best when they reach into the universe of their mate. Click. Click. Now we can really begin the rewiring of this marriage relationship.

Dogs Help with Counseling

Sometimes a city boy has to take a vacation and go to the country to learn some important lessons of life. Not that urban life doesn't have plenty of educational experiences; but they go by too fast to absorb their significance. Countryside wisdom hits you just right, subtle, and easy.

When I saw a man herding his cows with the help of his dog, I knew my destiny as a therapist would be changed forever. It looked to me as if this cowboy were doing family therapy with his cows; only the dog was doing most of the work. Dr. Herdsman only had to open the fence for the cows so they could cross the road. The dog did the rest, running around behind the errant cows, barking his own commands. If there was a stray critter going off in the wrong direction, the canine co-therapist nipped at their heels as needed. And there was real communication between dog and man. I couldn't tell if the man was giving quiet orders to the dog, or if it was the dog telling the man how to plan their next maneuver. The dog was like the cowboy's muse, an assistant in the creative management process. The dog danced around effortlessly, keeping the energy of the herd flowing smoothly. Between dog and the herd, it wasn't so much control as guidance.

I could use a helper like that in the therapy room. Who would notice if I consulted my therapeutic muse? It would be good to share the work of moving the herd-energy of intertwined relationships. And usually, it is not that relationship situations are grossly out of whack. More often than not, they have been temporarily thrown off balance by some stressful and disrupting life event that just happens in the course of living family life. You know, things like birth, death, adolescence. Like the herd, they are generally moving in the right direction, and just need a little tweaking here and there to keep the flow of interaction healthy and on-course. If I were a cowboy therapist, I would sit in the therapy session, do no more than my part, and watch the progress of the couple. As they struggled to get headed in the right direction, I would occasionally send my dog out to gently head off a straying communication. Or, suspend the action, and have a private conversation with the dog about what he sees happening in those areas of herd instinct that I can't see.

This could be really useful since, as writer Dee Tracy tells us, dogs have the right idea about how to live life. They know, for example when someone has invaded their territory, and they let others know. I'd say this is a good move, because sometimes spouses overstep their bounds and get too involved in wanting to control the other person's life.

Furthermore, Tracy says dogs know about the importance of being loyal in the face of trying times. They know when someone is having a bad day: they can be quiet, sit close, and gently nuzzle. I agree that this kind of wisdom should be shared with those couples we all know who lack the basic instinct of knowing when to talk and when to simply express their love without speaking.

Excuse me while I call the dog.

Relationship Requirements Not Complex

I see the huddled masses yearning not for freedom as much as for connectedness. Yearning is hovering like a visible aura over the people I come in contact with. We mysterious human creatures, having reached the top of the food chain, seek to be in relationships of some kind. But what does it take to make a connection? What makes a relationship a RELATIONSHIP?

Doesn't something have to actually happen in a relationship to qualify it as the genuine thing? I believe I ought to get this straight, since I talk to people who tell me about their relationships. If you're married, you must have a relationship, right? But people can be together a long time and still not have a relationship, because nothing significant seems to be happening. Maybe there have been years of being together, but still the closeness hasn't peaked. Thus, no relationship.

My guess is that both parties to these insulated arrangements are yearning to connect up with someone, but still are left feeling lonely, and feeling that something is missing. Take the recent goofy movie, *Magnolia*: Does anybody have a relationship here? In the course of one day's worth of Hollywood-contrived happenstance, we see an assortment of characters attempting to establish some real-life-type relationship. Will Tom Cruise ever have an adult relationship with his dying, on-screen, father? How can William Macy's cinematic girlfriend (who is horribly addicted) ever hope to have a relationship with him? Maybe the old man and his nurse have the best chance of anything resembling a relationship. See it for yourself or, better yet, don't see it and thereby spare yourself the reminders of the pain people go through for the sake of connecting up in a relationship.

I've got a character of my own, drawn from the archives of my old case files, which I could stack up against any of these fine *Magnolia* portrayals. This "urban hermit" started out his childhood mostly abandoned, which meant he didn't have much to measure his future relationships by. Despite this, he yearned to live a regular life for himself. I am picturing Al Pacino in the adult role, or maybe Anthony Hopkins, getting married, having children, a job, etc. Then things falling apart. He loses his family; his children never want to have any contact with him, except to steal his car. He ends up later in life with just his dog, very isolated. He used to tell me stories, on visits to my office, which revealed his yearnings to somehow relate to people around him. He would have been happy with just a simple, rudimentary connection.

I have to wonder now what would it take for my own *Magnolia* Man, and thousands like him, to have a basic, no frills relationship?

It comes down to this: I know it takes at least two people who want to share some life-experiences with each other, two individuals who want to fulfill their yearnings, where there is acceptance, and with an agreement about expectations of one another, usually called "commitment". And some degree of openness, where the inner "real" self is revealed. So, somebody, put THAT into a movie!

Sustaining Optimism

When I had my practice in Ohio, I received a grim referral. The word was that by marrying each other, this couple saved two other marriages. It was not the best of situations. The communication was so bad that when they bickered, it was considered to be progress in their interaction.

That was a while ago. Nowadays, I don't seem to see so many of these terminal situations. Why is this? Is Ohio that bad?

No, I figure it's probably because I have since learned to be more optimistic about relationship possibilities. Even the worst of couplings that I have seen often turn out to fool me, and I was wrong to have been pessimistic. It was pretty presumptuous of me to think I had the super brain to know who should get divorced or who should stay married. "Can this marriage be saved?" they often ask me. As if they couldn't trust their abilities to gage the comatose state of things between them. In those hopeless looking situations, which were played out in front of me, it was tempting for me to get caught in the pessimism of the moment and make dire predictions, to myself, if not to them. (O.K., maybe some people shouldn't stay together. Yet, everyone with that prospect deserves a realistic, not pessimistic, inward search to find an answer they can live with.)

A dark and dismal atmosphere that is hauled into my office by a despairing couple carries with it a powerful force. It is all encompassing. It sucks everybody around them into a black hole where things seem to be worse than they really are. Hopelessness becomes a shared state of consciousness.

On the other hand, optimism in a marriage is the ability to sustain a sense of hope through this current (and temporary) down period of the relationship. It is like a sustaining faith that goes into action in times of trouble. Optimism is rousing the memory of better times, and remembered confidence that the relationship was working during those times. It is the vision of the relationship working again. It is like saying that, if it could happen before, it could happen again,

If energy for renewal is missing in both parties, the only optimism may be that which is stemming from their clung-to hope that someone else will be able to see through the swirling mists of their conflict and discouragement. Someone who can see into their heart's best intentions, which have been temporarily forgotten and put aside. Surprisingly, then it doesn't take much to see at least a possibility of improvement, because even a little bit of optimism can be the spark that eventually kindles a new fire.

These days, with Ohio behind me, I think a little differently. I find myself believing there is a way to tap into that happier state of consciousness and draw on the couple's good memories. It is a place to begin, because it helps sustain the relationship through the bleaker season when things aren't going so well. With just a little pleasant recall, the relationship is morphed into something worth saving, and work on the relationship begins in earnest.

A Weird Plan for Helping Couples

Once the tourist season arrives, you never know whom you are going to run into. When the fellow customer at the car wash found out I was a marriage counselor, he had some homespun philosophy he had to share with me. He appeared to be one of those guys who seemed to have a surplus of ideas just waiting to be implemented. His weird plan was for the counselor to collect problems from one group of couples over a period of time, and then boil these down into typical problems that all marriages are subject to. Next, the therapist invites volunteer couples who have no problems to take one from the collection and wrestle with it, just for the sake of eventually building up the muscles of the marital bond.

For example, the assigned problem could be to have a couple wallpaper a bathroom together. Now I know from personal experience that such a task is truly a challenge, and is a true test of the core fiber of the marriage relationship. There is nothing like the stress of trying to hang a beautiful but flimsy curly strip of paper that doesn't want to perform according to the instructions. If they had wanted wallpaper to be hung straight, why do they give it to you in a roll? When one is frustrated, the tendency is to find someone else to blame the immediate problem on. And that someone, trying to be helpful, does not appreciate taking the blame for the wallpaper manufacturer, the builder, and their respective ancestors.

A tough assignment, so I did have some reservations about the radicalness of this scheme. Yet, I could see where this could start a whole new approach to making marriages work better. For sure, it would be a good idea for some couples to give up their perennial well-worn squabbles about things that never get resolved. You probably know couples that can get hung up on repeating some of the classic old predictable scripts. That poor couple will think they are locked into a hostile and inevitable dead-end in their total relationship. Such partners might be relieved by the symbolic letting go that would come from "turning in" their battle-worn debates to the therapist. And then, even better, they are able to "share" the problem with all those other marriages, which bestows a bit of normality into their married life.

It's about perspective. Plus, it could be a good thing for the assigned couples to get a boot camp experience that puts them in shape for the troubles that will surely befall them at some point. Sooner or later, every happy marriage will have to face some stressful event, whether it is brought on by themselves or some outside force. So why not be ready for it, prepare for the onslaught with proper emotional fortifications. A kind of marriage enrichment.

So, in the end, everybody benefits. Couples, fatigued by old-saw arguments, get a new start. Other couples get a jump-start by trying on problems they are likely to face before they have to take it too seriously. I'm starting to think this bizarre science might really work.

Relationship to the Unconscious

Normally, when I talk to somebody in my office, I look and act like a regular person. You know: respectable, good haircut, and I appear to be carrying on an intelligible conversation. However, there are times when certain situations evoke a retro-temperament, and a different professional stance seizes me. It happens whenever something tells me that the person I am talking with is leaking material from his/her unconscious into the conversation. That is when I transform myself into Sigmund Freud, better to deal with the complex situation.

Such was the case of The Man with Unsuitable Walls. Let's call him "Marshal" (like in the Roman god of war). He was an otherwise successful man who just couldn't get close in the relationships that mattered most to him. He barely saw that his anger was keeping his wife at bay. As a kid, his unconscious mind had conveniently built a wall to protect him from rejecting and emotionally absent parents. Fifty years later, the wall was still in place, long after his parents had died. So, you can see, this was one of those times when I had to take the fellow on board my psychoanalytic time capsule. He didn't think he owned an unconscious mind, (he thought he'd left it in Illinois with his first wife) but away we went. Destination: the old family-stories that would reveal where this unneeded wall had originally been constructed. I urged him on toward our objective: "Find the origin of the wall, and you'll have a broader choice about whether you still want to keep it."

Still, he thought I was digging up garbage that was irrelevant. "Just help me figure out what is going on now! Forget that other stuff" was Marshal's plea. Yet unbeknownst to him, he had a giant warehouse of information about his patterns of relationship behavior stored in his head. It contained a lot of useful files. Freud was right about the unconscious: He just couldn't pronounce the English words very well.

It's hard to explain to people like Marshal how those same emotions, which are stirred up in the marital conflict *du jour*, have been floating around for years. But they have. Every relationship we are in, beginning with our birth, carves a permanent template in this backroom of our mind. It lurks there revved up under full power, suspended in time, quietly judging all present relationships, like one of the workers in the citrus harvest who sorts out the big grapefruit from the small ones. Above all, this subliminal selection process seeks relationship familiarity. Why? I don't know. I guess because it seems safer and more comfortable to be with somebody who appears to be similar to what you were used to.

This unconscious inner guide is protective, and it won't alter its selection criteria unless it gets hauled up in front of the Improvement Committee of our conscious mind. And what is familiar is not necessarily what is useful in any present-day relationship. Maybe a certain reaction is useful for surviving the rigors of the past, but, hey, things change! The unconscious mind just hasn't kept up to date.

Be Brave in Confronting Marital Roadblocks

The great landscape artist, Joseph Turner, gave us a masterwork in which is depicted a Greek legend. In the painting, The Goddess of Discord is choosing the Apple of Contention. In fact, that is the title Turner gives it. Trouble if ever you saw it, I'd say. Here, Turner tells us, are the beginnings of the Trojan Wars. Now, I don't know much about Greek mythology, but I do know about discord and contention, especially in relationships. So, when I saw this painting, I thought this must be exactly how the Trojan Wars began: Somebody was "choosing" to start something. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Those Greeks had to get some things worked out among themselves. I don't mean war is good, especially with your mate, but I admire the person who chooses to lovingly confront what needs to be confronted. If you're unhappy with the way things are going, get it out in the open where you can see it in a fresh light!

Look at the alternative. Many couples choose to avoid the issue. Any contentious issue. Apologies to Turner, but I'd call this scenario the "Goddess of Denial choosing the Applesauce of Avoidance". (Yes, and men do it too.) Couples in collusion to evade the swirling waters think they are avoiding trouble; but, when a troublesome issue goes unspoken, there is more of a mess in the long run. The partner typically persists in thinking the problem-not-addressed will blow over, like a summer shower.

The way I see it, this is all brought about by a powerful unseen influence in this country: It's a Midwestern philosophy-gone-awry that has decreed against talking to our mate about the obvious. This regional dysfunctional philosophy has been disguised as some kind of politeness ethic. It's like a relationship situation where you pretend that nothing just happened, even though a first-magnitude abuse of human decency has been blatantly dropped on you. It is the "elephant in the living room" that no one chooses to see. Tension fills the air like pea soup, but you just bite your lip. Where is the virtue in that? Do you really want to live the unexamined life of Midwestern applesauce?

People also tell me they let these relationship-disturbing issues go by because they don't want to stir up a verbal battle (or worse). I can understand that no one wants to go to war over every slight or every minor hurt, but I am not convinced that healthy confrontation will be destructive. Not every relationship saga has to be like a classic Italian opera in which everybody makes loud lyrical protests and then all die in the end. Here's the good news: you can confront the gremlins and discover how much better everyone feels when you clear the air. You can expect a sense of pleasant relief and closeness to your mate.

You say it still looks like risky business to touch on a difficult issue? I agree; there is risk. But if you're intimidated, that is not a great way to live either. Besides, maybe you are underestimating your ability to hold up your end of such an encounter.

The Reluctant Mate

Relationships are like horses. They give a smooth ride most of the time; they even transport you through beautiful emotional landscapes. But they can also give a rough ride and, without a few lessons, the rider might fall off altogether. Like horses, relationships require good care and feeding. Neglected, they get to be old nags before their time. Marriage therapists have an understanding of the nature of the beast and, with a little cooperation from the owners, can train relationships with a patience that puts them back on the road again.

Even when the relationship is limping along, not everybody is ready to get help. For some, going to a therapist is an admission that, uh-oh, something is really wrong. These same people don't like going for a mammogram (women) or the dentist (men) because they don't want to find out that it's worse than they thought. Besides, with a relationship, no one really wants to open up their private diaries to a stranger.

Since relationship conflicts require two people, the movement toward solution will probably have two ways to go, including "go" and "don't go" to the therapist. I once had a man come into my office with his hat on backwards, as if he were already on his way out when he arrived. He came with his wife, but she had made the appointment. His role was that of the reluctant mate. Well, at least he was there! I congratulated him for that, and decided I could work with his ambivalence. Even though the wife looked like the mate who was eager to tackle the problem, I knew that behind the face of indignation lurked a little reluctance of her own. I could see that, if I could get her to talk about her mixed feelings, her husband wouldn't have to sit so tightly with his hesitancy. Then we could get on with the rest of the tuning up of the relationship.

Reluctance rises to even greater heights when one partner flat refuses to come to the therapy office. Now what can be done? Is there any hope of a better relationship when one spouse goes for help and the other stays home? It is usually better if both come in, at least for the first visit. Yet, I have often begun the treatment with the so-called ready and willing spouse.

Dr. Paul Watzlawick, a California therapist, is quite willing to treat the marriage with only one mate coming in. Yes, they do strange things in California, but Watzlawick knows that the stay at home partner is bound to be drawn into the treatment plan if he/she remains under the same roof and is within earshot of the client.

This happens because a relationship is a system with laws of interaction that is nearly as solid as the principle of physics: move this marble over here and something has to change in the whole jar of marbles. So yes, let's say there are ways to reach out and touch the reluctant partner. It is not a threat; it is just another way to work on the problem when you have a horse of a different color.

Chuck's Universe

Sometimes in my work, I feel like I'm a consultant to the Defense Department. My job: Help people feel safe to go on loving in the perilous regions of their relationships. Many of them have already learned lessons of distrust from their bad experiences with people they were once close to. At a vulnerable time in their lives, when they had no "missile defense system", they were wounded. Because of family conflict, or worse, family abuse, they became jaded, and their future relationships were messed up. Now they are afraid to trust or afraid to really love, even if they want to.

This outlook affects a lot of people. It colors their world and sets up a universe that is pessimistic, and then it starts to affect me. After I have repeatedly heard about how rough things are out there in the realm of relationships, I'm, at times, almost convinced that it is unsafe to trust, and I'd better lock things up tight. Danger. Despair!

But fortunately, I have also met up with a guy named Chuck, who has reminded me that things can be different. He didn't need my help. I needed his way of looking at things. It is refreshing, because in Chuck's universe, relationships are balanced. There is give and take. He seems to have a certain freedom to deal with the people in his life with trust. He behaves as if there is enough to go around. Enough love, enough work, enough play. When it comes to everyday contacts with his business clients, Chuck says go ahead and take the risk of erring on the side of generosity, because it will likely come back to you when you need it. Maybe you think this guy is naïve, fresh from some other world. Or hasn't been around long enough. He has. He's been around the block a few times, during which he made some observations about his experiences. And he has come back with an optimistic outlook on things.

See, if he doesn't get back from the person he gave to, he has this fantastic belief that the love will travel around within the universe from person to person, like a highly contagious and benevolent microorganism. And then some other person will be infected with the urge to be kind or generous to him. Without being a philosopher, he has built himself a world in which people get transformed from being loved and accepted.

It looks to me like he gets most of what he needs from the people of his universe, whether or not they are always considerate of him. If they are not, he recites Premise Number One: "Live and let-live". Which means don't bother trying to change them.

His second premise, "Everybody has something to offer" keeps him from worrying too much because he has this way of seeing potential in others, which creates an atmosphere of acceptance. Instead of judging others, he practices tolerance. He welcomes people into his universe who might not otherwise qualify as good guys.

If you want to move over to his universe, let me know. I'm sure there is room for you.

Part Two

Essays In Support of Children

The Origin of Fairy Godmothers

I've wondered what it would be like to be a legendary therapist, and be consulted by famous people, like, say, Cinderella. Counseling Cinderella would really be something! I'd probably have to help her deal with her prince fantasies and hear her frustration with all the household chores assigned to her by her step-mother. If she's only 16, I would bring in the rest of the family: the stepsisters, the allegedly wicked stepmother, and the somewhat nebulous father. (Is he dead, or just "not there"?) I'd want to get them all together to talk about what is going on in this family.

Is Cinderella being scapegoated here? Is she really as bad off in her new family as she says? Why all these rescue wishes? Maybe she has some unresolved grief about her departed birth mother. It would be a given that childhood relationships are often filled with frustrations and a certain emptiness. Too many hassles in the adult world. And because it hurts when parents leave, physically or emotionally. (New research tells us that divorce is worse for kids than we originally thought.) Cinderella wouldn't be alone among tragic tales.

But when it came to the visit from the fairy godmother, I would treat this very compassionately. It's because I happen to believe that fairy godmothers are real, and probably fairy godfathers too. I didn't used to be a believer, but, listening to many patients telling me about their childhood experiences, I have a different perspective. Whether people have been raised in a stepfamily or not, I've noticed that childhood experiences are filled with creative attempts by kids to fill in the gaps of their family life. Kids need parents, and if they don't have their own, they suffer. But they can hang on and survive emotionally if given just a little support from somebody in the adult world. Stepparents, grandparents, and other surrogates, like teachers and coaches, can do a grand and loving thing. It builds some foundation for future relationships, even if it is still a little shaky. Such was the case of a modern-day grown up Cinderella who came to my office.

As she slipped her shoe on and off there on the chair across from me, she went on about not being able to find the right man. But this wasn't the whole story. As I let her talk, she spun out a longer tale that demonstrated to me why she needed a fairy godmother in her life: She never quite got over why her birth-mother didn't stay with her as a kid. Never mind that it was due to the mother's untimely death. Young Cindy couldn't help the feeling she'd been abandoned. Just let her present, less than princely, boyfriend talk about the possibility that he might not be ready for this relationship (abandonment!), and Cindy's smoke alarm goes off. As a child, like all children, she was devastated by her parent's death. I was convinced she'd come to therapy looking for her fairy godmother.

Cindy, at 35, was still hurting. It was also hurting her relationships in the present. Fortunately for Cinderella, good mothering had returned to her in the form of the fairy godmother. In the case of the Cindy in my office, we searched the scrapbook of her mind to discover good and loving mothering in a neighbor. Cindy was greatly in need, given her sad home situation, and was on the lookout for someone who might be genuinely kind and loving toward her. When the neighbor offered to help Cindy pick blackberries, these summer excursions became a wonderful and fulfilling time. They were Cindy's wishes

and earnest fantasies come true. That's what fairy godmothers do: They make a child's yearnings into realities, if only briefly and on a small scale. It was fortunate in the development of Cindy's early years that she was able to absorb this neighbor's unconditional love and feel affirmed. The fairy godmother/neighbor was a remembered resource that helped her heal. I have to say that this focus of therapy even made her boyfriend look a little more trustworthy.

Home as a Sanctuary

As a long-time advocate for the family, I have been thinking of going back in history and recalling the Continental Congress so that we can draw up a Family Bill of Rights. I don't know if Ben Franklin, John Witherspoon, and all those guys would be interested, but what I'm campaigning for is of constitutional proportions. It's because there are some "inalienable" rights that every family and every family member deserves. Sometimes I think that the push for economic security and material gain has left the American family short on emotional and spiritual security. Number One on the Family Bill of Rights would be the right to a sense of home as sanctuary. From where I sit, I see a great need for "domestic tranquility". What I mean is that moms, dads, and kids all need a place where they can throw off pretense, relax, and be themselves.

