

Relationship Renewal - 2008

Pitt County Women's Journal

There is no better gift to ourselves and our family to dedicate ourselves this New Year to improving and renewing those relationships that are key to our happiness. The stress of the holidays is over and we have ahead of us eastern North Carolina's short season of winter culminating in traditional rites of spring. As a Marriage and Family Therapist, I know that every relationship has seasons of growth. The newly married are defining a sense of being a couple. Those in middle marriage struggle to keep their marriage vital during a time of competing demands while raising children. It is no surprise middle marriage is a time of decreased marital satisfaction. The "empty nest" years pose their own problems as couples try and find mutual interests that lead to an energized friendship.

Seasons of life, just as seasons of the earth, allow us to grow and change in cycles. In winter, my garden appears one dimensional and sparse. But I know that underground; my garden is recovering from this very hot summer and beginning to grow the roots necessary for longevity and the transition to spring. Likewise, in our lives, winter is a time to focus inward, to reign in community ventures, to tend to sniffles and our own home hearth. There is no better time to focus on deepening the roots of our family life and marital satisfaction.

Researchers in the field of family relations have heralded the institution of marriage for years. Men live longer when married, both women and men enjoy better health, couples accumulate more financial assets and stability, and children have better outcomes. Yet all these positive measures don't come close to measuring whether any individual or couple feels happy in their marriage. Personal happiness is a somewhat modern concept. Any long married couple will tell you they have gone through periods of extreme personal unhappiness. They have survived any number of variations of bad behavior including infidelity and addictions, not to mention the garden variety of arguments about money, children and sex. Yet, most of us still yearn for a relationship in our lives that makes us feel happy, cherished, safe, and even complete.

Couples are notoriously attracted to each other because of opposite characteristics. A shy woman is attracted to a gregarious man who secretly interprets her shyness as the steadiness he lacks; a laid-back man is attracted to a goal-oriented woman who sees his relaxed state as the perfect antidote to her insecurity based drive. Both the man and woman see each other as possessing some feature of character that they lack. The implicit assumption is that together, the couple will help each other be a more full and rounded person. Unfortunately, by the time unrest sets in, each partner views those opposing traits as negative and unacceptable. The gregarious husband sees his wife as boring, the laid back spouse is lazy, the goal oriented woman is critical and demanding. We now wonder why we didn't marry someone more like ourselves. What was a positive difference is now a blatant incompatibility. Unfortunately, we could do it over and over again, and we would still be attracted to those that are different from ourselves.

In this New Year, I ask you to plant the deeper roots and consider the following points important to any relationship success. We are rarely effective when we concentrate on how another person must change and be more like us. We are, frankly, not with a person for that reason. Instead, we must focus on how we must change. For instance, if my spouse grew up in a very independent home, he just doesn't understand my need for fairly constant companionship, which was typical in my home. I was probably even attracted to his independence when I met him. Over time, I have decided he doesn't care about

me because he doesn't like to be with me as often as I would like. My feelings are hurt and I in return, brood, question him and his whereabouts, and often withdraw when he is home. The more I pursue him yet withdraw from him in quiet hurt, the more often he feels judged, smothered, confused, and unable to meet my needs. I can choose to concentrate my efforts on changing him OR I can change how I decide to interpret and deal with circumstances I don't like. I can develop myself and fill some of my time with developing a new skill. I can find a group of really wonderful girlfriends. I can begin to ask those ultimate questions about my life. In other words, I can change. Changing doesn't mean "rolling over", but it does mean the long hard work of accepting others and ourselves and taking responsibility for our own happiness. That doesn't mean we can't still ask respectfully for change. You are supposed to "rub against" each other in order to grow in maturity. Maturity means a balance of acceptance, change, and growth.

Acceptance is not without boundaries or consequences. Clearly a situation where a spouse drinks too much, is abusive, or never home does not call for radical acceptance! It is a mistake to ignore these things but is also a mistake to view their resolution as the source of our happiness. Our happiness comes from living in the reality of our situation and developing ourselves to best meet our circumstances with respect for ourselves and others. It is not an easy road, but it is the process of becoming a mature person.

This year, I challenge you to become rooted in your relationships, to dedicate yourself to a maturation process that involves acceptance and change, to identify your role in relationship dissatisfaction, and to seek that elusive personal joy by seeking meaning that transcends seasons and relationships, clothes size and budget. There simply is no person that will satisfy the yearnings of your soul. We can spend decades confusing these two issues, or we can accept our responsibility to have an individual path as well as a relationship path. As human beings, we are made to live in relationship with each other. We must leave the self-interest of our youth, and through a natural attraction process, we are almost guaranteed to find ourselves married in a situation that will bring hurt and struggle. If we choose to grow, we learn eternal lessons. Those couples that stay together are rarely sorry.

Next issue – How to express needs, wishes, and meet the demands of everyday relationship conflict.