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### **Love's great service – Thoughts and a case vignette in couple therapy**

There is no doubt to me that one of the most challenging and potentially enriching experiences is to share one's life with an intimate partner. The ever significant proportion of couples who divorce is testament to the challenge. Our marriages are a central concern to us – the shelves of the self-help sections are well stocked with manuals and guides on how to create and maintain a healthy marriage. I believe that our society is deeply wrestling with the meaning of marriage, indeed with the very notion of what it is to create a lasting, intimate partnership with another human being. Here I present one view I use when practicing marriage and couple therapy.

As a psychologist who often works with couples I see that many people, despite intellectually understanding principles of good communication and being very capable of using these skills in other areas of life, find that resentments, bitterness and quarrel persist in their intimate relationships. I've wondered how it is that many couples arrive at a couple therapist's consulting room having read manuals on effective communication in relationships, having realised the importance of making specific times to be with one another, to "date" one another again by creating a routine that includes time dedicated to the relationship, and yet still find that their relationship is a source of deep pain and consternation. This pain and the state of the marriage pre-occupy the thoughts of these clients and most of their emotional energy is spent struggling with the relationship and its meaning.

As a couples therapist I have found that therapy with couples who are in the throes of such deep distress requires something more than the clarification of disturbed communication patterns or training the couple in clear and open communication. To be sure, this is an important aspect of good couple counselling but I have found myself challenged to incorporate a more encompassing and perhaps deeper view of marriage.

I am struck in couple's therapy how, even when the couple is locked in struggle and pain, how the marriage is constantly being of service to its partners. I have come to see our intimate love relationships as a context in which we can encounter our deepest selves. Very often pain that is being experienced in a marriage is the smarting of an earlier wound, perhaps a wound we acquired as a child in the marriage that created us. And where this is the case a similar process is usually happening for our partner – the pain that he or she is experiencing is the activation of an old wound, a long-ago experience that happened to another person, to the child that we once were.

How does this happen? My sense is that when we enter a marriage (and I use the word marriage to refer to any committed relationship in which the parties live with one another and have in some form or other declared themselves partners in life) one of the things we do is to re-constitute a family.

We have perhaps spent much of our adolescence and early adulthood moving away from the family that created us and establishing ourselves as independent adults, only now, through marriage, to re-enter a space of inter-dependence and union. This effect of reconstituting the family is especially amplified when we have children. Suddenly then, we find that love has led us back into the cauldron that created us. Family, with all that meant and means to us, with our experiences of its potential to harm and harbour, nurture and violate us, is again part of our

psychological landscape. Whatever it has been for us, on some level, our being now responds to the new family we have created as if it were the family that created us.

### **A couple seeks marriage therapy.**

I will illustrate with an example. John (38 years old) and Mary (40 years old) have been married for 12 years. They have 2 children a boy aged 5 and a girl aged 3.

#### **John's story**

John is the youngest by 10 years of three male children. He describes his father as a moody and aggressive man who worked offshore as an engineer and would be away from home for up to 3 months at a time before returning home for a 5 or 6 week break. When his father was home he says that the climate in the house would be tense and unhappy – his father would drink and become verbally and once physically abusive towards his mother. John describes his mother as a very soft person, who was completely unable to cope with his father. His childhood memories are mixed – he recalls very easy and happy times between him and his mother when his father was at sea. His older siblings had left home to study and live independently and he and his mother would do interesting things together. John says that his father was also financially abusive and that he would only erratically send money to his family while he was offshore and usually only the minimum required to keep life and limb together.

He says that his mother was very inventive and they would visit local museums and art galleries and take long walks in the countryside together. He regards these memories as being the best of his childhood. However, when his father was on shore leave, he would experience great anxiety, and a fierce desire to protect his mother from the aggressive outbursts of his father. He was physically afraid of his father and would hide from him when he sensed that he had been drinking and would feel guilty for abandoning his mother to her defencelessness in the face of his abusive behaviours. He remembers once, aged about 12, lying in bed hearing their conflict and being very afraid and then when he heard his father storming out of the house creeping into the kitchen to comfort his mother who was weeping at the table.