When I say freedom to retreat and let down your guard, I am reaching beyond women going without make-up and men flatulating at will. I'm talking about working mothers being able to have some peaceful time and space to themselves, a place for a little self-care and meditation. I'm talking about fathers thinking of their home as a true retreat, with a short honey-do list and an undisturbed corner off somewhere that can be messy. I'm talking about kids feeling safe from the fear of being hurt or intimidated.

A house is not a home if it is not a safe, trusting place. I don't have to tell you that good relationships thrive in an atmosphere of safety and security. God knows there is enough stress out there in the world of work and school to fray any person, young or old, and break down their ability to maintain their sanity. It is equally as important that other family members uphold these rights and freedoms as fundamental.

I know you're going to show this to your mate and say, "See, I told you so!" But when you do, don't forget to throw in some stuff about George Washington and those heroic characters who knew that with the new freedom comes responsibility. So a real home takes some cooperation and mutual respect for everyone's need. It takes an added dimension of sacred regard for the basic value of domestication. Even in the animal kingdom they know enough not to foul their own nest.

How do you do all this? Look for a clue in the religious holidays coming up. Our ancestors made their farmhouses and tenements into homes because they kept hold of their family rituals and traditions, no matter what. Poverty, illness, and death were constant threats to their emotional security. But, from what I've learned about American history, strength and trust came from celebrating the religious holidays and spiritual traditions that made everybody in the family feel safe and whole. Security obviously meant something more than indoor plumbing, which they didn't have any way. Have we forgotten the value of a Sabbath rest? Passover and Easter are appropriate times to keep in touch with the spiritual resources that give warmth to the house like coals in the hearth.

The Family Meal is Not Just for Eating

Recent research in the field of substance abuse says that attentive fathers may be a big factor in whether their kids use drugs or not. It is the quality of the father/teen relationship that is important. The researchers say improvement is a pretty simple thing, something as simple as eating dinner together. It seems pretty basic, since everybody has to eat. I mean, that's boiling it down to what fathers in most any cultural setting should be able to handle: Sit down. Eat. Talk. You don't even have to do all three simultaneously.

I am picturing some anthropologist in pith helmet stumbling upon a remote jungle village far up the Amazon. In this scene, the village gathers for a common meal. And then the host father gestures to the honored guest, grunts, and communicates three one-syllable words: "Sit. Eat. Talk." And everyone does, as they have for thousands of years. It is a grand occasion. Sitting, eating, talking. Maybe someone should warn these primitive villagers that as soon as they get television, supermarkets, and a paved road to the city, things would be harder. I could predict that one of the brave young boys in that village will break the mold and go to school one day and come back "civilized". Then the family will sit for a meal, only to hear the son utter the phrase he has learned from his new friends: "This meal sucks!" I can tell you that this will be the symbolic beginning of trouble in that village. The fathers will start drinking distilled potato water and coming home late for dinner. The witch doctors will become confounded by all the new problems.

So much for the uncertain future of the aborigines! Where did the American family get off track, I wonder? Somewhere along the line in our "progress" we began to think weird science. "Meals are for eating", said the Grocery Grinch, and so we turned on the television and started forgetting about real table meals and leisurely conversation. Not just fathers. We all got too busy. It seems to me that too many families have pushed the mealtime aside in favor of fast food and other family-member activities, as if physical nourishment were all that was important. By fracturing the family mealtime, we have neglected a basic resource. It is like poisoning your own well or setting fire to the house. We produced a vendorized barren dormitory, but not a home.

Amid all this frantic pace and skewed priorities, the ritual of the family meal should be held sacred; that is, don't mess with it. We all have something to learn from the Jewish tradition of the Sabbath meal, which is absented by any family member at risk of becoming a *nebech*. If you don't attend, it's like you are not part of the family. Besides, during the Jewish holidays, who would want to miss these special meals? Many ethnic groups know that feasting is not just for food. It is a time to restore the soul of the family.

Look into my eyes . . . You are getting weary . . . Sit. Eat. Talk.

Kids Can't Handle Parents' Stress

On a recent trip to the beach, I saw a young boy wearing a Gatormania tee shirt. He must have been about eleven years old, too young to realize the significance of what was emblazoned across the back of the shirt. "Your parents told you wrong. Winning is every-thing". I took some offense to this, not just because I happen to be a Seminoles fan, but because I didn't like the way the slogan had reached commercial proportions. Bad enough that we therapists have to help keep a balance in kids' lives with reminders about kid-stress, now we have a whole academic institution seeming to side with competitiveness. In my opinion, children are pushed too much into competition, and show it in their lives. Pediatricians report greater incidence of stress illnesses, including stomach aches, headaches, and allergic reactions. Where there is pressure to achieve, there is a high-strung child.

It's not just in premature competitive sports. It's in academics as well. David Elkind wrote about *The Hurried Child* a few years ago. He put a special emphasis on how our children are growing up too fast too soon, and he makes a case for giving time for the developmental stages. Every parent thinks their child is above average, which doesn't help, but what's more, parents are getting some kind of relief for themselves by pushing competition. I don't mean just the parents who have arguments at Little League. Parents are unconsciously passing on stress to their kids when they fail to work out their own problems. Pick your theory: Parents who don't deal appropriately with their own problems are more anxious and therefore more demanding. Parents under stress focus too much on themselves and fail to see what kids really need. Or this one: Parents who are stressed and anxious are more affected by low self-esteem, and (by the convoluted magic of the mind) want more perfection from those around them, their kids being the most vulnerable. In any case the kids get victimized. If a kid is pushed to perform, whatever stage of emotional development that he/she is going through is going to get short-circuited. If the child is not at the stage where the skills and abilities are present to perform as expected, that child will still think he/she should. Kids are vulnerable because they have a very strong need to please mom or dad. So they will accept the pressure and try, but at great emotional cost. That's what I call "kid-stress".

Remember poor Jon Binet. She is an example of a little girl pushed into the beauty queen role long before she had even had a chance to enjoy the make-believe world that children need to go through. While every kid needs some guidance and structure, there is also the child's own inner time clock which, when left unhurried, allows a natural unfolding of the skills and abilities, as the brain and emotions can accommodate them. Each stage builds upon the one previous, so that by the time childhood is over, all the building blocks are in place for the child to be able to function more on his/her own, with his/her own values, and to be able to make independent decisions. Jon Binet was a junior adult before her time.

That may be an extreme example. Yet I can't help feeling that, even without a sad death in the picture, there is a lesson there for all parents. It's about giving the best gift you can give to your child: An emotionally healthy YOU. Like any adult in today's society, parents' lives are subject to change, a lot of it beyond anybody's control. Change naturally brings stress. There is much stress to be managed, even before we start talking about separation, divorce and step parenting. There is also a greater threat of crimes against the person and the possibility of violence at the mall. It certainly makes the job of

parenting harder, since now it takes more stress and strain to make the family a safe environment. But, it can be done. It means dealing appropriately with the difficult emotions that confront us. The key is a kind of self-regard that enables parents to begin parenting even before the child is around: Take care of the grown-up emotions and stresses about married life and relationships, including one's own parents, ex-spouses, and, if there is a divorce, getting those emotions resolved. When all those emotions are neglected and left unresolved, they spread through the family like a virus. And kids will be most affected, because they have the weakest defense system.

So I think I'll market a kids' tee shirt of my own design. It will say, "Do not push-I'm growing as fast as I can."

Kids Need Absent Dad's Time

Here's a question for you: How are non-custodial fathers like psychotherapists? Answer: Both have to be conscious about doing their part to provide meaningful time in other people's lives. Relationships that get relegated to a business responsibility fail to get the job done.

Meaningful Time is not like other kinds of time. Meaningful Time is what you feel when you're having fun, or when you are engaged in personally important activity.

A therapist usually does his/her work in Meaningful Time. The rush and crush of the outside world gets temporarily suspended, while things are looked into and rethought. In the time warp of personal dialogue about feelings and worrisome distortions, the patient gains new insight.

But, being part of the managed health care industry, this therapist is swept up in a system that, in itself, is not very therapeutic. It seems, at the corporate level, to be bent on stretching everybody's health-insurance dollar. Efficiency is the by-word that is passed down the line from the president of the company to the watch birds of the accounting office, and then through all those care-managers, finally to me, the "health-care provider". But, if I hand on this spirit of cost-saving expediency in the same dosage that it was handed to me, no emotionally troubled person gets any help. They just get the end product of a series of low bids. While I have to operate my practice in a business-like manner, all of my training says that my role is to provide a therapeutic atmosphere in which people can work out emotional problems. The famous fifty-minute hour has to happen in Meaningful Time.

The time challenge is the same for dads. Many fathers, who don't live with their biological children, have forgotten that they have an important role to play in the lives of their children, especially their sons. Maintaining a relationship with the kids can be tricky. They, too, can get caught in the official system of the courts and divorce agreements. The family court judge sits at the top of this pyramid, whose justice is often tough tamales for dads. The system has rightly started a no-nonsense management of child-care payments, but this only insures that the non-custodial dad meets his financial responsibility. It all has a tendency to cause Dad amnesia about putting in some Meaningful Time with his children. The "ex-files" are filled with stories you don't want to hear, about minimal fathers who have made only a biological, and sometimes a financial contribution, and are now no longer in the picture. Just because he is a kid, the son really has a need to have contact with his father. Dad may be trying to deal with his own loss, and trying to forget he ever had another life, while starting a new life somewhere else. But, I can tell you this: his son, about the time he is entering adolescence, needs to have a little of his father's time, so he can get to know what it's like to be a man. Amazingly, the kid will be forgiving of past hurts just for the grand experience of basic affirmation.

Children's Day

My growing-up world as a kid was small and round. I was at the mercy of the calendar. Besides just enduring all those times when I was waiting for school vacations and Christmas to roll around, I knew there would be a few breaks in the annual cycle. I knew there would be Mother's Day and Father's Day, but what I thought was really neat was Children's Day. It was special because Bobby Corson and I sat in the front row at church, with a bunch of other kids, an assortment of the gangly and the prissified. The minister pointed us out as America's future, but I was mostly fixated on the present, including the benefits of Children's Day. For all I knew, it was a national holiday and required an extra Monday off, over some weekend. Maybe, I thought, the schools, the banks, and post-offices would be closed in honor of children! Well, if they weren't, they should have been! I just knew that kids are important. They deserve grown-ups' high regard and respect!

That's why when, recently, I read about the guy who, twenty years ago, took his two little girls, moved away, and changed everybody's name, I was mad. Not so much about whether he had to protect them, like the FBI, from the mother, but about his lack of understanding of the way kids' minds and souls work. He lied to them (is there ever any "good" reason for such a gigantic deception?), and they believed him. They thought their mother was dead! Those little girls trusted him because he had the power of the parent, who, in the kid's mind, is all wise, all knowing, and always right. Kids are so impressionable that parents' words, positive or negative, are firmly planted in their little brains, like the most effective hypnosis ever performed. If the parent says offhandedly, "You'll never amount to anything", the kid dutifully grows up to fulfill the prediction, without realizing the source of his/her predicament.

My advice to parents is to open their own eyes to this "age of vulnerability", and be very self-conscious about the seeds they are planting in their day-to day practices of child rearing. Ignorance about this vital wisdom is why children have trouble later on, including blaming themselves for parents' problems. It's hard for a kid to go against the parents' utterances about "the way things are". Some children, by the time they are teenagers, can overcome a lot of the obstacles from one or two generations back, but what they received when they were vulnerable is nearly indelible, like a tattooed message on the underside of their eyelids.

I recommend earlier preventive measures. It is better that parents read the warning label that comes with every kid: "Caution, this child has a soul. This child will believe everything you tell him/her. This child will trust you even when you are wrong, criminal, or off the wall. This child looks up to you as a model of the perfect parent." Parents who understand vulnerability will have the sensitivity to realize their own powerful and influential status in their child's fragile world.

Great Gifts

Christmas giving to children has gotten out of hand. It gets to be a gluttonous splurge measured in the number or volume of gifts. No matter how many gifts of things that kids get for Christmas, they are never basically satisfied, because it's not what they really want. Parents who think they are providing happiness with the latest Nintendo are doing more than they realize. They are sending a message saying that the way to be happy is to gain another toy, so, when this gift-besieged child grows up, his notion of happiness retains this external quality, evasive, and unfulfilling.

As I see it, we are producing an Acquisitive Generation, persons who are grasping for happiness in the material things they can gather around them? If it is a learned trait, parents teach it, even without knowing they are teaching it, every time they attempt to express their love by giving their child another gift of a thing.

What kids need most of all from their parents is some TIME with them. Parents get all hung up on wanting to be sure their kids know they love them in some tangible way. This loving motivation is good, but the usual materialistic expression is not so good. Instead of using material gifts to deal with the sense of something missing, I have a much more efficient suggestion: Spend some time!!

Time is a thousand times more valuable than parents think. A child needs a regular, and should I say, sacred time he or she can count on from each parent every week. It is sacred because it is kept as a priority. It doesn't have to be a long time. It could be 20 or 30 minutes. One-on-one. Some activity of the child's choosing, in which the parent is present, emotionally available, and not having to exert discipline. Active listening comes in handy here. The time together could be spent playing a game, or reading a book. The online "Divorce Wizard" says that caring for pets or starting collections are great ways to spend time with your child. Don't worry, the kid will think of something, once the parent introduces the idea. In a kid's mind, the fact that somebody wants to spend time with him/her equals LOVE.

I wish there would spring up merchants of intangible gifts, like a special store that brokers time for children. It works like this: Parents go into the store and sign a binding contract for a certain amount of time that they are willing to spend weekly with their kids for the next twelve months. The clerk enters it into the computer with the address or email of the parents. The store sends out regular reminders. The parents have to report back on their successful follow through, or pay a penalty. The penalty would not be money (the wrong message) but a penalty of time. The time police would go and jerk the father out of the bar or off the golf course. Stressed-out working mothers would also need to have an attitude adjustment about budgeting time. Time is a gift to be given. Your kids will love you for it!

Teenagers, What Helps?

The American Medical Association has concluded from a recent study of 12,000 teenagers that those kids who are connected to their families and schools are healthier, both physically and mentally, and safer than their counterparts who are unconnected. This sounds like a good idea, but when I first read the journal article, I was fuzzy about how this could help kids and their parents, let alone family counselors. I wouldn't want parents to use this new research as a weapon to hang on to their kids too long. I thought all along that everybody was supposed to be helping them get unconnected. Most therapists I know see themselves as midwives when it comes to treating adolescent conflicts in families. There comes along a family with the emerging young person about to pop out into the adult world, but everybody is stuck in the birthing process. Some people are pulling, some are pushing, and the teenager is there, looking oxygen-starved, suffering from prolonged labor and delivery.

If we took teenagers seriously, we would realize the trauma that they are forced to cope with. It is the trauma of near-death, as they must chart a treacherous course between death by dependence and death by over-exposure to responsibility. I refer here to the unseen forces lurking beneath the surface of family conflict. Here, among the cobwebby places that therapists like to venture into, everybody is afraid of growing up. Teenagers are so locked on their peers that they are scared to think for themselves. Parents are so afraid their kid will make the wrong decision about drugs or sex or alcohol that they insist on making everything look as if it were a black-and-white issue. Adolescents need to learn how to make decisions, not be told what the decisions should be, because most of life's important decisions are not clear-cut situations.

Since there is so much fear around this critical time in the life of the family, what is needed is more respect. Not the kind of respect that is demanded of the teenager, and the kind that parents send their kids off to military school to learn. It's the respect that gets modeled by parents first showing respect for the fearful struggle that their young person is going through. Respect means letting him or her see how some of their own decisions as grownups are complex and need to be wrestled with in earnest. This modeling process by parents is as powerful as a laser beam because it etches a lasting message on the adolescent's unconscious, and you won't even know it has been effective until years later. In this way it's a secret weapon that parents have, because it does the job with little fanfare. At the time, the teenagers are more influenced by admired adults than they can admit.

It turns out that the journal article had a few useful things to say, after you get past the proof of scholarliness. Their study looked at what would diminish the risky behaviors that adolescents often get themselves into, like drugs, violence, and sex. What they found was that when middle school and high school kids perceived they were in a family that cared about them, they were more protected, especially against emotional distress. Parents being at home at key times (like meals and bedtime) were a major factor in preventing abuse of marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco. Parental restriction on access to these substances was seen by the kids themselves to be helpful.

Obviously, if parents show caring and respect, they are going to also want to spend time with their teen. This, in simpler terms, is your basic love, and it is what these medical scholars really mean when they say “connected”. To cast this term in its worst light, that hints at dependence, is a no-no word, since no self-respecting teenager would want to acknowledge they are dependent on their parents. Even calling it “love” or “warmth” gets a little gushy, but as long as you don’t force them to admit to desiring such things, you can probably get away with putting it into action. The academics will go on reporting it as “connectedness”. That’s O.K. in my book as long as everybody knows that a connected family has respect for the growing independence of the young person. Nobody should have to leave home without it.

Teen-age Alcohol Abuse

The natural state of being an adolescent is the turbulent waters in between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents are thrust from the safe shore of childhood, but have not yet arrived on the other shore of the new world of being an adult. Their boat must navigate a treacherous and a not well-marked course, made hazardous by hormone storms above and family conflicts beneath the surface of their adventure-filled sea journey.

As if it weren't tough enough for them, we adults don't always provide very good beacons for guiding teenagers across the waters. It's not big news to report that they are in trouble. Just look at the drug and alcohol problems in Southwest Florida and the country. The statistics are like something out of Ripley's "Believe it or Not", but they are hard data from the recent school year's Pride survey of high school students in twenty-eight states, including Florida.

60% of high schoolers use beer. 38% more students report using beer to get "very high", i.e., drunk than ten years ago. Doesn't this add up?

Hard liquor showed the strongest increase in usage (along with cigarettes) of any drug category.

There are 6,000 new alcohol users (mostly teens) in this country every day! The alcohol industry will be happy to hear that. Peak age of initiation is now grade six.

Eight teens die each day in the United States in alcohol-related crashes. The greatest cause of death among youths 16-20 is alcohol-related traffic accidents. Alcohol is implicated in 46% of teen suicides.

Ironically, most parents know more about alcohol use and abuse than other drugs, because it is their chemical of choice. Do they therefore know more about how to talk to their children about drinking behavior?

Words, for the most part, don't do the job. The research shows that whether parents warn their kids about the dangers of alcohol "often" or "a lot", one-half of the kids in grades 6-12 still are using alcohol. (Hopefully, the one-half who aren't using are getting the message, somehow).

The best tool that parents have in the war on alcohol abuse among teenagers is their own example. It is the example of their parental relationship. It's true: Actions speak louder than words. For five years I was involved in Drug Free Lee County, and could never see the logic of excluding alcohol from the list of drugs to be avoided entirely. I don't know if we ever made any difference in the actual drug use in this county, because I doubt that teenagers get the subtle difference between use and abuse, or between moderate use of alcohol (the policy of most well-meaning adults) and total abstinence from other drugs. Parents say, "You can't go to that party if there's going to be alcohol". The kids respond, "You have a cocktail and it's not hurting you." Then what? My point is that no matter what is preached, the kids are

going to take their cue from their parent's behavior. Consider the "Drug-free Homeplace".

The training kids get in their own home is more powerful than any formal educational effort, and, in the long view, more powerful than peer pressure. Family life and the behavior of the grown-ups is a model that will inevitably be followed. The modeled relationship creates, over time, little persons who have it stamped forever on their brain, however often they rebel. The imprint is a set of mentally coded instructions unconsciously followed. In the Olympic National Park, I watched the salmon swim up the cascades of the rushing river. The instinct they had picked up from their parents before them, led them to struggle with great tiring leaps against the logic of the river currents. It was an amazing thing to see. Human parents are surprised that, without ever having told them to do so, their children follow in their footsteps. I tell you, it's scary how our children find out about, and repeat behaviors we never told them about. What we do as adults, and as parents, will get imitated in their lives, sometimes, I think, blindly.

So, from the time your kids are one year old until they are out of high school, maybe the best and most influential example would be to have a drug-free homeplace, including alcohol. Do we mean business or not? Nothing else has made much of a dent in the rate of teenage alcohol use/abuse. (See the movie, *Traffic*) Why not try something radical?

Teens' Feelings Need Listeners

Someone has put together a common theme in many of the school shootings of the past two years. It is that the adolescents involved had recently experienced a “failed romance, among other problems”. What this means to me is that the adults, who are trying to make some sense out of these senseless acts, are not paying enough attention to the feelings of young people. I mean paying attention to the fact that they have feelings that obviously affect them in powerful ways. Whether it is the deep sense of rejection that comes from lost love, or the anger and rage that rise up out of that rejection, these feelings are being expressed in increasingly violent actions that have already gone beyond words. I mean also paying attention to providing an atmosphere of listening. If the words that would name these feelings could be spoken within the dark forest of adolescence, will there be someone who cares?

Silence is not an option. It is a sure-fire formula that if feelings do not get talked out, they soon become acted out. It is as if feelings generate a dynamic force, like a charged steam chamber that seeks an outlet. The feelings are in there. They want to get out. Either they come out in words, or they come hissing out in behavior that encrypts the feelings and makes them unrecognizable to almost everyone around them. All anybody sees is troubled behavior.

First, there has to be some recognition that these creatures of hormonal storms actually have feelings. And that they experience some of the rough, more hurtful feelings in the world of young relationships, where emotional fortunes are won and lost on a regular basis. In a recent Public Agenda Poll, most adults report a pretty negative opinion of teens. Are you surprised? I figure that view must be based on what they see of behavior: “lazy, disrespectful, or spoiled”. 71% of the adults who had children of their own expressed this pessimism. Why are they seeing only the surface behavior? Where is some empathy for the feelings that surely lie behind the behavior?

