

Marriage Today: The Fragility of Intimacy

An article in the New York Times at the end of summer, heralding the new television series season was headlined "Television, in a darkening mood, looks at marriage and finds despair." Characterizing the new, chiaroscuro landscape was a sense of isolation and loneliness within the very institution that promises a deep and lasting attachment.

Marriage as an institution has had quite an interesting history. A contemporary sociologist, Dr. Stephanie Coontz, notes that until 200 years ago marriage was an arrangement which served political, social and economic functions. Individual needs were barely in view. Beginning in the 18th century, there was a revolutionary idea afoot which was that couples were supposed to be more interested in each other than in friends, their extended families, or their associates in commerce.

This concept traveled through an era of industrial development and the separation of male (workplace) and female (home guardian) spheres emerging as the essential "love-based, male breadwinner family" that lasted until it was challenged by the cultural revolution of the 1960's.

Today we know that the sands are shifting under and around this institution. Though the number of married couples as a proportion of households has been declining for decades, since 2005 more American women are living without a husband than with one. "This would seem to close the book on the Ozzie and Harriet era that characterized much of the last century."

But 93% of Americans say they still hope and plan on forming a lasting and happy union with one person. What challenges will they face? The following list is not exhaustive by any means:

--In an era when men and women are both in the workforce at the intensity in which many jobs must be performed today, there is often precious little time for intimacy, "hanging out" together.

--Feminist principles are still being absorbed into marital culture: Is it o.k. if she makes more money? Why isn't he responsible for an equal amount of childcare?

--The explosion of electronic and media formats burden and distract partners who now often spend more time on their computers than in face time with partners.

--The delay in childbearing has led to an unprecedented involvement in fertility treatments, a known stressor of coupling.

--As the population ages, partners become not only are responsible for each other and offspring, but are often crucial caretakers to their aging parents or other relatives.

In the face of these challenges, how can marriage remain a source of growth, security and nurturance to individuals?

From a psychodynamic perspective, the new challenges of marriage call for self-reflection in a way that more clearly scripted versions of bonding have not required in the past.

For instance, if you want to negotiate equitable gender arrangements, you will need to think deeply and honestly about the models your parents presented: the hidden resentments, unwilling accommodations. In general, we find ourselves replaying unfinished childhood struggles with our parents, and between our parents, in our adult intimate relationships.

In an era in which self-actualization, self-realization and even self-creation are held up as cultural ideals, it is daunting to face the necessary dependency of intimate relationships. To tolerate, let alone enjoy dependency on another, necessitates being honest with oneself about the fears evoked by relying on another: disappointment, humiliation, at the worst - abandonment.

It's crucial that each partner try to be as honest as possible about his or her wishes, longings and irritations and discuss these as tactfully and openly as possible. Generally, what is not "owned" becomes "disowned" and projected onto a partner. "It's not my rage or selfishness that's the problem, but yours, or at the very least that you make me act this way."

Open discussion can lead to argument, but it is wise to remember that marital research indicates that it is the way couples argue that causes distress, not what they argue about. Balancing positive with negative statements about one's partner is important; much damage can be avoided or done in the style of disagreement. Withdrawing and stonewalling is off-limits when the goal is relationship health. The common advice proffered today to "work at marriage" might seem a bit dreary and unromantic. But "working" at how we confront our disappointments and how we criticize our partners is essential.

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