This pattern continued throughout John's adolescence and early adulthood. In contrast to his brothers who left home as soon as they were able, John stayed at home while completing a degree in electronic engineering. Once qualified and working, he continued to stay at home and to pay board and lodging to his mother.

When John was 24 his father was involved in an accident at sea in which he was almost killed. He recovered but lost the use of his right arm and leg. His father was forced to retire and has, since that time, stayed at home on pension. John says that since his accident his father has "calmed down" a lot. Although he is largely uncommunicative, he no longer drinks as much as he did and while still irascible, is not subject to the rage and abusive outbursts that were present throughout John's childhood.

At around the same time as his father's accident, John met Mary.

#### **Mary's story**

Mary is an only child. Mary's describes her father as a soft and very gentle man who worked hard at his job as a junior account manager to support his family. Mary says that the family was never well off but there was always enough for the essentials and for an annual holiday. Mary speaks of her father with deep tenderness and affection. However, she says that her relationship with her mother is not and never has been a good one. She describes her mother as never being satisfied with any aspect of her life. This dissatisfaction extended to Mary herself. Mary remembers numerous occasions on which her mother expressed her general dissatisfaction and disappointment with her. Her mother described her performance in a school play as "average" and the play itself as "boring". Other memories that Mary has are of her mother refusing to eat the cake she had made in her Home Economics class as it

looked “disgustingly rich” and of being told on trying on her matric dance dress that she looked like “mutton dressed as lamb”. In fact Mary’s experience of her mother is that she never missed an opportunity to make her feel bad in small and in not-so-small ways.

Mary states that her father also did not escape the constant criticism of her mother. She recalls feeling very sorry for her father when her mother would frequently make comments about his menial job. Mary has a particular association with the word “pittance” which her mother often used to refer to her father’s salary. She has many similar memories of her parent’s relationship. She recalls her mother rolling her eyes as the family planned a holiday to a local coastal resort, as if to say that the holiday was not good enough or beneath her. She does not know if her father was aware of this but she says that as an adult she has watched him become, in her words, “progressively smaller”, as if he has over the years physically shrunk.

Mary recalls a strong sense of isolation and loneliness growing up. The absence of siblings, the constant criticism and dissatisfaction from her mother and her father’s quiet withdrawal meant that she spent a vast amount of time on her own. She recalls being very frightened a lot of the time, and says that she became very introverted. This notwithstanding, she went to university, choosing to study teaching because this meant that she would receive a full bursary and that no additional financial burden would be placed on her father. Once qualified she moved out of her parent’s house and shared a flat with a colleague and it was at this time that she met John.

### **John and Mary in couple therapy**

Let us now move forward twelve years. The couple is now an established family – they live in a comfortable home, they have recently, by taking a second home loan account, acquired a holiday house in a nearby coastal town and their children are attending prestigious private schools. John occupies a senior position in his company and Mary has recently returned to teaching after taking several years off after their children were born.

John and Mary have sought couple therapy because, as Mary puts it, there are lots of problems in their marriage. She says that she believes that John is depressed. She complains that he is emotionally very distant from her and that he spends all of his time either working or playing golf. She says that she feels abandoned by John, that he has, over the years, moved steadily away from her and that they are barely able to have a conversation with one another. When they do converse it is invariably to do with the children and their needs and practical arrangements regarding their transportation to and from the various extra-murals they attend.

Sometimes discussion about these and other practical matters end unsatisfactorily for both partners; Mary says that John will often say “OK whatever, I’ll fetch them on my way home it’s fine” when he clearly feels that it’s not fine. John on the other hand says that Mary is endlessly demanding of him – that although he works hard every day he is still expected to pick the children up on his way home and that even when he does this Mary is still not happy with him.

The sexual aspect of John and Mary’s relationship has all but disappeared. Mary says that she cannot remember the last time that John initiated sexual intimacy and John asks why it must always be up to him to initiate love-making. He says that he is often just too tired with everything he has to do in a day at work that by the end of it he just wants to go to sleep. Mary says that this makes her feel very neglected, saying that she feels that John finds her physically unattractive. She has wondered if John is having an affair; he denies this saying that sex feels like just another thing that Mary wants from him.