I implore parents and other adults to learn to read the signals. Just assume that adolescents, embarking on the journey into the adult world, are puzzled about many different feelings surrounding relationships. It's not that adults have made the complexities of relationships any more understandable. At least they should know that there are plenty of feelings involved. Maybe you have to be old enough to be tough, so that you let yourself actually feel the suffering of relationship hurts. By then you have been around and listened to the songmeisters who keep trying to put notions of lost love into words for us all to resonate with. But before you've sung these blue notes over a hundred times, if you're a teenager, you're going to need a little help. Step one: There are feelings that punctuate the turn of events in the most puppy of loves. Step two: These feelings have names and can be uttered without fear of self-annihilation. It's a great way to let off steam.

If only there were someone to listen.

When Idols Fall

Anyone who keeps up with the media would have to admit that 1998 was not a good year for idolizing. As for me, it especially didn't seem fair that both Roy Rogers and Gene Autry would die in the same year. They were my childhood idols. Although I had, for many years, consciously let them ride on into the past, when they died there was a twinge in some part of my brain warning me that something meaningful had been lost. It was more than just giving up those old Saturday movie rituals at the Bijou Theater. Those heroes, who kept my ordinary world of childhood propped up, weren't going to survive another simple plot. This time they were really gone. And, throughout the year, we learned that other idols fell off their pedestals, and, yes, we were affected by it.

I guess I thought Roy and Gene would never die. I had invested them with qualities they could never live up to. They were the good guys, able to overcome the bad guys. It didn't matter if they had feet of clay, I didn't know about it. Cowboy paparazzi in those days were sparing us the gory details of what was really inside those white hats. It all goes to show that we need reliable idols and heroes.

It is an odd sort of relationship to look up to someone that you really don't know. It starts when young kids, who are trying to sail the rough waters of adolescence, create idols. Perhaps it is at that particular developmental stage most of all when we human beings, consciously or unconsciously, have trouble with ambiguities. It is hard, at that stage in life, to figure out how someone can be both good and bad at the same time. Values are in flux, life is in transition, and, besides, we hardly know who we are. So we pick someone outside ourselves, and temporarily invest him or her with perfection. Nowadays, weird musicians and overpaid sports figures get put in that idol role for teenagers. It's a wonder any adolescent is valuing an education, a drug-free existence, or monogamy, given the available selection of public heroes to choose from.

So maybe kids have to copy somebody. It will likely be their parents, but that won't show until much later. Only after they have tried on a variety of other contrasting examples of how to be human, like looking for the right suit of clothes, will they find the right model.

I wish we had some better prototypes to offer. Maybe Roy and Gene can't be resurrected, but how are adolescents ever going to evolve their own inner guides if they don't have some (temporary) external guides to hold on to? I hope that before this new year is out and the millennium comes, there will emerge some reasonably decent heroes who can keep it together long enough to provide the kind of idol that a teenager needs. Maybe it will have to be Star Trek types with strange faces and good hearts. At least fictional characters are not so vulnerable to real human tragedies.

The Drummer Boys

When the town fathers decided to replace the ceiling in the old town hall, they discovered there were actually two ceilings in that ancient building. At some time in its 150-year-old history, some administration had thought to alter the original architect's idea of what a town hall should look like. But they had left the original ceiling intact, and in between the two levels was a kind of hidden compartment that no one knew about or had disturbed for over a century. When the carpenters got to checking things out, they found that someone had stored a bunch of old newspapers in the crawl space. The papers were actually in pretty good shape, many of them dating back to Civil War days, and made for some interesting reading. And there was one Civil War story from those papers that got a lot of attention because it was actually very touching.

The current newspaper got hold of it and published it in their Sunday Supplement. It was the story of two young boys who volunteered to join the army as drummer boys, only one of them was a Yankee soldier, and the other, being from the South, became a Johnnie Reb. I have to tell you that during the Civil war, many of the people living in the northern states had relatives living in the South, so that when young men (whose average age was about 17) were called into battle, they never knew whom they might be shooting at on the battlefield. It was a sad situation, but these two drummer boys were too young to actually carry a rifle. Instead they were assigned to beat the drums for the gun soldiers during a march across country or into battle. Civil War battles, with thousands of troops on both sides, were often fought during a period of several days, with a very curious sort of time-out period when night fell. When the sun went down, they just stopped the battle, declaring a truce for the time being. This nighttime experience was so unique that two sets of troops, perhaps separated by a river, would be within talking distance of each other at nightfall. In the stillness, before a cigarette was smoked and exhausted sleep overcame the young soldiers, the two enemies actually had conversation across the river.

No one would have known which were the gun soldiers and which were the drummer boys, except maybe the drummer boys were so young that their voices had not yet reached their full masculine sound. Nevertheless, they joined in shouts of "Where you from?" "You got any pretty sisters?" "How'd your farm do last year, before all this mess?"

Strangely, there were few hostile remarks—perhaps they were too tired or scared to be mad by this point. Then, one quiet comment from the other side of the river floated over, carried by the mist or smoke from the tiny campfire. "This sure aint our war—we didn't choose it." Another voice chimed in from somewhere: "It's the GENERALS' war—they's the ones that got a bone to pick. No siree, it sure aint our war—we just got called up to go to the front—we gotta be here."

If you'd been there, you'd have sworn that there were these brief moments of glorious unity that lifted right up over the river like the smoke from the two opposing campfires, joining up somewhere above the river, as if it had come from one single solitary chimney. Think of it, southern smoke actually mingling with the northern smoke. Only it was just one smoke, combining everything there was, all the day's gun

smoke, cigarette smoke, and campfire smoke into one. Don't get me wrong, these boys knew that when the sun came up, they'd have to go back into fightin' mode and think again about who was the enemy. They'd be on opposite sides again.

Now, in particular, maybe these two drummer boys (who were a lot alike, except one was in blue uniform and the other was in gray) were just plain scared when they each had to get their drum and their drum-sticks and go up near the front lines where people were actually gettin' killed, right in front their eyes. Oh, they did their job all right, but being as young as they were, they for sure didn't like their job very much at all. Still, you have to wonder what effect all that nighttime shoutin' across the river had on these boys. And, what if they were cousins? What if.....? But I don't want to get into that, because it's really too sad to think about. All I can figure is, on that one particular morning, when the battle got goin' again, they could take a little courage from the fact that, as soon as the sun went down on another day's fighting, nighttime would come, and they just might be within shouting distance of each other again.

**Author's Note: I originally wrote this for two children who were having difficulties adjusting to their parents' war-like divorce. I used it as part of the therapy. This and the following story (whose childhood worry theme is evident) are demonstrations of how metaphor can be used to communicate with the unconscious mind of young people. They are both suitable for reading aloud to children.*

Edward the Bear

(The Bear who Forgot Something Quite Important)

At the new stuffed bear factory, owned by the Great Mr. Webmaster, they made bears that were special and nearly human. What made them special was that once they were delivered to their new owners, they were able to get up from the shelf where they were kept and go to the woods at night to play. Now I have to tell you something that was told to me: It is that Edward the Electric Bear was one of those special bears. Except that at the factory something went a little bit wrong when they put Edward together, (which gave him a good battery, but a slightly bad memory right from the very start of his young career). This memory problem really didn't give him too much trouble, for the most part. He usually remembered that he had to return to his owner's bedroom by dawn on any one of the nights when he came to life and went out for an adventure in the woods. But what he did forget was the REASON that he was supposed to be back before dawn. The real reason was so his owner wouldn't discover the secret about his special qualities.

But he didn't have it quite right. He mistakenly thought it was because his battery would run down. Silly thought!! Whenever his owner propped him up on the shelf near his toothbrush, when you would think that his head would be clear, Edward looked in the mirror at himself and kept trying to remember what it was he was supposed to remember. But try as he might, he couldn't. Oh there were times when he got a glimmering of how he should be careful not to give away the secret of his specialness. But for the most part he just plain forgot that he had the kind of battery that keeps going and going (in fact, I was told, it was a permanent battery that would never run down).

So every night, as soon as his owner was asleep, Edward got up from the shelf, crept out the window, and went to play in the woods. On several occasions, he almost forgot what time it was and how close it was to sunrise (which was, incidentally, the time that his owner woke up), and he had to hurry home by the shortest route possible. When he got back he put his finger in the electric toothbrush holder to charge his battery. But of course you and I both know that he really didn't have to do that.

One night when he went out to the woods, it was very foggy and he unfortunately got lost after his night of play. I don't have to tell you that he was greatly troubled by this, since he thought this time his battery would surely run down. Well, if someone could have just reminded him of what he had forgotten, or if he could have reminded himself. But alas, this didn't happen, as we would have wished it to happen.

What did happen, though, was very fortunate for Edward, indeed. For who should be out on this foggy night but the Webmaster who was searching for stray cats and dogs. The Webmaster, as everyone in the forest knew, was a wizard of electric things, able to fix anything from toasters to computers. Mr. Webmaster happened upon Edward, who by now was huddled next to a large stump, softly sobbing to himself.

“What can I do for you?” he asked Edward. Between sobs, Edward said, “I am Edward, the Electric

Bear, but I am afraid my battery will run down if I do not get back to my owners house by sunrise. Please, Mr. Webmaster, can you help me?"

Now, of course, the Great Webmaster already knew that Edward must be suffering from a memory problem rather than a battery problem, so he knew just what to do. With great skill and a wise understanding of the way electric bears are made, Mr. Webmaster reached carefully into the small computer just inside Edward's back panel to see what needed fixing. And, although Mr. Webmaster made a few little strange noises to himself as he went about making small adjustments here and there, he soon fixed the memory chip which had been causing Edward to be just a little mixed up. Just as soon as Mr. Webmaster replaced the back panel, Edward got a silly grin across his face, for he knew what it was he needed to do and why. Just as it was near the time for a beautiful sunrise, the fog lifted, and having thanked Mr. Webmaster for his masterful repairs, Edward quite easily found his way back to the house of his owner and promptly climbed through the window. Soon he was back on the shelf, and no one in that house ever knew the close call that Edward had experienced.

On future nights, Edward could go out to the woods to play without a single worry about his battery. Of course, he always returned home on time out of politeness and because of his regard for the secret he must keep. But now he knew that even if he were just a little late probably no one would notice, and best of all he would always have enough battery power. After awhile, I am told, he thought it had always been that way.

Part Three

Couples in the Troubled Times

Dancing Through Life–Married

There is a lot that I, as a Marriage and Family Therapist, can't do for the couples that come to see me, but because of my training, there is a lot that I know how to do and just when to do it. And, now that Managed Health Care has become a major player in the treatment scene, there are constraints on how long I have to do what I'm going to do. But the reason I can't do everything that could be helpful is because some therapeutic programs lie outside my realm of expertise. I have recently discovered that dancing together can be a great way to improve a marriage. Dance Therapy as a popular healing art of the '70's was mostly an individual experience. It was done in groups, and sometimes with partners, but it was not designed for couples in a relationship.

What I have in mind is regular dancing. No cost-conscious treatment plans, no new-age gurus. Just good old fashioned dancing. Before there were marriage counselors, there was dancing. I suspect that partners in a long-term relationship knew, down in their dancing shoes, that dancing was good for the relationship. That's why it has survived as a worldwide activity in many forms. Sure, it's been used for meeting people, romancing, and maybe even for sexual harassment, but, in the larger view of things, it is about couples and working out a relationship. The reason that adolescents like dancing (once they actually begin dancing with another person) is because it's a way of practicing up for closeness before they actually get to adult-level relationships. I don't think physical closeness is the only thing they are trying, in this non-verbal way, to figure out. They need to rehearse for the life-long emotional partnership they aspire to. So dance they do.

In fact, my parents met and courted at the old Grange Hall. In their years, dancing was the major social activity, and every rural community made a place for weekly live-music gatherings. Square dancing was popular then, and my father was one of the "callers". Without a public address system, he sang out the instructions to the couples, who wove their way around the floor, but always came back "home" to their original partner. I have to think now that my father was like a marriage counselor, giving structure and direction to shy couples, reticent couples, and couples who needed to solve something non-verbally. Later on, my sister took up the dancing theme in the family when she signed up for tap-dancing lessons. Not me. A body at rest tends to remain at rest. Dancing was not something a guy was going to do until he needed to. So, dancing was in my blood, but it took me a long time to develop my genetic potential and to see what dancing could do for me. I went to the high school and college dances, but I didn't know what I was doing; it was freeform. I was not smooth. It wasn't until my wife and I started country and western dancing that I really came to see what it could do for married couples. My wife and I, who thought of ourselves as neither country nor western, began to enjoy the activity and the subtle personal benefits.

The reason dancing together is good for a married partnership is because it strengthens the sense of unity. Two people, who live and move in separate space (and sometimes separate universes), all week long, now have to negotiate, coordinate, and share the same space. They also have to share leadership, and be sensitive to one another's signals in order to move across the floor as a single unit. The dance instructor says the man is supposed to be in charge at all times on the dance floor, and I have to admit this appeals to me. When I know what I'm doing, I lead with a flourish that I imagine must look really cool.

But that's a lot of strain on my enjoyment of the kinesthetic experience, and, while I do my part, I like to know that my wife is doing her part as well. Still, I've learned some things about leadership. And beyond unity, there is the sheer enlivening power of the movement itself. If there was any lack of energy before you get yourselves moving, dancing surely wakes up the marital endorphins! It's one of the clearest things people like about dancing: it makes you feel good! When you dance together, both spouses feel lighter and livelier at the same time. That's got to be good for a marriage.

I can, having tried it out myself, heartily recommend couples dancing as a therapeutic tool and plain old fun. Managed Health Care should thank me for this inexpensive contribution to the mental health of husbands and wives. Maybe the increase in popularity of couples going out dancing will also make marriages stronger and long lasting. Maybe some of the churches that used to be against dancing could now promote it as marriage enrichment. This summer, I will be attending the wedding of two dance instructors. Wow! Think of it: After they get the leadership thing worked out, they should be a powerhouse-of-a-couple. This newly coupled unit can demonstrate how two persons, originally strangers and quite capable of moving through life separately and alone, can now join forces and dance through life together.

Who Gets More out of Marriage, Men or Women?

In a recent *American Journal of Sociology* article on longevity, I was happy to learn that, as a married man, I derive greater benefit from marriage than my wife (albeit, she is married to me). The theory is that certain things predict who among us can expect to live beyond the median age. This hypothetical median age presumably is determined by insurance underwriters, medical whiz kids, and other experts who are messing with my mortality. So, I get a little control over my life by being married. Something I can do something about, along with not smoking and reading the fine print on the potato chip package.

As a marriage and family therapist, I just knew, down in my subconscious, that being married was a whole lot better than being single or divorced. It is my profession, and, while I grant some people can't live together, basically I uphold the institution that entails a role for the marriage "fixers".

My wife, however, who is not a therapist, does not have to take a professional stance, and was free to tell me what she thought of this theory. In her mind it has nothing to do with superiority of the male (which I had hoped she would have to concede in the face of medical expertise). Her idea is that men get the advantage in the longevity calculation for marriage because women take care of them. Although this is obviously over-simplified, I had to think about this. I am a transitional man, which means that I have left the traditional husband role behind, and have not yet, after 30 years of marriage, quite reached the non-traditional. I have to be careful here, lest my professional opinion get in the way of my home base advantage. I don't want to make myself look worse than I am, but my personal position lags slightly behind my professional position.

Now, as to whether marriage is better for husbands than wives, there is no need to be gender-divided on the issue. I maintain that, even in traditional marriages, the care-taking wives get something out of the role of looking after, and picking up after their husbands. With one couple that I knew, the husband was really a pretty capable guy, but he hardly knew how to make his own sandwich. He evolved into a more helpless husband than he really was, because his wife did a lot for him. Get him out of the house, and he could take charge of a major weekend construction project. What I observed was that both marital partners derived benefit from this in-the-house arrangement of roles. So there are plenty of these "traditional" men who are being waited on. Few men would admit to being this needy, so for the most part, they don't get to claim the advantage. Do the husbands gain, while the wives lose? I don't think so. In the case of this couple, the wife seemed to thrive in her care-taking role. Maybe she thought, somewhere inside her, that she was adding years to his life. At the same time, she was probably gaining some longevity for herself.

Better to be married than not married. It's true that widows and widowers have poorer health and shorter life spans. These poor creatures also statistically make more trips to visit their physicians. They've got not only the loneliness of handling their grief; they face the other stresses of life alone as well. And look at the implication of the doctor visits: It's like having somebody to share personal things with, and a way of getting attention. Wait 'til managed care gets wind of this. They might become advocates for marital interaction: "Feel under the weather? Visit your spouse (at least as long as you can). Another case

for marital benefits being evenly distributed between the sexes.

Men and women both gain overall health from marriage, however it may be weighted between the sexes. It's been known for some time that being in a stable relationship increases the immune system response of the individual. Dr. Keicolt-Glazer (a woman) at Ohio State University did some interesting research on divorced and separated spouses. She found that this group of people had fewer antibodies in their blood samples than their satisfactorily married counterparts. Everybody knows you need lots of these immunity good guys to fight off illness and disease. So, overall, married people will live longer. I have always wanted to say it: Marriage is good for your health!

Marriage Is Like Car Ownership

I suppose every man reaches a point in his marriage when he has to rethink his commitment. Especially if he has been in it long enough to have experienced some of the big transition times, like the empty nest, for example, which always challenges the fiber of the relationship.

As for me, I am a little dim on what assorted turmoils I have weathered in my thirty-two years of marriage, and can't say for sure that I ever had any such challenging time. But I do clearly recall that I suffered a real heart-rending crisis about my car. (It's just the way a man's mind works.) Fifteen years ago or so I acquired a shiny pre-owned imported luxury car that made me proud. It's one of those you can just drive and drive, and it always "runs good", even though the acceleration is like somebody had put glue on the tires.

I remember there was a very definite transition time period when I had reached a critical point in my car ownership. I confess I had begun to be influenced by this Detroit mentality that says get a new car every few years. The philosophy is that it's good to change, have a little variety, and keep your four-wheel persona looking good to all your highway admirers. As if there were so many people who judge your suaveness based on what you are driving. And I had noticed a few blemishes on my old car; it wasn't holding all the same allure as it used to. It was clearly the time to decide about either keeping it or trading it in.

It was during this time that I had a pivotal discussion with my mechanic. He was someone I had taken my car troubles to over the years, so I considered him a trusted expert in these matters. After hearing my complaints and misgivings, he gazed knowingly under the hood, did a wisdom-quest walk-around, and commented about the fine engineering of my old buggy. Essentially he told me they don't make them like this anymore. He was so complimentary that I began to look at my car in a whole different way. I was converted. My eyes were opened. Now I saw my own beautiful vehicle, not past its prime, but just emerging into its classic period, like a spring flower. It was gaining new status every day, a car well suited for the long haul, that just got better with age, even as it approached the antique stage. I forgot about acceleration and became enamored with the car's comfort and safety features. I tingled with excitement, just like in the new car commercials on TV. I was ready to make this a matter of pride, and, barring any major accidents, I could see myself endeared, and fully capable of having a long-term relationship with this wondrous piece of machinery.

My wife thinks I have gone a little overboard in my nostalgic hyper-interest in my car, but, for some reason, she has a contented smile on her face most of the time. Probably because she has a car of her own to consider.

Let's Hear It for Ordinary Relationships

Why is there less entertainment value in portraying the ordinarily good marriage? I picture the average information consumer sitting around waiting for a National Enquirer Moment to fire them up enough to think about relationships.

If I said that there was a couple who was hung up on polygamy, or a relationship I once worked with where the woman was a wild animal trainer, readers would be curious to read further. No yawns. They would think I was truly entertaining. The Pulitzer Prize would be just around the corner. Good writers, I am told, are supposed to capture the imagination at the same time that they deliver a new twist on some uniquely human event. One journalist, that I heard interviewed, said she did not wish to be a “chamber of commerce for the ordinary”, and found her artistic talent in displaying the more bizarre. I say it is time to promote ordinary relationships and show their appeal. I object to the Ken Starr Report getting so much attention because of the lurid details in it. True it may be, but it is also true that there are functioning, intimate relationships out there, which are satisfying and healthy. Sound a trumpet for the ordinary marriage! Beat upon the drum in praise of the normal relationship!

I believe that for some, who have known nothing in their life but dysfunctional relationships, it is a tragic thing to go around not knowing what is normal. It's like having no lighthouse to guide their ship. I admire those, who, in their committed relationships, are attempting to redefine themselves without benefit of many guideposts. They are forging a new tradition of a normal and ordinary, i.e., healthy, marriage. For them the relationship scientists have opened a window into the private world of successful and lasting marriages. The research shows that, while sometimes conflicted, not always rosy, in all cases Mr. and Mrs. Normal have had to put real effort into making it work.

Judith Wallerstein has written *The Good Marriage*, in which she takes a stand for different paths up the mountain. But even with differences, what the good marriages she studied had in common were people who found a safe place within the relationship where they could say what was bothering them, and where they could express anger. Also important for all the good marriages were people who could rethink their emotional attachment to their childhood families.

Other studies emphasized that the relationship be a place where the people involved could experience (give and receive) tolerance, enjoyment, cooperation, and a satisfying sex life. That is what the pundits mean when they say love is not enough. Yes, Virginia, there is a marriage that works. It is alive and well, living in your neighborhood. It is a living, breathing thing that gives back in the same measure that you invest some effort in it. The regular and ordinary marriage is within your reach. It is possible to find it. Maybe you think it shouldn't be so hard to find the love you are seeking. But you are already doing something right just by your realization that the old system wasn't cutting it.

The Life and Times of Polly Mathis

On a hike through the mountains of North Carolina one day this summer, my wife and I came across an old cemetery. The only legible gravestone was inscribed to “Mrs. Polly Mathis, 1888-1934”. We just had to speculate about this woman, who lived in the time of my grandmother. What was her life like? Someone wanted us to know that she was a married woman. The “Mrs.” was a bit unusual from the gravestones I’ve seen. Headstone inscriptions are the final and permanent expression of your essence. In a small granite space, what you will be known as for all eternity is carved there for future generations to read. The unique characterization of this woman was her identity as a mated female who lived a mere 46 years. We couldn’t help spinning an imaginary life for her, based on the data we had. Death shortened not only her life but obviously her marriage as well. It is very possible that this woman’s husband, Mr. Mathis, whoever he was, went on to marry someone else, since there was no trace of his remains in the graveyard. He escaped death a little longer, to go on and enjoy (or endure?) another marriage. I suggest “endure” because marriages in those early times were short, not so much because of divorce, but because of illness, hardship, and ensuing death.

