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Foundations for a Loving, Rich Marriage

Laying firm foundations is essential if we are to build the lasting marriages we desire: marriages full of love, connection and passion; marriages in which we grow in skills for loving, and in which we can play and rest; marriages in which we will be challenged when we get complacent and comforted when we are wounded. The Gospel of Matthew, Chap 7:24-25 describes a way to build foundations of rock instead of sand: by listening to and acting on the words of Jesus. In this hand-out and column I will sketch out some of what I have learned as I have listened to Jesus through my study, prayer, work with clients, and my own marriage.

New Attitudes/Ways of Seeing

In order to love our neighbor as our self (which Jesus called the second of the two greatest commandments) we must embrace new attitudes, new ways of thinking and viewing the world. Specifically we need to welcome new attitudes regarding our partner and marriage.

Some important attitudes toward our spouse include:

- 1) An attitude of respect/reverence; this person is created and deeply loved by God;
- 2) Seeing our spouse's differences from us as a path for our growth, not as obstacles for us or ways in which our partner is wrong;
- 3) Accepting that only God holds the complete Truth or view of reality. When we honor our partner's unique piece of truth as well as our own unique piece of truth, we often discover a more complete vision of reality.
- 4) Seeing our spouse as our ally in healing and growth, not as a competitor for limited time/love/energy.

An important new way of viewing marriage is to see it as a journey on which we set out that begins with rather predictable stages and then continues to cycle through predictable cycles.

We can choose to navigate growthfully and gracefully or choose to stall or abandon the journey.

Stages and Cycles

1) Romance/falling in love (Hendrix) or Promise/Love without Knowledge (Real).

This is the stage which Hollywood and much of Western literature portrays as true love. In fact it is only the first stage, although its authentic elements can be renewed over and over throughout the marriage once we learn the skills for this renewal. In the first flush of falling in love we experience a kind of love without knowledge.

This stage is based on:

- a) brain chemicals (when we are "in love" our brains are producing a kind of natural "speed"!),
- b) projection onto our partner of our own inner qualities which we have not yet embraced, and of qualities-- both the loving and wounding qualities---which were in our early caregivers, especially parents, and
- c) our deep unconscious, God-given drive to seek healing and ongoing growth. This is what gives us the courage to risk intimacy.

In this stage both partners seem to be effortlessly able to know what each other's needs are and to meet them; we see only the beautiful qualities in each other; the flow of love back and forth seems natural and completely fulfilling.

2) The Power Struggle (Hendrix) or Disillusionment/Knowledge without Love (Real).

This is the stage where most couples stall at least for awhile. We enter it usually as soon as some form of commitment to the relationship has been made; this is often the actual wedding, although it may be earlier (e.g. purchasing a house together) or later (e.g. a year or two after the wedding as the couple starts to take each other for granted, or as children enter the home).

Some people upon entering this stage assume it means they haven't found the "right" partner and so at some point they break that relationship and begin to search for another partner; folks who do this almost always find that they start out again in stage one but end again in stage two. Others resign themselves to constant conflict or to a "parallel marriage" (moving in same general direction, often in raising children, yet never touching in a real relationship). Often the couple will move from conflict to silent resentment to apathy. Some common losing strategies of this stage are: needing to be right, controlling, disrespectful/unbridled self-expression, retaliation/vengeance, and withdrawal.
(Real)

In this stage it seems our partner no longer has any desire or ability to meet our needs; it seems like we are competing for time and attention and love. At the worst moments our partner seems more like an enemy than an ally. In this stage we are both unconsciously living out old "scripts" from earlier dramas in our

childhood or later love relationships and from our cultural conditioning (especially regarding gender roles); we are hoping to get the love, understanding, and acceptance and blessing we didn't get in those past relationships. Until we learn new attitudes and skills, we will usually reinjure each other instead of helping each other heal and grow.

3) Transformational Struggle moving into "Passionate Friendship" (Hendrix) or Repair/Knowing Love/Mature Love (Real)

In this stage we commit to learning new attitudes and skills, including learning about the roots of our marital conflicts. Practicing an awareness of God's presence with us and drawing on God's love for our partner and our self, so that God's power for loving flows through us---this is an important power source for the daily practice of the disciplines of intimacy.

In this stage we learn ways to help each other feel safer and more cherished, ways to express our selves lovingly and honestly and to listen with empathy, ways to lovingly resolve conflicts and make joint decisions, ways to help heal each other of old wounds, ways to create a rhythm of life together as well as support each one's individual growth path.

There is no "last stage", no point at which we "arrive" at perfect marital bliss! Instead, we learn that our relationship will regularly cycle (sometimes as quickly as within an hour, sometimes over weeks/months!) from harmony and warm connection to disharmony, then through repair and back into harmony. We do experience "passionate friendship" (phrase coined by Hendrix) with some regularity, once we have healed enough and practiced our new attitudes and skills long enough so that we have developed a level of confidence in each other and in our relationship's staying power (whether in good or bad times).

We are able now to see both our spouse and our self more as God sees each of us: as a unique, treasured creation with immense beauty and gifts along with flaws and weaknesses. We are able much of the time to accept our spouse (and our self!) with all these gifts and flaws. We are willing, with God's help, to love our partner sacrificially, deciding to act lovingly (for her/his best good) even when we aren't feeling loving. We regularly practice the skills of confession, forgiveness, making amends, and reconciliation in the small and big conflicts and wounds.

Fruits

The fruits of this dedicated and hard work of loving will be many. Not only will we, in our marriage, experience the joy of giving and receiving love and of being accepted and honored by another human, but we will also experience God's love in a unique way; we will have much to give to our families, to the faith community in which we belong, and to the larger human community.

Jesus taught: "Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed

together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap." (Luke 6:38) As we learn to give to our partner the love that she/he needs (without keeping records of who has given last or most!) we do find that gifts are given to us by God and our partner. We are given so much that the gifts do overflow to those around us. This is such a liberating, joyful way of living. It requires that we give up the old self-protective, defensive, stingy counting out of bits of "love". Yet the response to this risk for love proves to be richly worthwhile. Try it for yourself and taste the difference!!!!

For Further Study

The New Rules of Marriage: What You Need to Know to Make Love Work, 2007,
Terrence Real (marriage therapist)

(Includes exercises for couples; these exercises can be utilized by one partner even if the other is not yet willing)

How Can I Get Through to You?:

Closing the Intimacy Gap Between Men and Women, 2002, Terrence Real

A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage, 2002,
Richard R. Gaillardetz (Catholic author and theologian).

Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples, 1988
Harville Hendrix (marriage therapist)
(includes a series of 12 exercises for couples)

Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, 2003
Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. (excellent guide for loving compassionate communication! Additional resources, including for parenting, workplace, and classrooms at <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/index.htm>)