When the couple therapist asks John and Mary what they would like to achieve in their marriage therapy, Mary says that she would like to feel loved and cherished in the way she used to in their relationship. She says that she realises that children and the demands of life and work may make it difficult for a couple to spend time together but she would like to find a way for this to happen. John replies that he would like some appreciation for everything that he does. He says that he would like to be able to come home to a restful home and not, as he presently feels, to a home

in which he is expected to take responsibility for everything. Mary's retort to this is that she does not expect him to take responsibility for everything but that she just wants him to really be there for her.

Here is an excerpt from John and Mary's second session of couple therapy.

John : I just don't know what will be enough for you Mary, I really don't.

Mary: I don't think I'm asking for a lot. Do you? (to the marriage therapist) Do you? I mean I don't think there's many women who ask for as little as I do actually. I just want you to be around more and to, y'know, at least act like you care.

John: What? So now I don't care! I can't believe you Mary. Honestly. (in a hurt tone) How can you say I don't care? That really makes me feel crap y'know, really.

Mary: Well do you care? No really John, do you? Because it doesn't look like it to me, all it looks like to me is that you think so long as I've got everything that opens and shuts I'll be fine and I can just shut up. (crying) Well I want to tell you it's just not good enough for me. I want better than that.

John: (shifting uncomfortably in his seat, takes a tissue from the table and offers it to Mary) C'mon babe, c'mon, please man, you know I care

Mary: (takes tissue, but ignores John who sits back in his chair and runs his hands through his hair in agitation)

John : (to the therapist) I don't know what to do. I just ... I am just so tired.

Later in the same session is the following exchange

Mary: It's like the discussion about buying that bloody holiday house. (to the therapist) No actually, it's a lovely house, really. (to John) You just walked in and announced we're going to do that and a big fanfare, like – whoop-dee-doo, suddenly superman is here putting us in debt to the eyeballs, no discussion, no 'honey what do you think' just wham and a major decision like that is taken without any regard for me.

John : No way. That's enough. That's just enough! What bullshit! You were the one who said when we were there the last holiday "Oh this is so nice" and "Wouldn't it be lovely?" and all that shit. I was the one who said that we couldn't really afford it. It's too much this, honestly, you know you remember what you want and that's all and I came to you and said I've found a way to do it and that's also not OK because then I'm taking decisions without consulting you. Jesus I've had enough.

Mary: Who's got the convenient memory now? Do you not remember me saying to you that I thought it was a bad idea because it would tie us in to more debt?

John: No matter what I do you are just never ...

Mary : (interrupting, leaning forward, speaking very forcefully, waving her finger at John) NO! Just answer the question. Do you or do you not remember me saying that it was a bad idea

John : (laughing incongruently, somewhat anxiously, leaning back in his chair)

Mary : (furious now, shouting) Do NOT laugh at me because you can't man up and acknowledge that you did not consult me about (name of the holiday home).

John : (shrugs, very quietly, resentfully) I did consult you.

Mary : You are pathetic

John : (wringing his hands, tears forming in his eyes, almost as if afraid) ... damn!...

A long silence – about 30 seconds, John bites his lip, Mary seems torn, looking at John, at once angry and then from under her eyelids, as if to check that he's OK

Therapist : (quietly) Mary, you seem worried, or perhaps concerned about what's happening for John right now?

Mary : Ummm ... I dunno ... this is what we do. (sighs) I feel so crap, so crap ... for hurting John, so crap that we've come to this, crap for myself because I can't get him to hear me ...

### **Commentary**

And so dear reader, can you see what's happening here? Certainly we can say that each of this pair is trapped in a nightmare of pain and desperate anguish. We can by turns feel empathy for both of them.

Mary who feels alone and abandoned emotionally and sexually frustrated, crying out to be heard and included by John. John who labours constantly to satisfy a woman who's demands he does not understand and who is consistently unsatisfied with his efforts. Can we not empathise with Mary's frustration at John's inability to respond to her urgent emotional appeals for connection just as we can understand and resonate with John's pain when he sees that his attempts to give her all he thinks is required elicit only her anger and scorn? And perhaps we may even recognise aspects of ourselves in this couple because after all they are not so uncommon or so markedly different from you or I.

