

Section 3 - The Good Marriage

Introduction:

1 – This is based on the 1995 Judith Wallerstein/Sandra Blakeslee book entitled The Good Marriage

General Ideas About the Happy Marriage:

1 – Wallerstein and Blakeslee studied 50 couples; married at least 9 years; nearly equal numbers from the 1950's, 60's, 70's, and early 80's; marriages 10 to 40 years in length; both husband and wife considered it a happy marriage; all had at least one child; were promised full confidentiality; same first two questions (Tell me what's good about this marriage?; What's disappointing about your marriage?)

2 – Myths:

- the individuals have to come from healthy backgrounds
- the partners do not have significant neuroses
- there is no shouting and fighting in the happy marriage
- living together before marriage prevents divorce
- midlife crises are inevitable, even in happily married couples

3 – Qualities seen in happy marriages:

- on balance, each partner felt a goodness of fit in needs, wishes, and expectations
- appreciative on the other's responsiveness to their needs
- each has a feeling of safety and comfort even though the married life is not free of pain and conflict
- they adapt to an ever changing life and relationship
- only 5 of 100 spouses wanted a marriage like their parents
- the different types of marriage provide a different kind and degree of closeness between husband and wife, different divisions of labor and child care

4 – Chose partners based on: physical attraction, common interest, shared past or background, shared vision of the future, shared pain, fear it's last chance, has what we lack (complementarity)

5 – Important questions:

- Do these couples behave differently at an unconscious level in their marriage than couples who are unhappy, and if so, how and why?
- Is there less envy or less projection of hated parts of self and/or internal parental figures?

The Nine Tasks of Marriage:

1 – Separating from family of origin

- for women, marriage, motherhood, and mother's death are particularly difficult issues to traverse
- balancing ties to spouse versus parents sets up a task to traverse

2 – Building togetherness and creating autonomy

- giving up independence and freedom of single life

3 – Becoming parents

- one of life's peak experiences, defines marriage, promotes psychological growth, provides countless joyful experiences, and countless worries
- has task of making room for a baby and preserving the couple

4 – Coping with crises

- including all major changes, accidental or developmental; children's adolescence and leaving home; spouses midlife; retirement and aging; parent's illness and deaths; moves and natural disasters; etc.
- these couples approached crisis realistically
- protected each other instead of blaming

- allowed for pleasure and humor
- didn't play martyr or saint, kept out destructive tendencies
- blocked crises they could see coming

5 – Making a safe place for conflict

- conflict occurred in a preserved context of connectedness and caring
- sense of fairness maintained even in anger
- could distinguish little problems from big ones

6 – Exploring sexual love and intimacy

- need to distinguish excitement from satisfaction
- sexual intercourse combined with love requires trust
- a rewarding and stable sex life is the central task of marriage

7 – Sharing laughter and keeping interests alive

- enjoy activities together and separately
- humor and laughter are lifelong keys to coping

8 – Providing emotional nurturance

- comfort and encouragement in a place that is safe for dependency, failure, disappointment, aging, illness, etc.
- maintaining and restoring each other's self-esteem (i.e. feeling loved, feeling virtuous, feeling competent)
- not envious of what they gave to the other (ensemble work)

9 – Preserving a double vision

The Romantic Marriage: [15% of study couple]

1 – Core is a lasting, passionately sexual relationship with an exciting, sensual feeling of being “destined” to be together

2 – Its “antimarrriage” danger is the husband and wife being frozen in a self-absorbed, childlike preoccupation with each other, turning their backs on the world and their children

3 – Essential features of romantic marriage

- full blown baby idealization preserved, magic, safe smell
- high proportion had sustained severe losses during childhood including death or physical or mental illness of parent
- most women felt their father was the more nurturing parent
- men came to adulthood with intense, long postponed needs for love and closeness (thus felt physically connected to their wives)

Example Matt and Sara

(Sara's Background – age 51):

- surrounded by loving men from an early age (brother, dad, uncle, grandfather)
- at 5, never smiled in photographs, “life was too serious at an early age”
- her father's mother died at an early age and he raised his 6 siblings by himself with his dad
- “my mother didn't want children, had my bother to please her relatives, she hated females and had no use for me, mom says she didn't touch me until I was 6 months old, nursed me, milk dried up, sent me to a wet nurse, never took care of us when we were sick”
- “my father knew that, that is probably why he protected me”

(Matt's Background – age 53):

- wealthy, socially prominent family with attorney dad
- adored his father, wanted to be exactly like him
- dad treated volatile, unpredictable mom as if she was fragile
- lonely childhood, felt like unconfident outsider at school
- first go angry with mom when mom was mean to Sara

The Rescue Marriage: [20% of study couples]

1 – Begin their marriage as “walking wounded” from traumatic childhood experiences with “healing” as a central theme of the marital relationship

2 – Its “antimarrriage”, instead of healing, would replay old traumas with the spouses mistakenly concluding that this is what life is about; it can also fail by becoming a codependent one where one partner's difficulties are reinforced

3 – Essential features of the Rescue Marriage:

- people with great pain and trauma can put it behind them and have a stable, rewarding marriage with great growth
- seem to hold steadfastly to a different, better vision of life than the one they experienced
- thus the good marriage has a healing power, esp. in young adulthood that assists in a psychological transformation with successful recovery (e.g. Buckley's had weekly talk sessions, “she never lost confidence in me”)
- strong identification with each other yet are careful not to martyr or merge with one another
- each is inspirational symbol for the other in contrast to bad past figures
- having and raising kids well is important