The divorce rate that plagues this current era of American history was lower then. Breaking up a marriage was more rare even if bad marriages were not. Partnerships were practical and the need for companionship was a strong need. Lose one spouse and get another one. You changed partners by default, rather than by design.

People have told me in the counseling room that a marriage terminated by death is somewhat easier to handle than by divorce, because it’s final, and grief serves as the merciful adjuster. Divorce, on the other hand, while it is like a death, indeed the death of a relationship, is not the same. In this case, one cannot attribute the end of the broken relationship to fate. Someone is more likely to get blamed, or hope for possible reconciliation remains alive. It is harder to get over, since you are more likely to run into the ex spouse, like the ghost of Good Times Past. (They are still alive, but you can see right through them.) And, besides, out of necessity, for the children’s sake, there sometimes has to be some kind of relationship continuing for many years. Did Polly Mathis have it better in this respect?

Now that medical science has blessed us with longer lives, we have to figure out what to do with the married portions of those lives. Maybe if we, in our generation, had a Polly Mathis marriage of a predicted shorter duration, we’d think differently, seize the day, seize the years (*carpe annum?*) and reflect on quality. We therapists have to help couples add life to those prolonged years! Difficult enough because, if some people lived forever, they still wouldn’t get it about the “eternal” quality of a relationship. In my opinion, you get quality and depth in a relationship by teaming up to ride out the rough spots. A certain refinement and fabulous intimacy is injected into the marriage when you put some work into resolving the inevitable differences, and not quitting when trouble comes to visit your house.

Cranes, I am told, mate for life. Geese too. What have they gotten instinctively that we of the so-called higher brains still haven’t figured out?

Mating for life used to be easier. Since the times of Polly Mathis, there has been a change in expectation about what marriage does for you. Before we reached this “advanced” state of higher divorce rate, life’s hardships kept people focused on finding meaning in the struggle. It probably didn’t occur to the Mathis family to look outside their marriage for some greater satisfaction. The expectation was that they were in it together. With relatively more comforts in life, modern marriage partners get lazy about building some depth into their relationship. So it takes more work!

In case you need some ideas, go to the zoo. Check out the geese. I’ve seen them waddling around, paired off male and female, and honking vigorously at each other. They were obviously hashing out an issue that mattered to both of them. There was a little conflict, it got loud, but they stuck at it, and eventually were stroking each other’s necks.

Fighting is Normal in a Real Relationship

Ralph and Mary said they never have a fight in their relationship. Mary was raised in a family where there was constant yelling, and she determined early in her life that she was never going to subject her kids to the terrible chaos she experienced when her parents were verbally abusing each other. She used to hide in her bedroom, with the door closed and under the covers to try to shut it out. She remembers trembling with fear. For all she knew, her happy home was breaking up, and what was going to happen to her? So when she got married, she seldom took the risk of disagreeing with her husband. It was almost O.K. with her that she had an ulcer to contend with. Her anger had to go some place.

There is no fear that marriage therapists are going to work themselves out of a job. So long as there are males and females, there will be that eternal conflict between them. Perhaps that is as it should be. The conflictual nature of this duality lies down deep in the subterranean levels of human consciousness. It is a shifting pool of energy, both masculine and feminine, that the therapist can help adjust and provide some fine-tuning for. Within each pairing of the male and the female, there is a creative tension that works best when it is kept in balance. Sure, conflict can become destructive, but it makes sense to keep the healthy tension between the sexes.

People who “never fight” are missing the opportunity to reach their full potential. Each principle has something to contribute to the wholeness. Men and women have fights, not just because of different personalities, but because there are basic differences driving the forces of conflict.

John Grey has reached out to planetary metaphors to explain the differences, but I think it is better to look for an explanation in the vast inner space of our consciousness. Better to search the mysteries of the inner world than some world in space that we’ve never been to. Of course lots of people have never visited the inner space of their own mind let alone the inner space of their relationship, but from where I sit, it’s more accessible. And it is more productive.

So if it weren’t for conflict, people would never discover themselves. In the process of bumping up against another person, we learn about love and life’s little joys. It’s like saying we discover ourselves in the dance, the dialogue, the process of interaction that goes on in the shifting fortunes of a relationship that is lived out, and plumbed to its depths.

When I visited Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, I was fortunate to have a guide. She took us down into the cavernous mysteries with a full patter of explanation for what we were seeing. Then, at one point, she turned out the lights. Whoa! A moment of panic! Lost forever! How would I ever find my way out of those black and unlighted passageways? I was sure glad I had someone who knew her way around in this strange place.

Savers and Thrower-outers

Taking a morning walk in my end of town recently, I was several blocks from my own street when I noticed a driveway filled with odds and ends. I knew it was trash day, and most houses had the usual garbage cans set beside the driveway like sentinels posted and waiting. But this house didn't just have the typical trash set out. It had rows, double rows, lined up from the street all the way to the garage. Assorted boxes, rubbish, and castaways heaped up in an assortment that was sure to challenge the pick-up crew. I couldn't help but speculate about this overwhelming display as I made my way on down the street. Maybe I'd been reading too many mystery novels recently, but I thought this must be a clue about some earth-shaking event that had fallen upon this household.

I had no idea about the family that resided in that house, yet, as a therapist, I felt a certain sadness that some eruption beyond the normal family weekend had spewed out all this unwanted trash. My fantasy was that in that house there lived a couple comprised, like in most marriages I've observed, of one saver and one thrower-outer. Working on this tentative theory, the neatnik must have won out over the collector-of-things, and this couple had finally cleaned the storage closets, the attic, and the garage in one great explosion of a weekend project.

Then I knew why my subconscious was nudging me with the feeling of sadness: the balance between saving and throwing-out had been tilted in favor of the thrower-out advocate. Not good. Harmony in a marriage, I believe, is based on keeping a creative tension between these two opposing tendencies. Sure, there will always be a certain amount of push/pull between these different roles, and there will be some beneficent tolerance of each other's idiosyncrasies, with at least temporary compromises.

But one side of the equation should not prevail over the other. After all, this couple got together based on the attraction of opposites. What they lacked in their own individual personality, they made up for by marrying someone with that missing quality. I don't say this is a consciously calculated thing; it just happens, like marriages made in heaven, and earthlings shouldn't mess with this divine arrangement. What qualities God hath joined together by the mysteries of the unconscious, no man or woman should put asunder by an act of dominance or unfair maneuver. Sure, maybe the orderly spouse might win out and things would get thrown away, but, if that were the husband's victory, he would be limping around without much of the spark or creative energy that a saver wife often possesses. It's a package deal, in terms of personalities.

I have heard of one small town in North Carolina where they never have garage sales. The reason, as it was explained to me, is that they never have anything to throw away. I say this is bound to be an unhealthy advantage to the savers of that town. Things are out of balance in that place, and the marriage counselors who practice there have their work cut out for them: Get things back in balance. I can only wonder that such imbalance on this scale that involves a whole town must be counterbalanced by some other town somewhere in America where there are households of people who never save anything, no back issues of magazines, no balls of string, no clothing that "we might use someday"! They must have

non-stop garage sales, thriving Goodwill stores, and keep the trash man hopping. It's always better, in my opinion, to have the neatniks and the savers working it out within the same household, where it's greatly more manageable. If whole towns become polarized, with just one kind of personality predominating, there could be wars breaking out between towns, something marriage counselors don't know how to mediate.

No doubt there are opposing mental forces in the universe, but they won't get out of hand if we can resolve the problems of imbalance at the micro level. You may think it is fanciful to talk like this, but every couple has to do their part for world peace, working out the day-to-day differences over what household items are to be stockpiled and what are to be eliminated. My advice: Be tolerant of one another, give thanks for the modulating influence of your differences!

Appreciation Can Be Found in One's Soul

In the relative quiet of my office, there was a noisy undercurrent of non-verbal messages seeping out from somewhere.

I wasn't alone. The other guy was just sitting there with a pained expression in his eyes that reached out to knit his brow. As far as I could tell from his pleading words, there was this image of a devoted husband and father. He worked two jobs and did a lot for his friends, helping them out with weekend projects. But he was insistently trying to tell me something I hadn't quite comprehended: He didn't feel appreciated.

"The kids don't take care of their new bicycles. My wife forgot my birthday."

The sad lyrics started to sound familiar now. "After all I do for them. They don't care! Where do I get some appreciation?"

In the back room of my mind I had to wonder what was missing in this picture.

It was there in his eyes, but it was something he didn't yet know how to say. I thought that I should find some way to respond. Then I couldn't help myself. I had to dig deeper than his health insurance watchdogs would want me to go. So I figured it this way: He really wanted to be appreciated just for being himself, no good deeds attached. Unconditionally.

Couldn't fault him for that, but if he was looking for this ultimate appreciation, he apparently wasn't going to find it in his relationships.

The quest for real appreciation is a search inward, I kept thinking, some place deep behind those eyes, where he would have to first discover some self-appreciation, just like the rest of us. And, if he could grasp that idea, he might even be able eventually to get the unconditional part as well.

If I could be a travel agent for inner space, I would advertise the trip as a great adventure to the galactic realms of one's own psyche. Sure, the inner self contains a storehouse of stuff none of us likes to look at, yet it probably needs facing and settling up with. I wanted to get started.

Just around one of those dark corners I would hope to show him that there are parts of the self that are worthy of appreciation, even admiration! (I know that if you are from the Midwest you are not supposed to think overly well of yourself. But you can't beat some self-appreciation for its ability to straighten a guy right out and put him on the road to recovery from woe.)

Cindy Sharritt, my colleague at the Samaritan Center, thinks that when my fellow traveler digs down deep into the appreciation vein, he will find unconditional appreciation. It's discovered in a place where

the soul touches its Creator. In other words, it is a spiritual experience that swoops right on by any preoccupation with self. She says that what we long for in terms of appreciation can only come from God.

She has a point.

Couples Need Community

Beware of the seasonal flocking of Winnebagos! Recreational vehicles are not my cup of tea, but, as I travel the Interstates, I am amazed at their instant camaraderie. Without knowing a thing about a fellow traveler, vacationing Winnebago owners leap to greet one another like long lost relatives. It just shows you the power of that unconscious need to get with somebody else and at least pretend to be friendly. It's hard for me to understand how this elite tribe just automatically trusts their kindred travelers, stops for roadside rescues, and shares spare parts. Actually, closer scrutiny makes it obvious that what they have, without knowing it, is a sense of community. It is a mentality that is worth noting. The need for a sense of community is a relationship instinct that normally draws people together, but it has gotten out of whack.

Years ago a married couple could keep their relationship propped up emotionally by surrounding themselves with their relatives and friends (at least the sane ones). A group of couples stayed together in the same town over a period of time and found support in one another. Grandmas, aunts, and cousins could be consulted when junior made strange noises or had strange symptoms that mystified his parents. People leaned on one another and received strength for the rough spots of the journey of their marriage. Kids growing up in the same community, where everybody knew them, swallowed some good family values because the eyes of the community were upon them. If the urbanization of modern America has changed the family, it is the loss of this basic sense of community that has been the most destructive.

When a family waves good-bye to their hometown or extended family, they don't see the invisible ties that they are losing by leaving. With eyes fixed on a good career move or a cozier climate, supportive relationships get downgraded or forgotten. Maybe individual couples, isolated by geography or other circumstances, aren't really supposed to exist by themselves in some stale vacuum of outer space. Maybe it is a basic truth that real family units have to live in community to be healthy, both emotionally and morally.

When you think about it, the need for a marriage counselor is a replacement for the "real thing". In my professional work, I sometimes feel like I am doing for couples what some benevolent uncle would have done. If such a character had been available, he or grandma might have uttered some harsh truth or provided a sheltering wing during a difficult time in the couple's relationship. Or maybe I have to replace a whole community of caring and supportive people who, if present, could have cushioned and confronted this couple with their collective wisdom. So marriage and family therapists are just less adequate substitutes for good old community.

So where do we find it today since we have nearly all migrated out of the natural communities of support? If not in small towns, then maybe we could intentionally find it in churches, synagogues, or even bowling leagues! But save us from the unconscious groping of the lost tribes of recreational vehicles.

Kindness Rejuvenates a Relationship

You want power in your relationship? Whether it is a relationship at work you want to change or a few at home, there is a really effective over-the-counter method you can use.

I don't say it's cheap or easy, because it requires turning your thinking around from the methods you usually use to try to get people to change. It requires a positive approach and an attitude of hope. Hardest of all, it means giving up your old standby formula of criticism.

Specifically, it means finding a few things that were working well in your relationships and letting that powerful perspective drench you like warm chocolate syrup over a Chantilly custard cream.

But lest I get lost in a gastronomic metaphor, I'd like to turn your attention to recent developments in the hard science of sports psychology. The championship World Cup U.S. women's soccer team was coached by a man, Tony DiCicco. As one of the few men who really understand how to change women, he knows how to motivate them to do their best. Here is his secret method revealed: He videotapes the players in practice or in the heat of the soccer match and then edits to focus exclusively on the individual player's performance, specifically when she is playing her best game. Finally, he shows this video to the player as positive feedback. In effect, he's saying, "Notice this, and do more of it".

DiCicco actually trains men as well as women, always with emphasis on abilities, self-esteem and self-respect. I like this approach, and I think it would work off the soccer field, too.

What if employers would take up this philosophy with their employees, or parents with their kids?

We'd have championship teams all over the place—teams of sales and service personnel, teams of family members oozing respect and self-esteem. Positive feedback, well researched in many fields of endeavor, turns out to be a forceful and effective way to change people's behavior.

I congratulate the eighth annual N.I.C.E. Day Cape Coral committee for once again bringing a positive approach to relationships among the citizenry of our county.

N.I.C.E. stands for the National Incentive to Compliment Everyone. The observance of this special day is a way to encourage positive change in all segments of the community. If you are having a bad day and find yourself on the wrong side of the river, travel to Cape Coral, Florida, on Nice Day. As soon as you cross the bridge, a positive mood will hit you (gently) right in the face, and your spirits will be lifted. Even the Gator's Steve Spurrier would be transformed by a visit to the land of Nice Day.

From what I can see, in the Spurrier School of Relationship Motivation, things are not so positive. People are likely to get harangued. He apparently assumes the team members are lazy and operating on low voltage. It is hard to see any optimism or gratitude on his televised face.

The Rain Doesn't Fall Straight Down

Hey, Coach! Come to Cape Coral and they will teach you how to be NICE!

Who Was 'Too Young' When They Married?

When I received an invitation to my high-school class reunion, Bradford Senior High, Class of '54, I got to thinking about those wondrous years. The reunion was too far away to make a trip practical for me, but I couldn't help being curious about whatever happened to some of the old classmates. Did "Most-Likely-to-Succeed" do so as predicted by the intuitions of his and her peers? Especially, I was curious about those romances that became marriages. You can make a point about compatibility when it comes to those unions: People from very similar backgrounds are more likely to succeed in marriages. Then I thought: You can make a bigger point about marrying young.

Those marriages of "high-school sweethearts" have a lot of odds to overcome. To us young Bradfordians back then, the cheerleader and the basketball star looked, for all the world, like naturals. By high school standards, they were already successful. Why shouldn't the prince and the fair maiden have a happily-ever-after marriage? Odds are that, despite the high compatibility of backgrounds, they were a few years short of emotional maturity. There's an assumption here: Marriages last because of two individuals who are emotionally mature enough to handle the ups and downs of an intimate relationship. Everybody's marriage is subject to hardships, rough times, stresses, and strains. But, if you are able to make mature responses to these difficulties, you not only get through it, you learn from it, and, hopefully, grow closer.

Some do; some don't. I don't know whether the prince and the maiden lasted in their marriage, but I do know that, when people tell me about failed marriages, they often say: "We were too young."

I don't have to tell you, good readers, that a large number of divorces can be accounted for because the enthusiastic couple was made up of persons who were young. They were not yet finished with becoming who they were meant to be. Psychologically speaking, their sense of identity was incomplete. How could it be otherwise? It takes some time to find out who you are, to discover that sense of self. Not just a clone of your parents. Not just the ideal person your family thought you should be. Not just the good girl of your own fantasies. Not just the bad boy of your rebellious years. But somebody unique, with unique talents and tastes. Trouble is, many people find all this out after they have been married for a few years. Then it presents a problem to the marriage. Some people divorce at this point, and hook up with someone they think is more compatible with their newfound needs. The old choice gets discarded, and they start over with a new, up-to-date partner. I often hear, "She wasn't who I thought she was when I met her." What seems obvious is that most of the young marriages that last are marriages that grow with the individual spouses involved. The reasons to stay married changed with the new challenges. That's the good news: People don't have to stay married for the same reasons they originally got married. They can, in fact, reevaluate after the first 20,000 miles, and continue to choose to stay together. Most likely, both husbands and wives change and grow as time goes on. The advent of parenthood, career development, and life's bumps and blows make it inevitable that eventually the marital landscape is going to be different. The people in it are different, with differing values and evolving priorities. Even the notion of love changes with time. People can and do make the adjustment. Spouses become more tolerant of each other's idiosyncrasies. The wife gives up trying to change him and accepts his uniqueness. The husband

gets to know the person his wife has become as she moves out of his shadow.

So maybe you think this is an argument for marrying later in life. Perhaps. There are more couples statistically older at marriage than there used to be. More people are postponing marriage until after college at least, or after some years of “being around awhile”.

Whether we like it or not, more couples are living together without the marriage contract. And, I suspect, it is just because they are recognizing that they ought to wait awhile, get to know each other better, and grow up a little before making a big commitment, which they might not be able to keep. The older generation of 50% failed marriages has sent out the message: Don't get married too young. So the next generation made some different choices. They already know what divorce is like if they lived out their childhood in one.

But my best advice is to those already married: It's O.K. to change the contract and discover new reasons for staying married to the same person. My favorite high school cheerleader by now could be a grandmother, looking back at those fulfilling years of raising her family, and looking across the dinner table at that ex-basketball star who grew along with her, met the challenges, and hung in there to play the whole game.

Zigzag in the Marital Garden

Sometimes I think that if a troubled couple could only see what I see, they would realize that relationship difficulties are inevitable and, what is more important, are opportunities to grow and strengthen the relationship. No relationship is going to progress in a straight line. In fact, I don't think it should. It's unrealistic, and wouldn't be good for proper growth and development.

I learned this summer, on a visit to a beautifully landscaped oriental garden, that garden pathways, like the pathways of life should not be laid out in straight lines. In the oriental belief, evil travels in a straight line; therefore, the walkway through the iris garden is filled with twists and turns, some of them doubling back, as if to throw off the pursuit of the evil force.

Can you see the loving-yet-troubled couple making their way through the garden? First they have to turn sharply to fix the financial problems, and then they come to another bend in the path when jealousy becomes a barrier. The marital garden is going to be filled with unexpected difficulties, but my journeying couple is never brought down by an evil ending because they keep getting stronger as they take on the challenges to their marriage adventure. Even tragedies that would seem to break them in two, can, with a pause at the reflecting pool, bring a blessing.

Sometimes I think my job as a marriage therapist is to be the tour guide that takes couples through the garden pathways by being there to help them make sense of the mysteries of (human) nature.

Husbands Beware

The new Southern Baptist constitutional amendment which asks wives to “submit graciously” also has a major word to the husbands. In a no-wimp declaration, husbands are to provide for, protect, and lead in their families. This is a good idea that all husbands (and wives) would do well to listen to. If these Baptist men really take this seriously and hear what is entailed, I envision droves of them leaving that church and hightailing it on over to the other churches where partnership marriages prevail, and the males are relieved of some of the burden to be responsible on so many fronts.

It certainly is good that the husband in this arrangement has to start being responsible and keep being responsible. Things like having a job, being monogamous, and contributing to the well being of the kids. But, if that weren't enough, there is a near mission impossible in the remaining implications of what is entailed in the husband's role. I don't know if he's going to have time for fishing or watching football on TV anymore.

“Provide for” means not just material needs. Many wives already work and provide a large portion of the food, clothing, and shelter budget. This is about the husband being in touch with his own inner (and hopefully spiritual) life to have emotional strength enough to engage in verbal (i.e., real) conversation with a partner who feels supported when she's truly listened to. It takes a real man here to squelch his need to fix every emotional issue she brings to him, and let her know she's been heard. That's a “providing-for” that will benefit the whole family.

“Protect”. Even a submissive woman is not necessarily weak or helpless. The kind of protection they need is evidenced in a man who does not take out his frustrations, addictions, or immaturity on his wife. It is his job as a responsible human being to protect both his wife and his children from the dangers loose inside the family (like jealousy and rage) as well as the dangers preying on the family from the outside (like muggers or bill collectors).

And to “lead” is not about license to be a dictator. Leadership obviously must be tuned in to the feelings of those being led, and must seek cooperation. Submission by itself, on the part of the wife, will, in my way of thinking, only lead to resentment, unless the wife's point of view is heard and taken into account. A good leader does not distance himself from the followers and keeps open to suggestions. A good leader pulls his own weight and takes on the role of coach, supporter, and diplomat.

Strategy for Men

Some people have complained that I have been too hard on the males in relationships. And so, to keep things equal on the chessboard of gender conflict, I am divulging a strategic move that is bound to checkmate power-thirsty feminists. This move will also save men's relationships with women who don't understand why they're getting bored with their husbands.

Men: Follow this advice, and you will be seen as charming, sexy, and strong!

It is simply a matter of listening when a woman talks. Some sage has asked, "If a woman speaks in the forest, and there is no man there to listen to her, is she really saying anything?" This sounds chauvinistic on the surface, but it reveals the great importance that a woman places on communication. Sure, she can always speak with her female friends, but this leaves us men out of the loop, and deprived of many windows of opportunity that we might enjoy leaping into.