But there is also a more poignant and bitter sweet quality to their situation. If we look at them through the lens of their respective childhoods can we not see a terrible and yet deeply beautiful aesthetic to the storm that so besets their relationship? Their relationship deeply provokes each of them and leads them into an encounter with those aspects of their histories, of themselves and their experiences that are most painful for them.

Let us explore this a little further.

At points, Mary is in danger of behaving exactly as her mother has in her childhood. She is furiously critical of John, attacking him with the epithet "pathetic". In her frustration to be heard, she silences him almost as one would a recalcitrant schoolboy, wagging her finger at him and shouting him down. If she has not yet recognised this, or even if she has, I feel sure that if we were to reflect this to her she would be awash in pain and recognition of this pattern in her life. She has devoted a lot of psychic energy to dealing with and repudiating her mother's criticism of both her and her father and a similar quantum of energy in perhaps denying or avoiding that aspect of herself that can be critical; for who among us is not at times critical of delivering devastating critique. She may even, in quiet moments or even in the instant that she strikes out in this way, feel guilty and ashamed at her behaviour but the chances are that she feels unable to change it or to moderate her critique. It is possible that in the heat of the conflict, John has flung at Mary, "You are just like your mother" which can only add to the pain, even if in that moment it seems true.

In turn John too is expending psychic energy in resisting the impulse to attack Mary. In response to her calling him pathetic he is less hurt than he is afraid and we may hazard a guess that he is afraid of his own violence. We have seen how earlier in these excerpts he curses in his angry repudiation of Mary's claims against him. He has been raised as the responsible son, the good young man who comforts his suffering and fragile mother. He is afraid of the aggression shown by his father and has first-hand experience of its destructive impact. We may wonder if internally he might have devoted tremendous reserves of strength to disavowing his own aggression.

We may see, like shadows cast on the wall of their living room and the therapist's consulting room, two children, each in their own experience of being wounded. Mary feels alone, abandoned, unheard and unrecognised. We may posit that this is a deeply familiar feeling for her, to be emotionally alone in the face of a critical mother and a father, who in many ways similar to John, withdraws into his work.

John too is deep in his own and old wound here. As a child and in his father's absence, he became responsible for partnering his mother. Can we say that his positive childhood memories, while in many ways nourishing and growing him into the man that he is, have also left their mark on his soul? For in the gentle companionship of those walks he has been both child and adult, a boy draped in the jacket of a man's role of companionship, succour and protection for a woman. And how could he as a child ever be able to fill this jacket, most particularly in the face of his mother's ongoing suffering? He could perhaps soothe it temporarily but never heal her hurt. And we may then wonder to whom his repeated protest "It is never enough for you" is really directed. And may we say that more accurately the statement reads "*I am never enough for you*"?

And perhaps it is this injury that leads John to work so hard, to provide so much, to insist that the family acquires a holiday home. Perhaps the depression that Mary refers to is actually exhaustion caused by the massive imbalance in John's life. We could conceivably say that at the moment Mary's pleas for intimacy, connection, lovemaking, filtered as they are through John's wounding can only mean one thing to John, give me more, give me more, I am still not satisfied, it is still not enough, you are not enough to satiate me.

And of course, we can see that this is not at all what is at the root of what Mary is saying. It certainly looks as if it is at the point where she calls him "pathetic" but her deeper cry is for closeness. And paradoxically a closeness for which we may wonder if she is really prepared or knows how to create and participate in. Do we go too far if we say that her cries are the cries of a child, that there is something almost passive and child-like about her repeated exhortations to John to come to her, to love her, make love to her, to make everything better through his companionship and his willingness to love her. Are these not the cries of a child who has grown up in a vacuum of positive and affirming attention between her father and mother, aware of and a recipient of criticism from one side and passive withdrawal from the other. I would suggest that the message coming from Mary saying "Just love me and everything will be alright" is the heartfelt longing of a child for the nourishing love of a parent.

What has struck me time and again in couple therapy is the great pathos and (to take William Blake's line out of context) "fearful symmetry" of ordinary situations like John and Mary's. I say ordinary in the sense that I think these struggles are taking place in many living rooms and in the rooms of many therapists.