Example of Helen and Keith Buckley:

(Helen's background – age 59):

- orderly CPA husband keeps her from falling into the abyss
- married at 19 after 9 months of dialogue
- mom was promiscuous alcoholic who abandoned her at 2, only visiting a few times thereafter, divorced x3
- dad also divorced x3, put her in foster home at 2 and never took her back, 2nd wife didn't like kids
- foster mother, on farm, 57, paranoid and violent
- foster dad was crippled, ignored her, but built beautiful stringed instruments, she taught herself to play
- roamed back country alone from 10 to 16
- in 10th year of marriage, unconsciously recreating her abandonment when she was two, she briefly left when her daughter was two

(Keith's background):

- librarian, spinster mother married in mid 30's to younger stingy, caustic man who liked to hurt people, tyrannical, they bickered a lot, mom gentle, never hurt a fly
- hated his father and adored his mother who tried to make him feel good about himself and was Lutheran
- mom died when he was 17

4 – Summary:

- separated psychologically from parents early, recognizing the parent's deficiencies
- retained the capacity to feel (not numbness)
- growing up, they nourished hope, even with only mild encouragement from any adult

The Companionate Marriage: [70% of 1970's and 80's couples]

1 – The most common form of marriage among younger couples, reflecting the social changes of the last two decades, its core is friendship and equality with an attempt to balance each partner's serious emotional

investment in the workplace with their emotional investment in the relationship and children (key words: respect and fairness)

2 – Its “antimarrriage” would result in a degeneration into a brother/sister relationship, investing in their careers and seeing each other fleetingly with little sexual or emotional intimacy

3 – Essential features:

- newest marital form and most difficult to maintain
- friendship and trust with the belief that both partners have equal responsibility in all domains of the marriage including economic, child rearing and sexual
- when children are young and careers pressing, individual needs have to be placed on a back burner, so fairness is felt to be a key guideline
- speak to each other as friends
- serious issues are settled by negotiation and compromise
- mutual respect and trust supersede love

Example of Kit Morgan and Beth McNeil:

(Kit’s background – age 42):

- teaches math, does the cooking and maintenance
- his parents had terrible marriage, separating and getting back together, dad suspicious, he felt left by mom but felt dad didn’t treat her with respect, she divorced him after 25 years of marriage

(Beth’s background – age 42)

- nurse practitioner, AIDS volunteer
- moved a lot as child as dad was in merchant marines, left for 6 months at a time, mother never stopped feeling sorry for herself, dad never stopped blaming himself for being away, they loved each other
- Beth had to take care of mom, no boundaries, resented not getting to be a kid

The Traditional Marriage: [all of 1950’s and early 60’s, 25% thereafter]

1 – Its core is a clear division of roles and responsibilities with the woman taking charge of the home and the man being the primary wage earner, the woman defining her life in chapters, before marriage and children, life with young children, and a later chapter with new undertakings or a return to work

2 – Its “antimarrriage” has a narrow focus on the children and views themselves as parenting partners, dreading the time when the children leave home and they are left with little in common

3 – Essential features:

- home is where well-ordered, ethical and moral behavioral standards are created and maintained
- if this marriage type fails, the woman is not likely to be able to reenter the work force
- sexual passion is valued but not central
- children as first priority are viewed as needing full time or nearly full time mom with sacrifice for them necessary
- his work takes priority in terms of where the family lives and being a father is an important part of his manhood
- husband and wife comfort each other
- our society does not make this type of marriage easy

Example of Nicholas and Maureen Easterbrook:

(Nicholas’ background – age 55):

- a scientist, he owns his own very successful company, and is used to being in command
- his dad was a nuclear physicist at Los Alamos, ambitious workaholic, enviously cruel unrelenting tyrant
- mom was kind an gentle, worked in lab too, taught him right from wrong
- family never did anything together

(Maureen's background – age):

- homemaker and world class orchid breeder
- married her senior college year at 20, had felt tied to her mother's apron strings, dad died shortly thereafter
- soon had 4 daughters, lived in a strange town, felt very dependent
- mom was powerful, Christian, puritanical, strait-laced, and covered dad who worked hard and drank a lot
- went temporarily insane over a 16 year old Adonis boy

4 – More recent traditional marriages: don't separate sharing concerns about work and family, handle conflict differently with less power differential, power and decisions equally shared

Renegotiating Marriage:

1 – Infidelity

- sexual fantasies and desires outside marriage are universal as even a great marriage leaves some part of self unsatisfied
- despite excitement of risky sex, one night stands, when uncovered cause far more pain to marriage than anticipated
- 16% of women and 25% of men in study had brief affairs

2 – Second Marriages (1/3 of study couples)

- many rushed into first marriage at young age
- 2nd marriages fail earlier and more frequently than first, especially because of children
- need for rich sex life is often frankly
- “blending” families is very difficult task, thus one big, happy family is not a realistic goal

3 – Retirement Marriages

- able literally and emotionally to take more time
- still have fundamental issue of togetherness versus autonomy
- women struggle with increased emotional neediness of retired husband, fearing loss of privacy and being sucked dry
- grand parenting is a major pleasure
- sex is still important, but with less driven need, some impotence and women slower to reach orgasm