Historically, it has been difficult for men to keep up with all that our female mates have to say. Our best defense has been the full-length newspaper, and, at other times, intriguing T.V. programs. This, however, has not really worked. Women have an uncanny ability to talk and, at the same time, monitor the listening level of the man. And they don't believe anymore that we can read and listen to them at the same time. It has thrust large segments of the male householders out of their comfort zone. In short, we can't get away with pretending to listen anymore. The jig is up! New tactics are needed, if we are truly going to keep things equalized (and get possession of the ball.)

John Gray, high priest of the Mars-Venus movement, says that one of the problems here is that God gave women 5,000 words to speak each day, while he gave men only 2,000. An inequity, which, if taken seriously, could be quite a relief. Let's face it, Guys, we are not supposed to be good at talking. Fortunately, however, we can take our place in the divine order of things, if we become what we were only intended to be—good listeners.

The magic word is "uh-huh". But it must be given with good eye contact, or else "she" will know it is not genuine. "Uh-huh" is in the dictionary, but without description of its origins. Personally, I believe it must have been invented by a very clever man who understood this ingenious key to success with women. It can be delivered with very little effort. Some ancient (male) authorities say it can be done even with the mouth closed. Of course, variations in pronunciation and syllable accent will make it appear to seem an intelligent life form and convey a tone of voice that shows interest. You think this is elementary stuff, but I can't tell you how often I have to remind the husbands, who come into the office puzzled and frustrated with what has gone wrong. Years of marriage have brought them perilously close to disaster just because they forgot about their natural ability to listen, which can help them to recover the close relationship they once had.

Tone of Voice

This summer, when I was trying to learn French, I realized that I was never going to sound like a native French-speaker. Even with the audiotape, where you repeat the words and phrases with attempted *finesse*, my intonation was never the same as the recording. To me, the teacher-on-tape was “singing” it all wrong. When she pronounced the phrase that translated into the fact that she had (horrors!) lost her passport, this woman sounded nonchalantly happy, like she had just skipped barefoot through a field of wildflowers. Where was her remorse? These French! Not the way I would inject my stressed emotions into a lost passport situation. She was an obvious victim of diseased emotions! What can I say? If I had to get the point by “reading” her tone of voice, I would never have grasped the gravity of the situation. I’d never make it as a United Nations representative. War could break out between formerly friendly nations!

There were warlike proportions to the conflict I witnessed between two genuine native-born Americans sitting in my office. There they were, side by side on the couch, telling me they wanted to stay married to each other.

But, as I listened to their defensive interaction, I thought we must have been sitting over the San Andreas Fault-line of marital relationships. When I got them to talk about what was happening, I found out that the trouble was that old enemy of communication: Tone of Voice. He was sure that her tone of voice was demeaning and condescending. She was equally certain his tone of voice meant that he didn’t care. Both were brought up in the same region, yet under stress, they misread the tone of voice of their beloved. It was like a cultural barrier, unrecognized on their part, because they were each assuming they knew what the other person meant. And so their reactions were based on some bad assumptions that only escalated the rift.

I have to inject caution into these volatile situations, lest two otherwise loving persons get carried away on the rushing tide of their emotions, read the wrong signals, and carry on a tragicomedy of errors. In such a murky fog, there are definitely emotions that do need accurate sending and receiving.

I believe you need to “check it out” and ask if what you are receiving is what is really being sent. U.S. Navy semaphore flags must include one you could courageously wave that indicates “Unsure of your signal”. This flag probably should be issued with every marriage license. A little feedback is needed to provide time and opportunity to get across what you really mean. That’s just good communication and rapport maintenance.

It’s a bad idea to proceed with an argument based on what you think your partner means. That is the source of most of the hostile exchanges that grow into a category three argument, in which there is more wind than what is needed to carry the ideas.

Instead, convince yourself that you definitely do not know what the other person’s emotion is called. Your whole I.Q. will greatly increase as you cool down and contemplate what is really being said.

A Woman's Relationship Readiness

I once had a young woman patient who was having trouble getting into her marriage with both feet. It was scaring her husband, who thought he either had to try harder or leave. But she wasn't really blaming him. She wasn't so worried about finding the right man as finding herself. As I took the time to hear her life story, it was like a fairy tale gone bad. And in my mind, I found some gripping parallels to the saga of Snow White.

Like Ms. White, the woman I was counseling (let's call her "Neva") had had to leave home because of some stepmother problems. This is not all bad, because long, long ago, when the history of relationship basics was being written, women had to go through a series of misfortunes in their young lives before they could fall in with the mate that was just right for them. In those ancient times, there was this time-out when it was appropriate to be discovering her true identity. Is it any wonder she would traditionally have to struggle with underworld-type creatures (not to be confused with "jerks") and inner-demons? Poor Snow White didn't know who she really was, what with all the emphasis on beauty culture in the kingdom of her hometown. She had unfortunately lost her clear focus on her true and genuine self.

And now, here is Neva. As I saw it unfold, she had at first put a lot of her young energy into playing a role, which she knew wasn't really her. She thought she had to gain a man's approval, using only her external qualities of physical attraction.

Like Snow White, Neva had begun searching for her true self, trying on a few identities, like outfits in the upscale dress-shop. First, she tried the traditional role, marrying an immature man who, like the Seven Dwarfs, only wanted her to cook and clean. Yet this was not very satisfying to her in the long run, because she had to give up her individuality for the sake of being taken care of. She was only making herself miserable. After several years of a coma-like existence, she finally "woke up" and made noises that she wanted to leave that life behind. Only after getting through several layers of "shoulds" and "wannabes" in the therapy, did she have another awakening and begin to trust the authenticity of that inner self.

What is obvious, from this developmental sequence, is that some women marry before they are actually ready, and they experience their growth struggles with the underworld demons while they are still involved in the marriage. But I can tell you that it's hard on the relationship, adding stress to the normal difficulties of the first few years of married life. But don't give up! I believe people, like Neva, can stay married for different reasons than what brought them into the marriage. So thankfully, a woman doesn't always have to leave a relationship to find herself. In fact, if a woman doesn't get over-involved in the role of mother early in the marriage, she can gain knowledge and self-discovery in the course of time.

Mystery of Midlife

I really don't regret that I have only one midlife to give for my country. Although it was filled with new and dazzling insights into my masculine security system, it took a lot out of me. I felt my essential prowess was going to drain clean away. A little voice was telling me weird stuff. Like I was about to get my last chance to go ape over that certain mystery woman. All she did was smile at me in the frozen foods section of the supermarket. Fortunately, I was able to keep things on ice long enough to survive this foray into absolute lunacy. But it gave me an appreciation for the tumultuous times of the male menopause. Although the actual hormonal event has medical hope, the psychological part is treacherous.

During the midlife blackout period, men seem to lose contact with themselves. Some ancient ritual, long stored in the collective unconscious, floats up to the surface like a dead fish. Actions taken are not actions deliberated upon at a very high cortex level of gender intelligence. Instincts lead the way, akin to the rutting moose who falls over himself on the way to fantasyland. People get hurt in the name of destiny-type love. And this love is at least thirty degrees blinder than infatuation. I think it is because so much of the love focus is on one's self, and all the glorious feelings (which the guy thinks will never be within his grasp again, because he's Getting Old). People don't like to hear this, but this romantic flipping out is really not about the woman who is the object of the fond desires. A software program in the male brain has been set in motion; fireworks spin off. The outer world grows fuzzy and the earth tilts. The midlife male goes into a trance, while the real purpose of all these risky behaviors is revealed: He must desperately take in affirmation or die before his time.

What can be done in the repair shop? I decided to ask the point of view of a female marriage counselor. My colleague, Mary Robinson, thinks that, at this point, a man's Hero Journey begins. It is an inward journey with opportunity, she contends, to look deep into himself. And this scary trip is best assisted by a wise, experienced teacher or therapist. It's nice to know that a woman therapist believes that the man in jeopardy can survive the temporary blackout period, even though he has to answer some basic questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? (It is the crisis of the middle of things, because it is the time to look back as well as look ahead.) The enlightening answers become the new "software program", and out of this emerges a true Hero—a more confident, peaceful, and multi-dimensional man.

Perhaps easier said than done! Yet psychotherapy is a challenging journey in itself. Even a "real" man can discover some fascinating things within the inner realms of his own mind. Maybe just enough to keep a crisis from becoming a catastrophe.

The Promise Keepers Meet Men from Mars

Some men have lost their way on the treacherous and definitely complex path to a lasting and satisfying relationship with their female mates. But there are a couple of ideologies around, which stand ready to help. One of them, the Promise Keepers, offers some pointed advice. This men's movement has mobilized thousands of heretofore irresponsible husbands and made them stand up straight, start nurturing their wives and children, and take a leadership role. It apparently appeals to men who like a simplified structure, where God is at the top of the pyramid, husbands are next in rank, and then they get to be in charge of some things—like marital decision-making.

Some women aren't too keen on this, since it presumes that the male wisdom (even with divine consultation) is better than theirs.

One woman confidently summed up Promise Keepers' doctrine this way: Men become better husbands and fathers, and are more Godly. O.K. so far. This same woman (and her reformed husband) seems to have benefited from the best of the PK doctrine. What is interesting to me is that I've seen this very same couple also gain a great deal in communication from reading John Gray's book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are from Venus*. So I ask myself, what happens when the Men from Mars meet the Promise Keepers? Can the two "movements" for better relationships learn to share space in a marriage?

For example, communication and sensitivity are not natural Martian traits. Gray says they have to be learned. I would assume the purpose of learning them is so there can be some mutuality in the relationship. But in my view, the Promise guys are just a little afraid of getting swallowed up by too much equality with Promise girls. What if they lose their masculine edge? Can they still pull rank if they go ahead and be sensitive to feelings? Yikes! It's a slippery slope. Maybe they are a little afraid of what could happen to their sexuality if they really engaged a woman on the basis of her Venusian need for conversation!

You can tell I am a little bit skeptical of the Promise Keepers on this point. (I'm not against religion, just too much dogma.) Nevertheless, I have to congratulate them on getting men revolutionarily involved with their families. Some have been so immune to personal growth that no professional marriage counselor, male or female, was going to reach them. Many have repented and promised to be there on the home scene. But this is where the reformed Martians come in: They can help these men, some of whom are wanting to do something more than be patriarchal fathers and husbands. Some have been out of the loop so long, whether because of dreaded feminism or because of their own traditional hardness of heart, that they are just not sure of what they are supposed to do with their new-found spiritual determination. The Biblical orientation gives a sacred requirement, but should welcome a few of Gray's inspired insights as tools for the new men of promise, as they bravely face a whole new generation of liberated and spiritually mature women.

Cyber-romance and Intimacy

In the ever-raging battle between the sexes, you only hurt the one you love, simply because you don't let anyone else get that close. It is a world where we marriage therapists have to do our jobs, like medics moving over the battlefield, from one wounded lover to another. Occasionally, when the smoke has cleared for a while, I get a chance to help couples clear the relationship of the debris of old hurts, scars, and traumas. Such are the relationship risks that people are beset with as they attempt to urge themselves a little bit closer to their partners for the sake of more satisfying relationships.

People want to be close and share their most private selves with another—a desire to touch the soul without the trappings of social superficiality and masks. It is a holy quest and has been characterized in both poetry and Biblical scripture as a kind of participation in the divine scheme of things. It is the place where sexual intimacy develops most beautifully.

But I have seen pilgrims on this quest diverting their partnership energy into many forms of fantasy. It had to happen: The newest diversion is an electronic one. I refer to the cyber-romance made feasible by Internet communication.

I have been surprised by the number of counseling situations in which the computer was the culprit. Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised, because every since we all met "Hal" in the movie, *2001, Space Odyssey*, we should have guessed that the artificial intelligence of the Internet would eventually be as interested in artificial romance as those with real intelligence. Chat rooms seem to create an alluring setting for a number of people who like the relative anonymity of communicating electronically. Shy people, whose street skills with the opposite sex may be underdeveloped, can flirt with a flourish on-line. Something about the comforting distance of cyberspace brings out a person's readiness to risk reaching out.

Maybe there is loneliness in all of us that techno-contact alleviates. Some kind of hunger that even living in a married relationship doesn't quite meet. It's a comforting distance with the illusion of intimacy, because the words are intimate, loaded with meanings from real romantic dialogue. Electronic flirting has a powerful influence, but usually can't deliver when the real juice is called for.

When Luke's wife finally got him to come into my office, he was already in trouble with his marriage. He was neither participating nor communicating very well in his relationship. When the family finally got their first computer, a new problem developed. Luke came to life, emailing his friends and relatives. He also began drifting into the on-line chat room, where he discovered his ability to meet others with ease. Any shyness he may have felt at work or in social situations was blown away in the virtual safe space of the Internet. He came alive, managed to be witty, and eventually "met" a woman, who was herself seeking a refuge from her otherwise prosaic life in the real world. When his wife found the electronic cookie crumbs in the monthly statement, she was more than virtually upset. She was really mad! He claimed it was nothing serious.

The Luke saga got more real in the real space of my office. I had to acknowledge both the power of human desire to reach out and make soul contact and what was really missing in their marriage. I supported the excitement of real romance. But I also had to deal with how a person can get lost on the way to finding that real intimacy.

In a real romance, there are real houses to live in, with real responsibilities, and, I might add, real rewards and satisfactions. There are real people with real bodies. Even the best of fantasies still leave the mundane issues of real intimacy to be settled one way or another.

Why Smart People Do Dumb Things

Fidelity in marriage seems to classify as nearly an American ideal, yet statistics show that affairs are still very popular. Ninety percent of Americans think that it is always, or almost always, wrong for married persons to have sexual relations with someone other than their spouses. However, the statistics on the number of people privately acknowledging to opinion researchers that they have had an affair don't quite match this ideal and professed value. Why the discrepancy? Most people who have an affair think it is wrong. So why do smart people do dumb things?

I say "dumb" because, while sex in itself is pleasurable and a powerful attractant, outside of an established marriage, it is bound to lead to trouble. Even if the perpetrator doesn't get caught, the psychological effect on the original relationship will always create its own private havoc. Does the bear growl in the woods? The relationship knows it has been disturbed.

In other words, the risk of being found out is very high. But it is apparently a risk the foolhardy adventurers are willing to take for the sake of the great excitement. Unlike driving over the speed limit, a risky wrongdoing of another sort, the affair has the added excitement of the secret itself. Fifty percent of the excitement of the affair is the element of secrecy. Ha! You thought all that allure was sex? Freud knew how our brains work. I'd hate to tell you how mother is involved in this. It is enough for now to tell you that it is one of those tricky unconscious things that winds its way, like a kudzu vine, back onto the formerly attractive landscape.

So, what are the chances of getting caught? Those odds are directly related to the degree to which the affair was entered into because of thinking with one's genitals, rather than thinking with one's brain. This means that the crazy thoughts that draw a person into the affair do not connect up to any part of the brain that is even acquainted with consequences. In the face of sexual excitement and secret liaisons, the conscience seems to short-circuit only to deliver its wallop later, at the point of greater rationality.

For most people who get into an affair, the big mistake is leaping from mere fantasy, where a person can have numerous daydreams about affairs, to the point of acting on the fantasy and living it out. To make this leap is a gross error, since it is humanly possible to remain within a Jimmy Carter consciousness, and only think about doing more things than we would ever do. It is entirely feasible for most people to think about an affair, not do it, and have the wisdom to know the difference. Not everybody who thinks about stealing money actually robs a bank, because they can make the distinction between fantasy and reality, and between actions and consequences.

I heard this song by Smokie Robinson and the Miracles in which they blurt out, "If you want a lifetime of devotion, I second that emotion!" Good words from Motown. Come on, America! Get your American conscience working for you.

Proper Emotional Closeness Requires Maintenance

When couples come to my office for a regular joint session of marital therapy, I like to ask them about their feelings of closeness to one another. On a scale of one to ten, I ask each partner to rate the degree of closeness they feel to the other. I tell them there is an invisible electrical pulsation vibrating between them, and I invite them to “read” that for the sake of getting in touch with the vitality of the relationship. I get some interesting results. Sometimes I think I can tell when they are both going to rate the relationship on the cozy end of the spectrum: There they are, both sitting on the couch, with good vibrations discharging across the physical space between them, like a shower of sparks. Other times, I miss some subtlety and discover that the sparks are really hostile barbs! Or, if she has misread his barometer, she later finds out that he is feeling distant simply because he is tied up inside himself with some personal stressor, not related to their relationship at all.

Emotional closeness has a lifelike quality that causes it to shrink and shift, like the ocean tides, with the fluctuations of daily interactions. It is not the same every day, or even every hour, depending on perceptions, moods, and sometimes bad assumptions about what is brewing in the other person. When people become more conscious of the things that make for closeness, they can have an effect on the quality of their intimacy. And the most important tool is talking about it.

Closeness is not the same in every relationship. I heard of these two porcupines in the cold weather, who needed to huddle together for warmth, but soon found out that sticking each other with their needles was painful. Sometimes there is a need for a certain amount of emotional space between partners, and it gets expressed physically. But don’t ask me to come up with some fixed optimum amount of distance or closeness that is right for all couples. It is unique to the two people involved. And it changes. The porcupines figured it out eventually, and so can a loving couple.

It’s time to talk when outside circumstances change the family, such as a child born, a child leaving home, or one spouse retiring. Couples can recognize the shifting status of their relationship, because the new routine will not feel as comfortable as the old one they were used to. The couple who is planning to retire should be forewarned that all that new leisure time will not be as relaxing as they thought. Thank God for senior citizen executive bagboy positions and part-time boutique associates.

These fortunate job slots in the workforce provide an outlet that helps to maintain the proper emotional distance between the newly retired. With the advent of more people at this retirement stage of family development, there will need to be more thought given to purposeful activity outside the home. The relationship stays balanced when the hunters and the gatherers go out and engage in useful work (paid or volunteer) and then return home with a new injection of emotions to enrich the relationship.

Covenant Relationships Have a Spiritual Dimension

Before I decided to combine my theology degree with training as a marriage counselor, I was a dangerous guy. I knew how to perform weddings, even though I didn't know much about what it took to make a marriage really work. As a result, I wasn't much help to those couples who were looking for blessings on their relationships. I figure that people seek out a church wedding because they want to have as much going for them as possible when they tie the knot. You can't blame them for that. It's like they know in some way that forging a new union has some essential spiritual element that makes those wedding promises endure.

The "covenant marriage", which recently became law in Louisiana, has some of the ingredients for getting serious about a marriage relationship. In that state, this deal is optional for persons planning to get married. If they sign on, they are required to get counseling at the beginning and also later if the marriage gets into trouble. A couple can then only divorce for dire situations, such as adultery, abandonment, or abuse. In other words, it does away with a too-easy divorce and asks couples to take their marriage relationships for real, and to put some informed effort into it. The couples who choose this route are seeking and then getting some reinforcement for their intentions, which apparently hadn't been there before. But I am afraid there is not enough depth to any state's bureaucratic pinions to support better marriages.

The notion of "covenant", when it comes to marriage, is about promises, but it is more than that. It is more like a two-party contract, signed and sealed, like the Magna Carta. Both partners agree that something is expected of each of them. I would even go so far as to say that the marriage covenant is a cornerstone of secure family living. It's the griddle for all the pancakes of life. It is meant to provide a secure environment for trusting and for loyalty. It is also an agreement to limit personal power and self-interest. People get to participate in a great experiment. Spoken or unspoken, it sounds like this: If I keep my self-interest and personal pleasures in check, can I find greater meaning in family life? A covenant agreement is both given and received. It creates the atmosphere one needs in order to live married. I believe people want to have a feeling of connectedness, and that they derive an essential sense of self-worth from that connection. In other words, we human beings really want to join up with a power greater than self-interest. The old jokes about being shackled by a marriage have it backwards. We choose, at some civilized level within us, to put some limits on ourselves. It's an instinct for survival that takes survival of the spirit into account.

In a true marriage covenant, the terms are not set by either party, but by a higher authority. Either the state or the church. If it is the church, then we are talking about Divine reinforcement, supposedly retailed in the church wedding. But we know that even that doesn't always take effect. Something practical needs to happen. Maybe covenanting people have to be reminded that they made a deal with the Almighty. In my belief, it is the same God who gives us a feeling of mystery about the universe who also provides an element of mystery and blessing to the marriage contract. It's a good mystery, though, and touches the best within us. We counselors could put a little more emphasis on the spiritual threads that run through a

marriage relationship. And all of us mates could stand to get a booster shot that opens our eyes to the sacred glimmers of our relationships.

Lesson from the Birds

I am not much of a bird watcher, but I can't help making the observation that there are more storks along the rural roads than there ever used to be. Then I ask myself, "Why are there more storks than before?" The scientist in me was tempted to supply the explanation: It's because the storks have stopped delivering other people's babies, and started delivering their own. I don't know exactly when this happened, but the myth of storks delivering babies has begun to fade in favor of greater realism. It seems to me to be an appropriate bit of progress for the stork colony, and a very healthy move for them as well.

Here I'm talking about mental and emotional health, because for the storks to pay more attention to their own needs has got to be a definitely good thing. My theory is that it wasn't out of benevolence that they were doing this baby business, or for some ecology of nature thing. They were trying to take care of things that were none of their business! I am glad they have apparently stopped, because these birds were taking on matters beyond their scope of responsibility. In short, they were trying to take care of others instead of taking care of themselves.

It is a lesson of nature that I would like to see picked up and applied in human relationships. Maybe then we therapists wouldn't have to work so hard to help people focus on self-care. (This is not a selfishness trip I am promoting. In fact, the kind of self-care I have in mind is the exact right love of self that engenders love of neighbor.) Strange as it may seem, those who become overly responsible for other people feel safer when they are neglecting themselves and sacrificing for others. This self-neglect eventually turns them into angry casualties who feel a great sense of injustice. They end up puzzled that others aren't making sacrifices for them like they themselves are doing. It is like believing the myth that babies are sent by the storks. It isn't reality, and there is no benefit to thinking this way.