The pathos lies in the observation that it is so often the very means through which we reach out to the other person and appeal to them to hear us, recognise us, encounter us that creates the injury. It is as if the wound itself is calling out drawing attention to its pain and its need for healing but it is caught in its own woundedness and can only create and recreate more injury.

In this instance, the more Mary appeals to John to connect, the more he hears that he is not fulfilling her and that he is not enough and the more he rejects and abandons her. The more John attempts to give what his wound dictates he must to soothe the sense of inadequacy, the more he elicits feedback that screams at him, "You are not enough".

### **Resolution through couple therapy**

What then can we offer by way of resolution to John and Mary. Certainly at this point the picture looks bleak. Repeatedly both John and Mary throw their hands up in despair or shrug and look to the therapist as if to say "What now? What do we do now?".

For the people locked in struggles such as these the experience is painful, debilitating and may feel hopeless. Sometimes, the repeated cycles of injury and thwarted need and expectation have eroded the relationship to the point where the couple consults the marriage counsellor or therapist as an act of last resort without much hope or faith that some useful resolution can be found. In some situations the conflict has led to deep hurt and loss of trust, basic respect or goodwill. Further, when confronted with an understanding that the patterns of relationship are embedded in old injuries the therapist, as well as the couple may feel that the problems are intractable and that resolution will be nigh on impossible.

At this point we must perhaps extend our understanding of love. In our western society we are apt to include in our definition of love only those experiences that are positive or which leave us feeling good. James Hollis (whose thinking informs much of this present article) has lamented that the once powerful, capricious and majestic figure of Eros, the ancient Greek god of erotic love, has been reduced to the innocuous cherub, cupid who adorns Valentine's cards and the chocolates that lovers in the initial flush of being in love exchange like sweet nothings. His lament draws attention to our culture's child-like insistence that love is pleasant. Of course, any seasoned lover can point out that love is a painful experience, full of capricious emotion, unpredictable effects and sometimes difficult consequences.

Hollis points out that to insist that erotic love, the love that impels us towards another person, to temporarily psychologically fuse with another and then, on the basis of this experience to more or less consciously decide to make the union permanent and to symbolise this union in some form of legal and or religious marriage is the work of a powerful spiritual force. Clearly an insistence that this love be only kind and gentle and sweet to taste and touch is wrong-headed. A difficulty here, and indeed further evidence of our culture's impoverished understanding of love, is that we have only this one word "love" to encompass erotic love, brotherly love, divine love and so on.

For this is love's great service to us; it leads us, however willingly or unwillingly and very often without us even realising that this is what is happening, into an experience of ourselves that illuminates our hurts, our disavowed tendencies, those aspects of ourselves that by nature or through our learning we wish to avoid.

Love's great service is to illuminate our blind spots. When erotic love "shines its' light" on us we feel magnificent, as if we have found the best possible expression of ourselves. And after basking however briefly in its warmth and splendour, we are almost invariably confronted with difficulty, strife and problem in relationship with our partners. This is normal and usual. Again, love's great service to us is to throw our shadows on the wall behind us and invite us to explore them. It is our refusal to do so, our insistence on ignoring these unacceptable truths about ourselves and these wounds we would rather forget, that creates the pain.

The task and gift that love hands us then is a difficult one for who would willingly acknowledge such unpalatable truths about themselves, much less accept responsibility for them and then take some form of action. We can be forgiven this aspect of our natures for we are, by virtue of our biology, programmed to avoid pain and seek reward even as our erotic attachments consistently insist that we acknowledge these hurts and unacceptable aspects of ourselves. If we ignore them, love hurts more. If we accept them, love allows us to heal and grow.

Some couples sense this about their relationships and by tacit mutual consent, elect to avoid or postpone the confrontation with the child within or the shadow on the wall. On the outside, such unions appear happy and positive. There is an absence of conflict and life appears to progress smoothly. However, this is also usually in such agreements, an absence of intimacy and mutuality. The participants in such marriages often become stagnant and growth, the development of maturity, wisdom and personal power are in abeyance.

Other couples encounter the difficulty and recoil from it. Such couples get such a fright when the conflict begins or find that the emotional space that the relationship creates is too painful and recoil from one another. Such couples tend to divorce very quickly.