The distortion of self-care, brought into the therapy room, is as hard to crack as a stone egg, even after the patient has gone emotionally bankrupt trying to make the myth work for them.

If I could, I would send these wounded souls back to their childhood to bring justice to the situation that stole away their youth. Whatever it was, back then, that taught them to neglect themselves, deserves a new perspective. Something was out of balance. Too soon in their lives they had to turn themselves into caregivers for someone else in the family who wasn't managing. Some situations are nobody's fault. Still, if it were the case of a parent who was emotionally handicapped or addicted, that parent would have been spaced-out and unable to provide the love that a child needed. So, even though you can't change the past, it is the beginning of self-care now to get an adult perspective on a scene that the grown-up child had forever misinterpreted.

Battling the Inner Critic

Some of the worst relationships I have ever been in have been relationships with myself. From time to time, when I sit down to have a little talk with myself, things deteriorate into an experience that is like being in the school principal's office. It's in those situations when the nemesis of my own psyche gains the upper hand and negative self-talk goes wild.

It's not good for me or for those around me, because nothing interferes with good relationships with real people more than that tyrannical resident watch-bird, called (by some clever psychologist before me) the Inner Critic. It is more unwelcome than your brother-in-law, but, nonetheless, moves right in to occupy vital inner space in your head. There it nags at you far more than any friend, enemy, or relative ever would or could.

It is a relationship with yourself that you don't need. I don't know how this bothersome character ever got so much power over us. It harps and carps and interferes with the day-to-day satisfaction that we could otherwise enjoy from being with other people. Right when you think your relationships with significant others are running smoothly, old Inner Critic throws a monkey wrench of doubt into the mix. You can recognize its whiny voice, because it usually has this know-it-all, superior-sounding tone when it interrupts your fun with, "You're not doing this right" or "what a dumb thing to say!" Its most used vocabulary word is "should".

This Voice is not to be confused with your healthy conscience, which is a rightful guest in your mental inventory. This kind force, by contrast, nudges you with more gentle reminders in those times when you overstep your own value system. It is your friend. It provides you with appropriate guilt. A healthy conscience you want to keep. It helps keep you civilized and fun to be around.

Inner Critic serves no beneficial purpose. It is like a hyperactive coach standing over you, pointing out every little flaw and minor relationship infraction. There is so much mental flack coming at you that it becomes impossible to just do what you can do, be what you can be, with the abilities that you possess. It is anxiety producing, and the more anxiety, the less you can put forth your best in a relationship.

This is the time when I call out the National Guard. I mean those good guys in your brain that can go into action to question the "shoulds" and quell the Inner Critic. These little soldiers of mercy help you to confront the barrage of distorted opinions that you are inflicting on yourself, and, at the same time, encourage you to be more reasonable with yourself. There is even a brigade whose specialty is to arm you with better self-talk.

So, wouldn't you rather hear messages from yourself like, "You are capable of using good judgment" or "You deserve to have a productive relationship with someone who treats you well"?

When you begin to get this encouraging dialogue going in your head, you are bound to create sleeker vibrations in your relationships with real people.

Ah! Did you just hear that loving inner voice? It was saying, "You can do it!"

Don't Wait on Love. Create It!

When she was in middle school, she used to pull the petals off daisies, one at a time, to decide on the whimsical love of the boy she admired. "He loves me; he loves me not."

She didn't know, but she was resigned to the fact that it might go either way, decided, as it was, by the number of petals on the flower. She had no idea that his loving her or not loving her was possibly influenced by her own signals. She never thought she could affect the outcome. As if her only part was to learn, one way or the other, by magic or psychic energy what was actually going on in his head? She was made powerless as much by her own view of how love is born as she was by her shyness that kept her at a respectable distance from him.

When she got a little older, boys were more vital to her survival and just as inscrutable as ever. Did he, could he love her? Then she called the psychic hotline to get the pearls of wisdom that were supposedly dropping straight from some energy channel of knowledge-in-the-sky into her aching heart.

She still held the picture of a mind-reading science from which she had to wring some truth about boys. It was just a higher tech version of daisy petals. Everybody had grown up a little, but how love resided in the head, and how it really bloomed, remained obscure.

Years and experiences later, she arrived in my world, frustrated with a husband whom she wasn't sure loved her. She believed she had to wait to see what was going to happen.

But my own weird science clashed with hers. In the world of baseball, from which I draw some important lessons about life, things are at least as lofty a science as the world of psychotherapy. For example, when the home plate umpire is faced with a tough decision about that last whizzing fastball, he has no time (or interest) in consulting micro-measurements or attempting to discover, by some other objective means, whether that pitch was really a ball or really a strike.

He doesn't seek to discover reality. He CREATES it. The pitch is neither a ball nor a strike until he calls it, loud and clear. It is what he says it is. I admire that.

I take this lesson seriously, even knowing that in the world of relationships, we can't just make things happen the way we want them. Yet neither are we like some paralyzed audience that has to passively wait to see what the outcome is going to be.

So I had to tell her that when it comes to matters of the heart, love in the other person is at least 50 percent reaction to the pursuer. It is true: We greatly influence the love that pulsates in the other. Love is not a flame that brightens on its own. It responds to the air that moves around it, reacts, and sees itself reflected in the eyes of the one who waits and hopes.

Intimacy isn't Easy

This whole thing about intimacy is not easy or simple. It's because partners want to be close to each other and, at the same time, they don't want to. Intimacy for a male is different than it is for a woman, thus the Two Planet theory. Aside from reproduction needs, it is a gift that two people in a marriage relationship can share the same house and the same family. It is also the result of two individuals working at their relationship together and separately. They are doing it, either in first or subsequent marriages. It's about keeping a balance between the tensions of the sometimes conflicting intimacy needs. I recently heard one of the experts on intimacy and sex speak about it.

Dr. David Snarsch, who is about to publish a new book called *The Passionate Marriage*, speaks about the importance of intimacy in a relationship. I would have to say that it is not the latest sex manual that everyone is going to want to go out and buy, but I found his thesis very worthwhile. He makes a fine point about sex and intimacy that I hope I will be able to keep in mind when Bob and Carol, or Debbie and John come to my office seeking to get past their own particular barriers to intimacy. There is probably no greater hurt than that which comes from the person you love. Two people, who have been married long enough to raise children, are bound to experience a change in their sexual intimacy. Snarsch says that this struggle is actually fortunate, because it enables the partners to discover new levels of intimacy. I don't have to tell you that human beings were made for something more than reproduction. This is not a denial of sex in the animal kingdom. Development basically stops after the animals reach puberty and are able to reproduce. Human beings actually begin a long process of development following this childbearing time in their lives. The struggle over sex and intimacy is the means by which people become fully grown emotionally.

Can you believe that? Marriage actually helps people grow into their own individual maturity. Snarsch calls it a crucible, like a place for refinement, shaping or forming new and stronger marriages. This expert says that hot and conflicting emotions, especially those about sex, come together and are the stuff of reaching full human maturity. The sexual struggle of two people, committed to working it through, creates more passion. Try it, you'll like it! Sorry to say, but those wandering Romeos (and their female counterparts) will never find what they are looking for by leaving and seeking the alluring affair. True intimacy and real passion in a marriage are born out of conflict, doubts, and sometimes waning attraction. The problem you face is the route to greater happiness. Instead of creating buffers to intimacy (children, newspaper-reading) or windows of escape (affairs, alcohol), most of the experts are saying men and women should not go back to their separate planets, but hash it out here on this planet. Put a little romance in the relationship: Face the conflict and work it out. You're in the right place to do it—your marriage.

Sandra and Rob after 20 Years

Marriage counseling isn't like other occupations. If I were a surgeon, I could more easily see the results of my work. If I were a carpenter, I could admire the product of my labors, something tangible. But often a marriage counselor is dealing with intangibles like the subtleties of a power-struggle in a relationship, or the healing of an emotional scar. I knew a counselor who gave it up and went into carpentry because he yearned to see the finished product.

The closest I ever was to eyeballing the consequences of the counseling process came recently when I met up with a couple that I saw in counseling twenty years ago. Even in this modern day encounter, I couldn't claim that I had made them what they were—a happy family with three nice kids I didn't know existed.

They were, however, willing to talk to me about the influences that our counseling sessions together had had on them over the years. It was made more delightful by the fact that this wasn't a treatment interview; we didn't need to talk about problems. We talked about what worked. It was more like a well-baby clinic, where education for maintaining health was the topic; only I was the one being educated. Not only was I being educated, I was feeling gratified to see how some of what I had imparted twenty years ago to a young couple had helped them.

The fact that they stayed together is not necessarily the measure of success. I think, from what they told me, that they are a couple who would have stayed together anyway. The wife had come from a family that was split when she was growing up, and she gained a sense of the realities of marriage long before she got married. When she says of married life over these twenty-some years, "It's what I thought it would be", it means to me that her expectations are realistic in a very healthy way. Most of all she knows that a marriage did and does take work. It's a kind of maintenance that is required. He says, "Don't avoid problems that may arise; turn off the TV and talk about it." They agreed that one of the important lessons was this attention to the value of keeping lines of communication open, making it a priority. What they were saying was what I thought and must have imparted to them in those early sessions together. It's not that marriage counselors are given problems to solve, like being handed a rubix cube then solving it, and handing it back to the couple. It's more like that the enduring counseling benefits are tools and values that are conveyed. Face it, I was not the Wizard of Oz; I was more like a carpenter's helper who could hand them the right tool at the right time for them to work with.

They sat comfortably on the couch together, looking for all the world like a team that was pausing in the locker room to survey the game. Like its half time and we were so busy running the plays that only now do we have the opportunity to sit back and think about what put us ahead. What put them ahead was an eventual willingness (as they remembered it) to see marriage counseling as a helpful tool that both of them could make good use of. At the time, I suspect, it was both an acknowledgement that there were (a.) discussable problems, and (b.) that discussing them would help.

He remembered that, at first, he was your typical male who didn't want to talk about personal

problems with anyone. Nowadays, he advocates it for everyone. I was glad she came up with a very appropriate analogy when it came to their willingness to be involved in marriage counseling. She said that going to a counselor is like going to a health club—you sweat while you're there. There's some hard work and energy invested, then you feel good later that you have done it. There is a measure of sacrifice, and setting priorities. Just like staying physically healthy requires some time and money. For them, the relationship was so important that bearing the financial cost was well worth the investment. They said no one would deny medical care to a family member who needed it, so why consider the marriage health and stability any less valuable. I think it was that sense of valuing that made their marriage successful and made the counseling successful.

After that, I was relieved to hear that they actually hadn't stopped disagreeing with one another. (Just as twenty years ago they had been relieved to hear from me that their problems weren't unique; everybody has disputes and disagreements.) It was a kind of validation of everything else that they were sharing with me about their twenty years of true-life marriage struggles and successes. The point was that, as a result of the counseling back then, they were able to learn fair fighting.

It served to remind me that I shouldn't forget to tell my current people about Dr. Bach's rules for a fair fight:

- Stay in the present and don't bring up the past.
- No name calling or pinning labels on the other person.
- Don't threaten to leave the relationship as a power play.
- Avoid using "always" or "never".

I'm glad they got that, because I know that was a gift I definitely gave them, one they still use. They've changed, each of them over the years, just as I have, and they have learned to respect the changes and growth in each other. They have obviously benefited from knowing each other. I've definitely benefited from getting reacquainted with them. .

Part Four

Mothers, Daughters, and Other Loving Expressions

Is Your Mommy Still with You?

Everybody seems to want to retrieve family values, but most of the people who have this notion don't really know what they are asking. Let's say there is supposed to be some ideal time, maybe 150 years ago, in the Victorian times. A great period for antiques, but not so great for family values. If it was a time when families were happy, it was because the mom stayed home and did all the domestic stuff, creating the smell of fresh baked bread in the kitchen, while, at the very same time, she was out digging potatoes in the family garden, while simultaneously reading stories to the children. In those Victorian times, mothers were probably glorified and given maternal virtues beyond what they could ever live up to.

The family in that era of history was beginning to feel the pinch of industrialization, and the actual domestic scene did not give fathers much of a role to play. He was viewed as the hard worker, and all of his work was outside the home. This ideal man wouldn't be caught dead with a broom in his hand, let alone changing a diaper.

I don't think it was such a great time in the history of the family. I've got proof, because I've seen the faded tintype pictures of families from that so-called ideal time, and what strikes me the most is that nobody is smiling! If it was such a great time for families, why do they look so austere and somber?

The only thing that I have discovered that was good about that period was the furniture. Victorian home furnishings make for great antiques. My favorites are the old music boxes that must have been, in their time, forerunners of today's surround sound. The one I saw in a restored mansion had intricate brass mechanics that must have given joy to its owners—actual self-playing music in the parlor! But then I saw the tune that it played. It was *Is Your Mommy Still With Ye?* This was the entertainment, one of the hit songs of its day, and, although I am speculating, I really don't think it was a children's song either. It just made me realize the nineteenth century grasp of the mother's influence on everything. Without the advent of psychoanalysis, they had stumbled on a truth that is still powerful and influential in the psyche of all grown-ups.

The truth is that mothers, in all eras, have this ability to stick with you wherever you are, and no matter how old you are. If they don't live around the corner, they still have a way of making their presence felt. Your Mommy is "still with ye" because her emotional presence can dominate, even if she is on the other side of the globe. Mothers leave their imprint on their children forever, and the effect is enough to make some people bold and confident and others to cower. It makes the internalized mother a great benefit in some people's lives and a Brunhilda in others. It is a good thing that someone set this to music, because if we couldn't sing about it, it might become too overwhelming. Some adults spend most of their spare time working out their relationships to their mothers, and for the rest of their lives don't quite know what to do with her, living or dead.

I know, you think I am some kind of elder-basher. But read on. I'm going to promote a therapeutic stance, which all good family therapists cleverly embrace in order to distribute the potential problems

equally: You can't blame everything on your parents!

But it still leaves the question of just how to cope with the indelible image of your parent that is tattooed on your brain, whether that otherwise-loveable person is geographically north or south, near or far, embraced or disowned. It's not ever easy, but sooner or later, you will have to consciously and mindfully construct a mental scrapbook about your mother that lets you go on living your life. What seems to work is to eventually see her as a real person, with a real life story that reveals her own unique set of abilities and frailties.

Mothering Comes in Different Packages

Some people hold the murky opinion that mothers and mothering get a bad rap in the counseling room. But I am here to tell you that mothering is my co-pilot. Without basic mothering, people of the human race would never grow up, and there would not be enough family counselors to take up the unfinished task.

I hate to see what a bunch of people would be like who had no mothering. But then again, in the counseling office, I often do see the results of insufficient mothering. There are a lot of sad stories.

Still, don't accuse me of mother bashing. I see no therapeutic value in condemning mothers when emotional problems crop up. What I do encourage is that those involved in the counseling process take on the job of making the present more nurturing for themselves.

Those grown-ups who think themselves deprived of essential mothering probably have more resources of good nurturing than they think. Although it sometimes seems in short supply, there really is mothering all around us, and it's available if we look in the right places. Clue: Not all mothering comes from original-equipment-mothers. There is what could be termed "after-market" mothering. Maybe it comes from a big sister, an aunt, a stepmother and yes, maybe even mothering from a father.

After the research phase, I also do a little therapeutic "mothering" of my own in the form of teaching self-nurturing, self-care and self-respect. Before that inner trip is over, those who had missed out on nurturing basics have located the "good mother" that lives inside them. Their tank no longer reads "empty", and there is a sense of being loved. It's just what was needed.

What is obvious to me is that even moms need mothering. They do a lot of care taking of everybody else, but soon wear down to the nubbins if they don't have some nurturing on tap for themselves. Wives, show this to your husbands. Confess your need for a little of what you dole out to others, and then get ready to be on the receiving end of mothering.

Nurture is not right up there near the top of the male arsenal of emotions, but I have seen it happen in families so often when it became a necessity, that I am sure it is at least a recessive gene. See, even single parent households, where the dad is the primary caregiver, are beautiful scenes of love and nurture.

Between mates, there is great benefit where love, like a fresh breeze, can take the form of nurturing one another. You grown-ups don't have to wait for all the children to leave home and the dog dies to start practicing the joys of mothering as a unisex activity.

Let those adults who are strong become temporarily weak. Let those adults who are weak become strong. Nurturing is such a needed commodity that both spouses can get into the act in order to keep an abundant supply in stock.

Thoughts for the Next Generation

As the new century gets underway, I thought I should write an open letter to my daughters and share with them my prophetic vision about human relationships for their future families:

Dear Daughters,

I know there are some dire predictions floating around about how your century will turn out, but, even if Jerry Falwell teams up with Henny Penny in doom saying, in my opinion the state of the family looks hopeful for the future. I am optimistic when I predict that the things that really matter will be supported by the blossoming of spiritual enlightenment and the broadening of the behavioral sciences. Although your future husbands will probably still not pick up their socks in the living room, I know you will find some inspired new styles to deal with these things. I see those future marriage scientists focusing less on pathology and more on what people like yourselves can do to overcome problems in their relationships. You can start your families in the new century with the confidence that there will be plenty of resources to strengthen family ties.

The traditional family of the twentieth century probably will be beyond recognition in the twenty-first. Increasing globalization and our own country's cultural diversity will generate acceptance of new forms of families. Although your grandfather told me not to marry a "foreigner", (meaning the ethnic group in the next valley) it's even possible that you will marry someone from another continent!

One thing that will not change is the battle of the sexes. Both you and your respective husbands will have to be vigilant about maintaining the intimacy of your relationships, because the ageless ego stuff will tend to get in the way. You will learn that the real strength of your relationship will be in how you work your way past the times of conflict. Each family crisis will be an opportunity for growing more durable and resilient.

Your mother and I have handed you a mixed bag of family function and dysfunction. You have the opportunity to sort out and reshape that emotional heritage, and pass on to your children some beneficial resources that will shore up their relationships for the outward stressors and unpredictable rigors that lie ahead. Why pass to them a torch that is flickering dysfunctionally? While the family "coat of arms" is in your possession, you will have an opportunity to alter the emotional genes, and move our clan more solidly into the future. You will need an empathetic support system of friends and counselors, just as we did when we realized what set of unsolved family problems we were handed.

I predict your generation will learn more about a supportive community, because feminine energies, the fuel of the future for relationships, will become more influential in society. And, while I think of it, don't count too much on computers or technology to support relationships. Although computers will get "smarter" than their creators, it would be the crime of the century to think that the virtues of empathy, compassion, and tolerance will ever spring from techno-

wizardry.

I see great things ahead for you both.

Love, Dad.”

Make the Marriage as Important as the Wedding

I thought a wedding was supposed to be a simple and pleasant family ritual that you just arranged with the minister, and then invited a few friends and relatives. But, alas, now that I am involved in actually planning one for my daughter, I find out weddings are major Hollywood productions, set up apparently for the sake of turning out beautiful pictures for the wedding album. In other, perhaps more sane cultures, they ritualize the wedding ceremony to my satisfaction with mud and egg yolks rubbed on the faces of the new couple. Much simpler, I say, and proportionally as sacred as, for example, the stretch limo ride.

What are we parents up against? It's hard to fight the deeply rooted western cultural force of the Princess Bride that every new bride is drawn into. It must be planted in the subconscious brain of all little girls that they will one day dip their pretty little foot into the Great River of Generations and be magically transformed. "Get ready to be the best mother ever," the river says, "and of course you shall marry a prince!" The parents of the bride bask in the glow of this transformation process, and dearly want to take part in the magic. "How much", Mr. and Mrs. Merlin ask, "to make your dreams come true, my darling daughter?" They don't want to know!

The question is how can I get the priorities message across to my daughter and prospective son-in-law? I'd like to see them and their contemporaries put a little more emphasis on things that make the marriage as successful as the wedding. When you do the budget math, there may be an inverse proportion: The more money spent, the less secure the relationship begins. It's not just all that money that's being dropped, it's about what it takes to superglue the relationship of the bride and groom for the long haul.

Below the frilly surface of veils, toasts, and perfect wedding pictures, is a wonderfully mysterious bonding of two whole personalities about to pool their genes and resources for a family of the twenty-first century. An awesome task by any measure. And, surely, the durability of the knot they are tying will be tested by all the normal stressors of many years ahead, plus new challenges to the family that they have not yet thought of.

I can hear the cries of the next generation of marriage therapists floating back from the future, like the shrill warning sounds of a sea hawk. They beg us parents to hound these new couples into working at their marriage connection before the inertia of wedding bliss wears off. Will somebody tell the about-to-be newlyweds that lasting relationships are not geared to the elaborateness or magic of the wedding.

The statistics touting the average wedding costs are phenomenal. I'm too embarrassed to give an actual figure, but it is at least thirty times more than most brides and grooms spend on the emotional or spiritual underpinnings. The tradition of the wedding in the church is just a "veiled" recognition that all the paraphernalia needs a calming blessing and some Guiding Light to make the relationship solid.

Wedding Ceremony Has Power

We celebrated a wedding at our house recently. My own daughter met her man at the altar. If it was as powerful to the bride and groom as it was to me, it must have propelled them bodily into the realm of magical-mystery, like Dorothy caught up in the whirlwind that carried her off to the Land of Oz. I say this because I had a taste of the ritual power just from the mere position of being the father-of-the-bride. It was like I was drawn into this intense volcanic eruption, despite my determination to be somewhat of a cool observer. When I had thought about it ahead of the Big Event, I thought I might whimper a bit as I was given the signal to take this lovely apparition down the last mile of her single status.

But there were so many other emotions going on that mine were stifled by the buzzing energy of this Grand Moment. I did not feel the wallop of the event until I looked at the photos of it all a few days later. What I saw was like one of those aura effects that show up in kirilian photography: Right next to the “me” I know and love, partially superimposed in the picture, was this old guy merging into the next generation, another realm of being. No, it wasn't somebody else; it was I! Right there, in the midst of all the goings on, I was being powerfully transformed. No one else probably noticed anything special at the time, what with all the focus on the bride and groom.