But what of Mary and John? How might couple therapy assist their relationship?

First, often the presence of a neutral witness to the unfolding drama of love takes some of the edge and sting off the struggle between the party. The presence of the third party often allows the couple a space to consider what they are saying before they say it. The context of a couple therapy and the extent to which each person has willingly agreed to a marriage therapy creates a sense of willingness to resolve the issues at hand.

Second, assuming that the couple therapist has the requisite training and knowledge, he or she is able to sensitively and accurately describe and repeated patterns of behaviour and interaction that are playing themselves out between the couple and to reflect these to the couple in a way that can be understood and that sheds new light or a different perspective on the situation. This sensitivity includes the ability to communicate to the partners as individuals an accurate and non-judgemental understanding of what their experience is of the relationship as well as a deep commitment to the truth of the relationship.

Third, the couple therapist proceeds from an assumption that the relationship, despite and perhaps even through it's painful present circumstances, is attempting to illuminate and draw attention to pertinent and helpful aspects of itself but also to aspects of each partner's personal history and personality that have been neglected or overlooked. Without overstating the case, the marriage therapist assumes that the dynamics of the relationship, while possibly damaging and experienced as painful, represent the relationship's attempt to heal itself. In other words, in the perspective of this article, the skilled couple's therapist searches for love's service to the clients, as a couple and as individuals. This orientation allows the therapist, with the couple, to create a context for the release of fixed and conflict laden positions that each partner may be stuck in and for the exploration of the personal vulnerabilities that underpin the difficulties.

Fourth, the couple therapist can suggest or recommend alternatives to the view of the relationship and of one another that the partners have formed. This can significantly shift the partner's understanding of what motivates each other to say and do the things that they do. In addition, some couple therapists or marriage counsellors may suggest specific alternative strategies for communication and behaviour.

Fifth, the skilled couple counsellor can deliberately interrupt patterns of behaviour and communication that deepen injury and block mutual understanding.

Finally, and I believe most importantly, marriage counselling or therapy is not only an intellectual understanding. A skilled couple therapist will work to create a space where the partners can gain an emotional and deeply lived understanding of their own participation in the relationship. Very often I find that when partners are able to experience, without blame or attack, the effect of their behaviour on the other, that this emotionally lived and felt experience allows them to develop compassion not only for the other, but for themselves in the relationship and in their personal histories. In other words, it is often through the emotionally felt sense of the effect of the shadow on the wall on the other person and the empathy for self and other that this creates, that a partner is able to start acknowledging and taking responsibility for him or herself in the relationship. This emotional realisation is often accompanied by a strong outpouring of emotion as deep and sometimes long forgotten or ignored feelings are released. Moreover, this process is frequently a mutual one and there often emerges at this time a sense of relief and of deeper appreciation of who the other person is and what their participation in one's life is and has meant. In these moments, the truth of the relationship, with its beauty, frailty and it's ugliness is revealed and honoured. Moments such as these in marital therapy are deeply rewarding for the couple and for the therapist too.

And in moments like that, nature itself smiles.

Would Mary and John reach this point in a marriage therapy?

I believe so. The excerpts show that both, despite the intensity of their exchanges still are capable of responding to one another's hurt – which is a good prognostic indicator. Mary hesitates and appeals to the therapist for assistance when she senses that she has hurt John. John invests considerable energy in not launching an attack of the vicious nature that he witnessed in his childhood. His over-riding motivation is to satisfy Mary which indicates that he may be amenable to adapting the kind of attention he pays the relationship. No doubt though, the road will be a long one and difficult too. Each will have to confront aspects of their characters and personal histories that may be painful. They may find themselves initially reluctant to accept unpalatable truth's about the other. There will be slip-ups,



blown tempers, obstacles, progress that feels like regression and perhaps a few dashed hopes en route but on the small information presented here, I believe that love's service can be well met.

What say you?

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Please note that Mary and John are a fictitious couple. Their stories and the transcripts of their exchanges in the couple therapist's room are inventions of the author's based on the author's experience of working with couples over many years. A psychologist may only under very specific circumstances, publish, discuss or in any way breach the confidentiality of the consulting room without his or her client's specific and preferably written informed consent.

#### References

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