So if I felt it, think what the very same ceremonial event must have done to inwardly and covertly transform these two young people, as they were formally linking their lives and bloodlines together! While I was merely slipping into senior citizen (potential grandfather) status, they were embarking on the Great Relationship Adventure. My daughter said she didn't feel any jolt, because she and her new spouse had already committed themselves to each other some time ago. To them, the community ritual, with all the friends and relatives, was just icing on the cake.

Nevertheless I think it was something bigger than the both of them. Bigger than they could assimilate in the moment. It will probably take them a few months and lower hormone levels to realize what hit them. After all, if you really stop to think about it, a marriage relationship is one of the grandest relationship projects of all time, defying science and, to some extent, rationality. In the face of potential hardships and misunderstandings, two people are called on to intimately trust and respect one another. At the same time that they are struggling to fulfill themselves with individual careers and finding satisfaction in the world of work, they are expected to extend their loving relationship to family life, and take responsibility for birthing and raising children. Where else in the human experiment on this planet can two people play such an important role in the quality of ongoing life, shaping the culture, contributing to the quality dimension of ongoing generations?

Why Do People Cry at Weddings?

Weddings are happy events. Right? As a young person, I attended my cousins' weddings and was embarrassed to see grown people crying, like it was a funeral. I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. I secretly wondered if these sobbing people, who were already married themselves, were depressed about the prospects of two more innocent young people headed for some torturous capital punishment. I personally didn't think getting married would be all that bad, since you got to do a lot of neat things that kids can't do, like looking at a naked woman. But, hey, I figured the adults knew more than I did about the perils of being married. Only later on in life did I grasp the significance of the complex emotions at work in the formation of a new family.

In my high-school biology class we had to draw pictures of cells dividing. Amazingly, one whole cell could spawn another whole cell, complete with nucleus and everything else it needed to drift off in the pond water and take up life somewhere else, downstream. Looking into the microscope, I never saw anybody crying about this. It was just what creatures in nature do. When it comes to human beings, though, things are obviously more dramatic. Tears at a wedding are about the families of the bride and groom together launching a brand new family. Of course, all the friends and relatives gathered for the occasion can lend their tears to the flood of emotions that launches the new couple, like a ship that needs enough water under the keel to begin its venture.

But why all the emotion? Even though you can't see it, there is a great emotional rending as this essential cell division does its thing. And surely, there are rumblings of energy like those at the edge of the universe when a new star is formed. Cosmic forces groan. Then come tears that are the welcome sign that the wedding sobbers are the ones in the audience who are in touch with the importance of this event. Don't you see? A new family is birthed. It's time to respect that family as the new entity that it is. They have a new commitment to implement.

So, I say, treat the new couple like they are capable of making it successfully. They will be blessed if they don't get too much interference or unasked advice about how to raise their babies. I recommend that the relatives on both sides should restrain themselves from living their lives vicariously through the new generation. It doesn't mean they won't need support. I like the symbolic huppah tent in the Jewish wedding ceremony. It is a canopy erected at the altar, which allows the family members to be close at hand, supportive, yet only the new couple stands beneath the canopy. There is a lesson here that we could all use: One family per huppah. And, if the new couple would see all the tears shed on their behalf, they would claim the unique place that this emotional fiesta has given them. And then they will be strengthened for the journey that lies ahead.

Differences Can Solidify Relationships

There are several theories about how Valentine's Day got started. My favorite is the Italian tradition of a feast day. We Americans think a mere box of candy is what rings the lover's bell, but those Italians know what the celebration of a full meal can do for a relationship.

In Italy, they normally go in for long drawn-out meals with several courses that last until midnight. Think what a feast that day would be! They probably eat all day and into the night, likely with singing and dancing.

This is surely a celebration for couples of all ages, confirming my vision of extending Valentine's Day to include not just young lovers, but seasoned mates and couples who have been married for a while.

A hard thing to do, you say, since romance has too often gone out of the marriage by the time the first few years have passed. Well, I have seen it happen like that, but it's because husbands and wives are neglecting the secrets of long-term love.

From where I sit, many couples these days are not waiting for the seven-year itch to get impatient with each other's personality differences and idiosyncrasies. The three-year itch can be biologically documented, if you haven't confirmed it already by your own experience.

When those "lets-get-together" hormones start to subside, it can allow the "let-me-see-if-I-can-change-you" hormones to kick in. Then spouses become more critical and irritated with each other.

Maybe for Valentine's Day you guys could look with loving eyes on the personalities God gave you to marry.

Sandra Gray Bender has written a helpful book called *Recreating Marriage with the Same Old Spouse*. It is a tribute to the kind of love that seeks to understand and tolerate differences of personal temperament. She advocates long-term love, based on appreciating the unique traits that we all possess by virtue of being human.

Instead of trying to change one another, she urges, applaud those distinctions of personality because they contribute to a well-rounded relationship. She thinks every marriage needs a thinker as well as a feeler, and that every marriage could use a dreamer as well as a practical person.

To recognize that there are natural and normal differences in the way two well-meaning persons go about relating is a sign of maturity.

Tolerance, appreciation, and acceptance, I say, are the virtues of a lasting love relationship. The longer that couples are married, the more individual characteristic and habits start to show. It requires saintly Valentine energy to overlook some things in your mate that bother you. Differences do not have to

be evaluated as good or bad. They are just differences that give the relationship its character. Something to be thankful for.

Relationships Need Help from the Saints

“Define love,” she said.

“It’s a hollow place,” he said, “you go around with this hollow place inside you all your life, then you meet somebody who fills up that hollow place, and you don’t feel hollow anymore.” This is Meg Ryan and Matthew Broderick talking ethereally in the movie, *Addicted to Love*, an otherwise fun and light-hearted trip through the lives of four young love-seekers. Meg has to set Matt straight on the love thing, though, and gives a different, if gross, view of love by her standards. She says that it’s more like her father’s relationship to his pet dog. He had to patiently remove the maggots from the dog’s anatomy, with no expectation of its being a pleasant task. So much for the verse on your next Hallmark Valentine card.

This love story, like so many others I have witnessed, definitely needed more than a touch of St. Valentine. You’ve seen relationships that really hum throughout the time of the courtship phase, and then life moves on. The soul mate society goes into the children-in diapers phase. Partners wish for a restoration of romance. Several Valentine’s Days later, something is still lacking. Spouses notice that the marriage isn’t filling up the hollow place. Now it is more obvious that this is a two-saint relationship. Bring in St. Monica.

This Monica, who, I emphasize, lived in the fourth century, had a bad marriage with Patritius. He had a violent temper. Despite her troubles with him and her mother-in-law, she was able to be of comfort to the other wives in her village who were going through the same thing. And, eventually, her prayers were able to help even her intractable husband. For this she was made a saint, and had quite a following, even a thousand years later. Her reputation is still heralded in many cultures as the patron saint for bad marriages.

We marriage counselors need all the help we can get, including some from the saints. This lady, St. Monica, understands that all loving marriages don’t work out like in the movies. She weathered a lot and knew what it was like to experience disappointment in her partner. She, in her esteemed place among the saints, is someone who can lend an ear to the pleas of troubled couples, and has more to offer, for the long haul, than this guy Valentine. It’s reassuring to know there’s help for the worst of situations. St. Monica, or marriage therapy itself, may not turn the married frogs into princes and princesses, but between the therapist and the saintly consultant, the counseling still ranks as being enormously helpful if there is some easing of pain. Just add a little sense of purpose to the rugged day-to-day adventures of being in a difficult relationship. No miracle, but their love lives become a little more pleasurable.

Not everybody is going to get flowers or have consistent romantic moments. Yet their love relationships still qualify as the real thing, even if they need a little help. This year, watch the card racks for good old St. Monica.

Love Always Changes

Around this time of year when I see you people picking out valentines, I think, why does it take you so long to choose just the right one? Why not just grab and go? After a little research, I've concluded it is because you individual lovers are hanging out there in the greeting card aisle for a purpose. It is to find the card that speaks accurately and carefully of the love you feel. And that vital feeling may not be the same as it was last year.

It is because love always changes. It changes from the first hot coals of desire to the cherishing love of two companions who have lived through thick and thin. And then maybe it changes back again. The only place the meaning of love doesn't change is in tennis where it means you have absolutely nothing.

If you had lived way back around the turn of the first millennium, people would have thought you daft to be actually married to the person you loved. Nobody in his or her right mind would have entered into a marriage contract as a result of a romantic attachment. Marriages were arranged as a way to increase the economic advantage of a family or a tribe. The poor young folks whose marriages were arranged were just lucky if they could work out some relationship that made their alliance worthwhile. I say "they" but you know which gender usually got taken advantage of.

Romantic love itself was something else, usually illicit and off the record. Then along come brave hearts like Abelard and Eloise (twelfth century) who married for love. They set a noisy precedent when they made a conscious choice connecting love and marriage with the same person! It was a really big deal, and blew everybody's minds!

I don't know if we, who live amidst the current state of relationship hazards, should throw flowers and cheer them wildly or curse them. Because, thanks to this "ideal" couple, we have had nearly a thousand years to work out the consequences of the love-choice connection in both glorious and painful ways. See what we've got? If we marry for love, it seems just as natural to divorce when love appears to die or shows up feverishly in some other relationship that happens along. This is a brief but sad history-and-development of married love.

If it weren't complicated enough already, marrying for love has more intricacies. It gives you the opportunity to choose a life partner based on standards that you don't even realize are operating behind the scenes, like an internal matchmaker. Ha! You thought the old-style arranged marriages were torture. Now, if you're smart, you're going to discover that a deliberate love choice involves hidden reasons, too. Things that you don't find out about until you have been married for ten or twenty years. Fortunately, these unconscious factors usually make for wise choices, because we're dealing with a basically Friendly Force. It lives in the heart as well as in the mind.

But sometimes things go wrong, and people lose contact with their Unconscious. Yah, there was a good and meaningful purpose for getting together with this particular mate. They just forgot what it was. Or the original conscious reasons for getting together no longer seem to apply, as in "We were young and

foolish”.

The nice thing about romantic choices is, in my opinion, that they leave room for couples to reinvent their relationships every few years. So what if the original reasons for getting together don't look so impressive now? I say that people can decide to stay together for a whole new set of reasons that consciously seem to have nothing to do with their first avowed intent.

Part Five

Divorce and Various Reflections

What's New in the New Year?

One thing that won't change this year is that there will be a surge of divorces filed after the holidays. People want to wait in order to feel a little less guilty, and maybe get a tax advantage. There is a seasonal inclination to start the New Year off right, divested of those old problems that were dragging them down last year.

So why not a new relationship as a way of starting over? "Brilliant," I say, "but you could just start over with the same person. And this time, get it right!"

Psychic mastery of old dysfunctional relationship patterns is achieved just as well by repetition with the same old partner as it is with any new partner. Besides, courtship bliss is frightfully deceptive. What seems new in a fresh relationship is frequently the same-old; we just don't see it until it's too late. Failed attempts at a new relationship are only a mystery if one is blind to his/her own inner clockworks.

If this sounds like a pessimistic way to start off the year, it's because I stare at the divorce statistics for the past 12 months and get a little depressed. Hey, my worthy colleagues and I are working to stem the tide. I personally am optimistic about what couples can do to renew the relationship they are now in. My suggestion is that disappointed mates can work at their relationships, and that divorce is not usually the answer to marital conflict. It seems obvious, but needs to be said, since there are a lot of smart people out there who usually know how to learn from their mistakes, yet trip over themselves in the next new relationship.

There must be a point in our self-understanding where we can team rational thinking with the positive, if irrational, quality of persistent hope. It is hope that keeps people trying to find the "right" mate. I am always impressed with how much stronger the basic desire for companionship is, compared to the hurts and emotional pain that are incurred in breaking up. It would be a worthy goal to achieve an enduring and satisfying relationship based on both smart thinking and the power of hope. But, how to do it?

We mortals, who stumble and fumble as we seek to relate significantly to one other of our species, greatly undervalue our ability to grow up ourselves.

In a great disservice to our personal capacity to change and grow emotionally, we act as if our inner resources were depleted, and that we finished learning about ourselves at age 18. Perhaps it is the disappointment in not finding the meaning of life in the partner that makes couples give up.

I remember last year I saw a woman who was so disenchanted with her husband's New Year's resolutions (they didn't last until Valentine's Day) that she was ready to leave. She had on her running shoes. She was pretty cynical about "people" changing. Of course, she meant her husband.

I couldn't resist telling her about emotional growth. O.K., so maybe people don't exactly change. But I believe they do grow, and move down the pike toward becoming more of their real and lovable selves. I believe there is a vast area of undiscovered truth in our personal histories. With a little motivation and courage for inner search, great discoveries are just ahead. I'll grant you it takes time, but the notion of quick-fix change trivializes the power of psychotherapy to benefit people's lives and relationships.

Author Peter Kramer, in his new book, *Should You Leave?*, says that the real question about leaving the old relationship and starting over should be put differently. When people come to him to work out their dilemma about an impending-divorce impulse, he (like a good psychotherapist) asks them a question of his own, "Can you make the adjustment to not being with this present mate?" Now, the dissatisfied mate, on the crusade for better things, has to ask, "Can I myself change?" And this is the real question, because leaving a long-standing relationship is not so easy as it might look. (Even abusive relationships are hard to leave). It means change and growth will be necessary whether one leaves or stays.

If the woman in the running shoes is hanging in there, I feel certain she will have a Happy New Year.

Good Guys and Bad Guys in Divorce

Divorce is not just divorce. It is not just calling off a contract.

Something else frequently happens that doesn't even deserve the name divorce. It has to do with the extreme polarization that takes place between two people who originally got together under very pleasant circumstances. Remember the days of courtship and romance? Two people, who originally chose each other for good reasons and mutually warm positive feelings, can find themselves slipping into actions and reactions that bring out the worst in everybody. In the movie, *The War of the Roses*, the two main characters, played by Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner, carry the divorce scene to the extremes of revenge and recrimination. The ending is brutal with no benefit to anyone.

In a typical divorce, I often see two people transformed, putting too much energy into anger and hate. Two people, who often have brought children into the world, now allow their hurt and angry feelings and actions to be passed on to their children. Both parties seem to be thoroughly convinced that they are right, innocent, and deserving to best their former mate.

I don't think even the animal world has such cruel rituals. (There are some animals that mate for life.) Aren't we human beings supposed to be the higher creatures? It's not much advancement in the evolutionary cycle when two decent human beings, former intimates, begin to tear at each other. I guess there is supposed to be some motivation of fairness employed, but it hardly looks that way since, by design, what is fair to one is seldom fair to the other.

Here's the scenario: John and Mary are a nice couple with some occasional conflicts. After a heated discussion in which both say things they don't mean, John talks to Mary about the possibility they should get divorced. Mary thinks John might drain their joint bank accounts so she pulls her money out in a pre-emptive move. John now suspects that Mary is going to "take him to the cleaners", (and maybe run off with the kids) so he hires an attorney to "protect his rights". Although Mary's attorney is reluctant to encourage this nice couple to go to war, he none-the-less advises her to have her own attorney to make sure she and the children are protected. Now there are two adversarial parties, each with their own legal advisors. They have already begun to think of their spouse as the enemy. The battle has begun. There is a stockpiling of ammunition. The children don't understand what is happening, become confused about who loves them, and are worried it's something they did.

It's pretty hard to convince the children at this point that they are not to blame, because blame is being thrown around freely (if not subtly) with plenty of "supporters". In an effort to be supportive of the "stricken" spouse (which one was to blame?), family and friends fall prey to the notion that the relationship is now adversarial. Where once the good guy-bad guy distinction was blurred, it's suddenly clear (so they think). Without always wanting to take sides, they unwittingly fuel the fight. As the dispute progresses into court, custody becomes the new battleground. Now professionals are hired to prove that each parent is the better one, and they will testify to such, as experts. I haven't yet heard of one of these

experts declaring neither parent can qualify as capable based on their recent nasty behavior to each other.

It's sadder than anything, especially when it doesn't take an expert to tell us that the children will feel the effects of the divorce for years to come. The more the divorce is adversarial, the more there is to adjust to.

The phenomenon of basically good people turning into hateful adversaries is a very unpleasant scene. Why does this frequently repeated scenario bring out the worst? Something happens in the mind that changes the way we see things, someplace in the memory bank of old hurts (including from childhood) there was an experience that gauged a shift in how "good people" and "bad people" are perceived. Whenever that memory gets reactivated, usually unconsciously, it distorts how we view the people around us, usually those close to us (since the original childhood hurt likely came from someone close). Bad experiences make a person feel bad and see bad in others. A present day hurt can trigger this old defense, and while it was originally a protective and helpful alarm system for the child, it now doesn't help the situation.

The good news is that it is not necessary to evaluate present-day intimates in terms of the past. People can learn to discriminate and understand their old hurts. Bad things happen to good people, and good people can behave badly without becoming the enemy. There are some truly abusive situations in a marriage that require protective action, but the majority of the divorce reactions, I believe, are unnecessarily polarized and hurtful. With a little self-examination, two adults can make the best of a bad situation.

Divorce counseling and/or mediation are two practical alternatives to the "awfulizing" of divorce. If these helpful services are entered into at an early stage, they can prevent the destructiveness or at least lessen its effects. In these settings, a couple can remain basically civil and retain their self-respect, avoiding the hostility and humiliation of a courtroom scene. In a relatively more relaxed atmosphere, the partners keep a greater awareness of the other person's thinking and feeling, which prevents the imagination from building undue negative ideas.

When communication is only through attorneys there is usually less trust and therefore more hostility. Decisions made in mediation are more likely to be followed through and commitments kept. The new post-divorce relationship, where it is needed for parenting, can be built up in the relatively safe atmosphere of the counseling office.

Divorce Isn't What It Used To Be

I knew I was a wanted man in two countries when I went through customs in Ireland. I'm always a little nervous in those situations, like they will catch me smuggling in a bag of illegal peanuts. As the officer scanned my passport, he asked me what my occupation was. I thought I was being grilled for sure. "Marriage Counselor," I uttered, and wondered if I was off the hook.

"We could use you in this country," he said, alluding to the recent increase in Ireland's divorce rate. I only pointed out that I had enough to do in my own country, but I was inwardly glad to be valued internationally. It reminded me that I was a veteran soldier in the war on divorce, though I was not about to congratulate myself on who is winning the war. Divorce is a Goliath-like force in our society and now it is striking new victims.

Divorce isn't what it used to be. It is no longer just a private matter between two consenting parties. The fall-out of many years with a 50% divorce rate has now hit a lot of us like a major devastating disease. Divorce has afflicted the lives of well over one-third of Americans alive today. Like it or not, we are all now living in a Divorce Culture in which relationships are haunted by the pain of their crashing. There is a generation of people who have grown up in divorced households and who now have families of their own. They only know what they have seen and function out of deep pessimism. This is not a pretty picture, and it makes the experts want to do something constructive.

Author and researcher, Judith Wallerstein, has confirmed the reality of divorce's long-term and generation-to-generation effects. In her new book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, she writes about the creeping devastation. She talked to a hundred adult children of divorce about the effects of their parents' divorces on current marriages. This is an expanding population of people, handicapped by an almost inevitably bad experience. The popular notion used to be that, while it was rough for a time on the children, divorce eventually dimmed into the background of those children when they grew up. It was thought that they "adjusted". Not so, according to Wallerstein. The adult children of divorce have inherited a relationship deficiency that plagues their ability to find love, intimacy, and commitment. If they adjusted at all, it was at the price of losing these relationship skills.

This important study makes it imperative that there are a number of changes that our courts, divorce attorneys and divorce educators must make. In the meantime, marriage and family therapists have a lot to do themselves. I mean not just cleaning up after the divorces (some of which occurred a generation before we came along), but doing our job with those adult survivors. What is hopeful here is that currently troubled couples who are willing to explore the roots of their problems in their parents' divorces, can sort out their wounds. Instead of being driven in today's relationships (in some cases unconsciously) by the "default" reaction that was derived from the divorce battlefield, the liberated survivors can begin to make better day-to-day choices in their marriages.

Marriage therapy offers this possibility: It is not inevitable that you repeat your painful history on



yourself or your own children.

Divorce is Not in Logical Order

When I checked out the teenage girl in the grocery checkout line, I couldn't help noticing that she was slinging a baby on her hip. I felt sad, because I imagined that she was a single mom who was already faced with the responsibilities of the work/parent/household world. She looked a little spent, like a good wine that had been poured out before its time. Maybe she really did have a diligent husband who was at this moment out working hard to make his family secure.

Still, what I know is that there is a higher divorce rate in those younger marriages. I wished for her that, if she were a single mom, she could have had an opportunity to gain some maturity. Somehow I doubted that she was living out her dream.

Why does it take the challenges of parenting, or worse, the pain of divorce, to create maturity in younger relationships? Look. Here's the sequence of things for an unsuccessful alliance: Hang out for a while, fall in love, live together, marry, have a child, get divorced. (Or maybe one of these steps falls out of sequence, creating more problems.) Statistics tell us that it all happens, more or less in this order, in five out of ten couplings.

I say if something has to be out of sequence, it should be divorce. Radical thinking for radical devastation of the family. Divorce is the great sobering experience. It punctuates the cycle that nobody in love could have foreseen. It is devastating, but, at the same time, has this quality of being a rite of passage that drastically changes a person's outlook on relationships.

So why not rearrange things so that divorce comes first!! Get it over with, before anything else has happened! I mean in the very same relationship. This way, young couples could be, by virtue of being grizzled by the experience, more prepared for lasting relationships than they are now.

Or, at least select the part of the divorce experience that strengthens a person and gets them to thinking about durable relationships. Serve it early, before things get out of whack. I know some marriage therapists who would say that you couldn't really be married until you have at least thought about the possibility of divorce. What I think they mean is that you have to see clearly what a commitment is all about. Let some of the myths about marriage die. Learn from your mistakes. Realize where you can better direct your relationship energy.

I don't say that couples set out to fail at stabilizing a relationship. In fact, the heavy trend toward couples living together before marriage could well be seen as a serious attempt to learn the highs and lows of a relationship before they are ready to commit to something "until death do us part". No doubt they are tuned-in, at more than one level, to the pain that divorce caused, maybe even in their own parents. To put it in its best light, these young people are avoiding divorce by avoiding marriage. If their semi-instinctive design is well intentioned, our society, marriage educators, or church programs could give them a little help. That would be a better way to get the crucial issues on the table and learn some tools as their



relationships grow and develop.

Holiday Boozing

Don't call me a scrooge or a party pooper, but I have to wave the caution flag on holiday drinking. I have seen so many lives crippled by the effects of alcohol that I have a tragedy-overload headache.

A few years back, I became aware of how many of the people I saw in my office had a common thread: They all had a parent who was alcoholic. Their current problems had nothing apparently to do with alcohol. In fact, many of these adult-children-of-alcoholics had not touched a drop of alcohol in years. But they had problems in present-day relationships that were rooted in the past.

Abusive holiday drinking seems like a gross misunderstanding of what family gatherings are all about. Alcohol is the most widely consumed drug in existence, and is responsible for 75-85% of motor vehicle crashes, not to mention how it puts a dent in the family tree. The sad thing is that much of the alcohol consumed this weekend will negatively affect the family for years to come. Even if there will be no more drinking by the grown children of today's problem drinker, the effect on their relationships grabs everybody down the line, like a gene pool ghost rising up out of the swamp. Holiday time is a time to get together with friends and family, and have a good time, but drugging-up is not my idea of hospitality.

I can just hear the "moderates" mumbling that many people can consume alcohol safely and without abuse, and, "Besides," they claim, "nobody should legislate morals for others. Everybody should be responsible for themselves."

Now I have to get on my soapbox, labeled "Duh, Think About It", and throw in the point about how there are so many factors that contribute to problem drinking, that this chemical, alcohol, is not a substance to be dealt with lightly. That old man of reason, Sam Shoemaker, said he wouldn't keep a dog in his house that bit every sixth visitor. He was making the point that abuse statistics are bad enough, even if the rate of problem drinkers is one in six moderate drinkers.

Besides, moderate use is the basis for abuse, when you mix in the other emotional issues. Subtly, the drinking escalates, and all the signs of a problem start showing up—arguments, dishonesty and denial, missing work, or becoming more isolated from the family. Maybe there is no such thing as moderate use of alcohol in families where there are children. If you want your children to stay off drugs altogether, you can't model this by moderate use of alcohol yourself.

So this season think about the ghosts of Christmas Past and the ghosts of Christmas Future, when you celebrate. Children need to experience their homes as safe havens, where their relationship sensors can develop normally, and where they can enjoy the benefits of family life and family celebrations.

There will be some sad memories this year for the victims of alcohol abuse. And, unfortunately, there will be some new ghosts created by misuse of the drug that somehow got labeled as "Holiday Cheer".

Don't Marry a Foreigner

In my parents' generation, intermarriage was uncommon and predictably dangerous. A marriage between persons beyond the radius of one day's journey by horse and buggy was fraught with the perils of misunderstanding and loss of family support. Let alone any ethnic boundaries being crossed, if you weren't a "down-homer", you were suspect.

Then add in the waves of immigration that made this country what it is, and you have numerous occasions for persons of vastly different backgrounds to test the extremes of new world civilization. It must have produced some unhappiness, because I remember my father exclaiming, "Don't marry a foreigner!" I knew he didn't mean a recent immigrant or someone from another country. He meant those ethnic neighbors down in the valley. Yet, despite the warnings, there were plenty of "mixed marriages".

The heat that made the melting pot what it was must have been the heat of love, because the Dutch, the English, the Irish, the Germans, and the Italians soon began marrying and producing little Americans who grew up to care about ethnic origins less than the generation before them. Somehow it all worked out. Yes, there were troubled marriages, but the nationalities got melded, and we, as a country, moved on to the next frontier: marriage between black and white, and marriage between Christian and Jew. We think these are sharper distinctions than those of the old days. Maybe, but the world keeps getting smaller and smaller, and more barriers than the Berlin Wall are falling on every frontier.

What is the prospect for the new version of intermarriage? How tough will it be for the Christian/Jewish couples whose weddings I have attended recently?

As a diligent marriage counselor, I have to look seriously at the relationship aspects of these differences. Forget that. As a father of two eligible daughters, I have to examine my parental feelings about Intercontinental Marriage. I mean that, all the while they were growing up, we told our daughters to be unprejudiced. We welcomed persons from other countries into our home. Now they are both living abroad, and, although it is temporary, the prospect for them romantically meeting men from truly foreign countries is not just hypothetical. (Or I did have two eligible daughters at the time of writing. As the reader may have noticed, one did marry a foreigner. I imagine her grandfather would have approved of the Swede.)

I have this notion that the greater the distance between the individual origins of the couple, the harder it will be to communicate meaningfully. Both at the verbal level and at the non-verbal level, things get interpreted differently. When Richard Nixon went on a South American tour during his presidency, he unintentionally managed to insult many citizens of that continent. All he was doing was instinctively responding to the cheering crowd with his usual two-finger V-for-Victory' salute. What he actually communicated to his audience was the equivalent of the single upturned middle finger that we, in this country, reserve for Great Moments in Obscenity.

There are many lesser differences: words, facial gestures, and nuances, even the meaning of love.

You've heard "If you really loved me, you would have..." followed by some activity that the hurt spouse had in mind. I believe these differences of understanding are inevitable, and provide good reasons for seeking clarification from one another. I also believe that meanings of words and gestures have wider differences the further apart the spouses grew up from one another. So, nowadays, these differences are inevitable, and should not be overlooked in marital therapy as a source of much anger and hurt.

No social sanctions will keep star-crossed lovers apart. Even Romeo and Juliet had problems. (Their problems didn't get better, although they did result in bringing their families together.) What can be done, however, is to recognize that there is much that is unconscious in a marriage that needs to be made conscious. Get it on the table and talk about it! The unconscious stuff will kill or cripple a marriage quicker than a tidal wave can hit the beach on a dark night. I believe most of these differences are solvable, but they must be faced and brought to the surface.

Even the great historical differences between religions can be aired. All our marriages are victims of the Collective Subconscious of old hatreds, distrust, and prejudice. Some are worse than others. The Holocaust has left such a deep scar among generations of Jews that intermarriage with non-Jews carries a very difficult wound. I don't say this will make these interfaith marriages easy, but neither is it impossible.

Two committed individuals in a marriage, when they know they carry the weight of their roots on their backs, have a job to do. And that job has to be done at both a conscious level and at an unconscious level. That's what marital therapists are trained to do. It's probably true that each couple that examines and refines their rootedness creates a new heritage to pass on to their children.

Keep in Touch with Old Friends

You want to know the legend of the first Christmas card? When my wife and I took the Dickens tour of London, our guide told us how it happened. Supposedly:

It all got started when God and Charles Dickens were chatting one day. God said to Dickens, “Don’t forget your poor Aunt Madge this Christmas. If you can’t have her over for tea at least you could send her a note with a few good tidings! Besides, I don’t think once a year is asking too much!”

Dickens said, “O.K., but what are ‘tidings’?”

And God said, “Check out the Christmas stories in the Bible. I put some of my best material in there. ‘Tidings of great joy’ was one of my better inspirations.”

And so it began a really good custom. People actually wrote holiday messages to one another.

But thanks to glitzy greeting cards, the tradition has eroded over the years, until there is hardly a shred left of the original purpose of the Christmas card tradition. These days, people don’t give the priority to their Christmas card list that it deserves. I call it the Seasonal Neglect Disorder.

But your Christmas card list is important because it is an indicator of your identity. Your relationships of the past have helped to define you. These people are like a fortification encircling you, some are close in, and others have drifted to the periphery, but remained on the list year after year. It is because those people at one time or another were meaningful to you, shared experiences with you, and you just know they are part of your permanent list. Neglect of this identity marker will get you more than a lump of coal in your stocking.

Attending to your list is a kind of gathering of the pieces of your life that are represented by these people on your list. Each one represents a phase of your life that made you who you are today. A chapter was written in your life, and they are the main characters of that chapter.

Your list describes your sense of family, some blood family members chosen for you and some friends you chose. Christmas is a family time, and like it or not, you are a part of some family.

You strengthen your own immediate family when you reach out and contact that circle of old friends, distant relatives, as well as new acquaintances. It is like pumping life into your roots; it makes you and your family stronger. Getting connected brings people back to life. Cutting yourself off from people you were once close to handicaps all other close relationships. This is fair warning.

You owe it to yourself to stay connected and surround yourself and your present family with that support system.

New Century Advances Go Only So Far

O.K. I have to admit it; I am not always a willing travel partner on the road to progress. When it comes to the matter of how to start referring to this new century that we have launched, I am especially reluctant to begin using the term “two-thousand” as the designation for the current calendar year. It sounds too snobbish, like someone is trying to be hip. I think I will hold out for the more secure, tried and true naming method that has been around for a thousand years. I liked “ninety-nine” and, for that matter, “eighty-eight”, so I’m going to call this New Year “oughty—ought”(rhymes with potty pot). Go ahead, say it out loud! See how good it feels on your tongue? This is my cautionary note: I say, go slow on this New Year stuff.

The reason I don’t trust all things new is because I think people will start thinking too highly of computers and other modern technology in this new millennium. And some smart Alec computers might start thinking too highly of themselves! Ray Kurzweil, the inventor of voice-recognition technology, predicts that by the year 2020 our computers will be smarter than we are! The notion is a little scary.

With regard to our relationships, there is a false sense of security that computer reliance has given us. Just because you have seen a late twentieth century rally of techno advances in most every aspect of your life, don’t rely on computers to deliver the good stuff of relationships. I doubt they will be assisting in the art of psychotherapy, or replacing therapists themselves.

The idea that computers could perform the task of helping people with relationship problems is a misunderstanding of what the healing effect of real live human discourse is all about. Imagine! You call for help and Darth Vader answers. This is not progress. Sure, there are a few good “Dear Abbey” answers that could be electro-catalogued for most common personal problems, but advice-giving is a very primitive level of counseling.

No matter how smart computers get, they will never be able to generate that essential element of empathy that can exist between two living, breathing human beings. Empathy is the personal quality that enables one person to be truly present and open to another. It is the quality of understanding what your mate is saying or feeling in the situation of the moment. You yourself know you are really listened-to when someone responds in a way that lets you know they have grasped the meaning of your feeling-laden words. It is the crux of meaningful human contact, it can happen in a loving relationship between family members. It helps make you whole. Yet, because this quality of empathy is often missing in family relationships, people actually pay me (and other therapists) to implant this otherwise “free” ingredient back into their interactions.

Before oughty-ought is over, you could be guilty of the crime of the century if you let your relationship fall prey to some cold non-empathic microchip! Let yourself ease into all this newness with some old values.

In Your Dreams

Relationships are complicated. They start out sweet and full of excitement, then, as quickly as a summer storm, a black cloud of misunderstanding rolls in and complicates what you thought you had going for you. Cheryl exclaimed, “What happened to this guy I married?” She thought she had somehow missed the signals in her romantic beginnings with James. Now she had a stormy situation to deal with.

Well, wouldn't it be nice if we had a radar warning system where a little buzzer would go off in our heads when caution is called for in a relationship? Whether it's a new relationship or a marriage of 20 years, we could all use a little aid-to-intuition when it comes to our interaction with those significant others in our lives. Something to keep us from making painful mistakes, to head-off a stupid move that we will probably regret later.

Future technology? No! Present reality. We have a perfect factory-installed ability to stay on top of relationships through our dreams. Dreams are like having our own personal advisor that we can consult with every night. Dreams send us valuable messages, hoping for us to have fulfilling and uncomplicated relationships. To avoid pitfalls in our relationships, all we have to do is tune-in to our nightly advisor with a receptive attitude and a little understanding about how dreams work. Sleep lab research tells us that everybody dreams at least three dreams a night. Of course, all people don't remember their dreams.

But even that little problem of remembering can be fixed. Get a dream journal and stand-by, expectantly. So look at all this untapped psychic help that's available! I use dream interpretation often in the course of psychotherapy treatment. Most people can learn to do it on their own. For now I want to show what dreams can do for a relationship.

The unconscious works during our waking hours like a radar that senses and records the subtle events of our interactions at home, at work, or wherever we are spending time with our favorite person. The accumulated data is played back at night in the form of dream images and stories. Within the dreams lie startlingly useful insights about what we have been doing, thinking, feeling. Long before we can consciously put it all together, the dream makes connection and knocks on the door of our consciousness, delivering information that is more revealing than anything we could have figured out, even if we had Angela Lansbury helping us. Want to really read what's going on with Katie, the seemingly together new woman you have just met? Ask your dreams.

Dreams can help us examine our intense reactions to people, especially people we're close to. Whether it's because something they do really bugs you, inexplicably, or because you can't understand the mysteriously huge attraction you feel for that new person you've just met, your dreams will tell you what is getting triggered in yourself. The stronger the emotion, the greater the chance that someone in your environment is simply a blank screen on which your mind is projecting its own emotionally unresolved conflict. So why take it out on them?

The great dream psychologist Carl Jung would ask us to own up to the feeling that belongs to us.

Without dreams, we could go on pretending with some high-flying self-righteousness that we have no prejudice, for example. Then lo-and-behold it turns out we are capable of the very things we criticize others for. Even the intensity of being in love is about our own narcissism. But then, people in love will not believe that, probably until it has caused them to act a little crazy. My opinion is that persons in midlife crisis miss the inner message of their behavior when they run off with some young thing.

So it's a good idea to listen to those dreams during times of major transitions, adult developmental stages, and family crises. Stay in touch with what you are really feeling. Learn what your true motivations are for important decisions. Don't fool yourself. Reflect in time to make repairs.

The Senoi tribe in Southeast Asia has a custom about dreams. From the time of childhood, members of the tribe take their dreams to the elder for instruction. He assigns a task, usually about reconciling a relationship, to the dreamer. The dreamer must carry out this task during the ensuing day with real people and real relationships. The tribe has never been in conflict with their neighbors, and is noted for their peaceful existence as a people. Now, that's my idea of a family counselor!

Positive Work Relationships Work Better

“She was a walking personnel disaster,” one employer told me about the staff manager at his place of business. The turnover was high. He was describing the lapsing morale where he worked, and how much it had affected productivity.

Relationships at a person’s place of business are not the same as family relationships. But there are some parallels. Without any teamwork or clear personnel policies, the workplace can be a source of conflict that generates nearly as much emotion as home and family. Most businesses are driven by the bottom-line. Still, attention to smoother work relationships will actually increase productivity. A business that ignores the “spirit of the work place” will generate a negative atmosphere, like a bad virus.

What if this bad workplace virus got loose and infected the whole community? People would take it home at night. Families would feel the stress. Roadways and city streets would be a scary place.

Get the point? Workplace relationships could do with a little lifting of the spirit. Here’s how:

The Cape Coral Human Services Network is launching another of its annual N.I.C.E. Days (see “Kindness Rejuvenates a Relationship”). The acronym stands for the National Incentive to Compliment Everyone, the idea is to spread the positive approach to as many people as possible. Businesses, as well as agencies, will celebrate the day with an emphasis on lifting the spirit through compliments.

O.K., so it takes a special day to draw attention to something most of us don’t do as a normal part of our relationships at work or at home. The tendency is, left to our usual stressed-out workday, to slip into criticism. And criticism doesn’t work. So this is a little encouragement to look on the bright side, find the fortunate in the humdrum, and tell someone about a good quality you see in them.

While the family home is a good place to give compliments, the workplace affects a lot of relationships. For just one day, all the participating businesses and agencies become classrooms for the naysayers and pessimists. It is a kind of defensive driving school for the critical. I say, flash the blue light and stop those critical people that are running loose around town thinking negative thoughts and criticizing everything around them. Send them to compliment school, and show them how to look on the bright side. Actually, the workplace is a good place to do that. For NICE Day, the participating groups provide a tutoring place for the positive approach. The basic 101 course is simply to give an honest compliment. Rule of thumb: Praise a piece of work that goes beyond the call of duty.

As the new day dawns, citizens of our county will look to the sky for inspiration, as several hot-air balloons float overhead in the early morning. It just so happens that the hot-air balloon is the logo for the day’s events, corresponding to the motto, “Give a lift, give a compliment”.

Positive Relationships

After the umpteenth time I am called on to help repair an ailing relationship, something a little strange starts to happen. I start to feel little vibrations in the front part of my brain. The signals are arising from the old frontal lobe, which has been designated as the planning department of my personally issued mental equipment.

“Beep, Beep,” it says, “think ahead, make a plan. Don’t just repair the road. Do something to keep the road from getting these potholes in the first place!”

“Right,” I say, “I want to be more than a repairman for the potholes on the road of life.” So, wouldn’t it be great if someone could come up with a way to prevent so many rough spots in relationships. That “someone” was me, because I had seen what criticism can do to relationships, and I had also seen what a little praise can do.

My job: Champion the forces of praise and compliments.

I hear a lot of stories about the families people grow up in, because it’s part of the baggage that people bring into their adult relationships. None was more characteristic of the need for praise than one married man who was trying to figure out his insecurity in a new stepfamily role.

“Growing up,” he said, “what I missed were ‘attaboys’ or other encouragements from my father. Dad didn’t have time to go to my basketball games and watch me play.” Adolescents already feel like they’re living inside the body of a humvee—slightly too big for the road and more horsepower than they need. It’s a vulnerable time when a compliment can do wonders and criticism can be devastating. Kids and adults alike respond to praise. Praise is such a powerful force that it influences the learning process. Those pure psychologists who run rats through mazes all day have shown us that positive reinforcement works with human beings as well. I don’t know why I have to remind people, who have trained their dogs to do tricks with doggie biscuits, that getting their mates to make changes is a matter of praising the right behaviors.

So I envisioned a special day to highlight the value of praise and compliments. Draw some attention to some good preventive measures that no one would be afraid to try, even at home! I called it N.I.C.E. day: The National Incentive to Compliment Everyone. To say “National” may be a bit expansive, but that’s just what I’d like it to become. Everybody doing it, at least on one day of the year. So far, it has only been a local phenomenon. For the past four years, the Cape Coral Human Services Network has carried the ball and has promoted NICE day in Cape Coral, Florida. This year they will do it again, and on September 29th you can expect to get a compliment when you visit Greater Cape Coral.

Fort Myers residents can look across the river and see a different atmosphere hanging over the city, like a glowing cloud. Schools, banks, and supermarkets, among others will have their own ways of

celebrating a positive approach to relationships throughout Cape Coral. The City Council will be enjoined by the mayor's proclamation to do so. It gets bigger every year!

It might even happen in homes throughout Lee County and beyond. O.K., so you know only too well that guy or gal you have lived with all these years. After sharing the same emotional space for so long, you probably know a lot of the murkier qualities of your mate, but I recommend that you take a relationship risk and comment on something you like in that person. It works!

Love in a family setting surely means that one can lovingly discover something good, useful, or progressive in what a family member is doing . . . and say so!

Relationship health, especially in marital relationships, depends on keeping the forces of criticism at bay. Take up the cause! There is no place in family relationships for criticism. In fact, there may not be any such thing as constructive criticism! I have a dream that if, in every reader's household, a compliment was given on NICE Day, the ground beneath Southwest Florida would tremble, and our whole community would be impressively thrust forward in the evolution of family relationships.

Beep, Beep!

Buried Treasure

I recently had to clear out some outdated files of people I saw years ago. Proper protocol suggests putting them (the files, not the people!) through the shredding machine, to keep confidentiality intact, and consign all those old stories to the black hole of the universe, where passé information is sent. Probably, by now, most of those people have forgotten what they had fretted or complained about that long ago anyway. To keep the finely shredded papers moving in the right direction, I decided to dump them in my backyard compost pile. Somehow, it seemed appropriate to recycle all those life stories back into the dust they had been created out of, and put the phosphorous-rich shreds to good gardening use. What had been secrets and sad tales now were on their way to a proper burial, where they could do some good next to the roots of my heliconias.

My professional contact with those struggling folks was a brief time in their lives of relationships. I think they were unknowingly on safari, searching for themselves. The way I see it, everybody in life is on a journey, seeking and searching to discover the lost continent of the real and pristine self. Christopher Columbus didn't know what he was going to find, but he knew two things for sure, that he was searching, and that he was on a great journey of some kind. For all of us, self-acceptance of the rough edges of our souls is the goal of the journey.

But, meanwhile, along the way, relationships become a diversion. The search gets delayed, and becomes tied up in the pursuit of finding someone out there who will affirm us, accept us. It's like we budding human beings need the O.K. stamp-of-approval to validate us. But it never quite happens, because even the greatest human relationship of love can never hope to produce this salvation, this inner self-affirmation that is, when you come right down to it, more like a spiritual experience than some kind of relationship success. This is not a lecture against having relationships, but, hey, let's get them in perspective.

In a way, having a marriage is only incidental to having a life. I am a bad tour guide if I only work to help with the success of the relationship itself. Since it takes two whole people to have a whole relationship, I believe it is my job, as tour guide, also to point out a few things along the individual route they each are taking. And, to some of those relationship-desperate people, I would like to say, "Get a life!"

As the guardian of all those buried tales of old endings and new beginnings, blending of families, and sad relationship failures, I have to think seriously about what has happened to the sojourners I have met in my office. How did the story turn out? I don't often get to hear the ending. I was just one stopover on their road to somewhere. I'm honored that they consulted me along the way, in their searches for happier solutions to their conflicts, in their searches to find some meaning in their losses, or as they looked to understand and be understood by their partners.

I assume that each one was on that awesome journey. And that each one ended up in a better place than did my files on them.

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