

The Myths and Reality of Enduring Relationships: The Stories We Are Told

As we consider a new model of development among intimate couples that is based on examples of enduring relationships, rather than on the opposite of failed relationships, we must first look at the history of relationships in our contemporary societies and, more specifically, on the dominant personal and collective myths we cling to about intimacy and enduring relationships.

Why are we so easily disappointed and why do we hold on to old truths and old expectations? First, we tend to live through and are strongly influenced by a set of unified assumptions that we hold about the world around us. This unified set of assumptions is often called a "paradigm" or "frame of reference." Each of us enters a relationship with our own individual frames of reference regarding the nature of intimate relationships which we apply to the relationships we form with other people. It seems that intimate relationships are not so much about somehow aligning with objective realities as they are about finding shared images and perceptions particularly with regard to how two people should fall in love and live together for the rest of their lives. We also enter relationships with a set of assumptions that we acquire from the society of which we both are members (if we are from different cultures then this dynamic becomes much more complex). These are the collective myths that have strongly influenced the expectations and actions of couples for many centuries that, in somewhat modified form, continue to influence our notions about being in an intimate relationship.

This collective cultural narrative is the compilation and distillation of messages within a specific society about how people are supposed to do things. It contains a mixture of beliefs, values, biases, myths, stories, "facts," observations, feelings and hunches. It is not so very important whether or not this narrative in any "scientific" sense accurately represents our world, it is only important that this cultural narrative: (1) have an objective quality (appearing to be based in our experiences of the outer world rather than our own inner world; 2) be consistent and internally logical and coherent; and (3) be of help in stabilizing or serving as an anchor point for our often

turbulent world.

The dominant cultural narrative of our time with regard to intimate relationships consists of the story of a man and woman who meet, fall in love, and remain together for life. They solve all their problems, keep their love alive, live independently of their families [of origin], encourage each other's personal development, have healthy and happy children, and endure as partners and friends. This dominant narrative certainly meets all three criteria. It appears to be external and is strongly reinforced on a daily basis in the popular media. It is also consistent, logical and coherent: If we are in love and work hard on our relationship, then it will be successful and everyone associated with the relationship (including children) will be happy. Consideration and hard work, in other words, always pay off in the end.

Finally, this image of the perfect relationship does provide stability, particularly in a world which so rarely seems to produce successful and enduring relationships. We can always turn back to this ideal relationship and know that if we will only emulate this perfect couple, we too will be happy. Given the power of this dominant narrative, we look everywhere for relevant models and paths to achieving this ideal. Yet, we are rarely successful, in part because intimate relationships might not be all about happiness. Furthermore, events over which we have no control intrude on our relationships and disrupt our best intentions. Finally, this narrative (like all collective myths) tends to be immune to the influence of real life and contemporary experiences.

Our society instills many of these narratives as frames of reference that enable us to live with relative comfort in a specific society every day of our life. Other frames of reference that guide our daily lives range from the ways in which we value and use money to the ways in which we see our universe. Yet, not all of our narratives come from our specific society. Many come from our families of origins and the communities in which we were raised, while other narratives represent our own unique perspectives. These latter narratives are often called self-biographies and constitute a central ingredient in our sense of a personal "self." It would seem that some of the most influential frames of reference in our life are generated by and are deeply embedded in our intimate relationships.

These unique paradigms contain the mysteries and magic of an intimate relationship (Moore, 1994, pp. 49-52). We are entranced not only by the special nature of the person we live with, but also by the special world and narratives we have created for ourselves. As I shall note throughout this series of essays, the *couple's narrative* is often constructed in compliance with the dominant cultural narrative. At other times, however, the couple's narrative is constructed in direct opposition to the dominant cultural narrative or in a manner that tries to accommodate both the cultural narrative and the unique couple's narrative ("we aren't currently like the ideal, but are going to work hard to achieve it!"). Thus, as we examine in these essays the ways in which enduring relationships function we will be looking at the distinctive ways in which partners not only perceive their relationship, but also conceive of the world around them individually and collectively as a couple through their joint narrative.

It is also important to note that the dominant narrative in any society regarding intimate relationship is defined primarily during our early life (ages 5-10). It is during these first years that we venture outside the family when we are most susceptible to the dominant social narrative and myths of the time. The dominant myth regarding intimate relationships (particularly marriages) has been defined in most contemporary societies primarily through the stories that are conveyed in the popular media (film, radio, television, novels, magazines, newspapers). Furthermore, these images are chosen not because they challenge us, but rather because they entertain and reassure us. These images, in other words, are themselves inherently dated and nostalgic. Yet, they are very powerful and are worthy of some examination.

The Early Twentieth Century Models of Intimate Relationships

As we find ourselves in the midst of the 21st Century, it particularly timely to look back over the 20th Century to observe the extent to which things have changed and the extent to which they have remained the same. As our world entered the 20th Century, many of its societies had just begun to move from the premodern to the modern era. Marriages were no longer arranged, nor were they primarily based on economic factors, as they were when families were the primary unit of production (agriculture and crafts) in our society. Romantic notions of marriage became more prevalent before the turn of the century, as people who were poor looked to a time through upward mobility when they could indulge in the finer and tender aspects of life, including the

love of their husband or wife.

As we look from the vantage point of the early 21st Century, there have certainly been major shifts in the ways in which intimate relationships and in particular marriages are viewed. The advice that was offered in the popular media of the time about how to be successful in marriage now seems both very dated and ironically unchanged. At the turn of the 20th Century, everyone was expected to get married. Women, in particular, were expected to find value in life primarily through their intimate and enduring relationship with a man. Writing for *Cosmopolitan* magazine in July of 1902 (33, 323-8, p. 323), Rafford Pyke declared that "marriage is confessedly the most profoundly important event in a woman's life. It is an event to which she is always looking forward from the days of her very girlhood."

Yet, women were also assumed to be naive and vulnerable to the guiles and passions of men. The young, pathetic and inexperienced woman, according to Pyke, is "credulous, confiding and utterly without experience." Hence, she must remain always on guard against the lure and destructive forces of sexuality, looking instead for the presence of deep love. She must be able to distinguish between "the mere flutterings of girlish emulation, and the great elemental throb which reads the soul with the birth pangs of immortal love." In order to ensure this quality of love, it is essential that young women enter first into a platonic friendship with a man that they respect, this relationship eventually blossoming into love, if there is a solid basis of immortal love.

A 1912 article written by Washington Gladden for *Good Housekeeping* (April, v. 54, pp. 483-491) similarly emphasizes the importance of friendship during the courtship period of a relationship: "marriage, at its best, is the sacrament of friendship." Married couples should be first and foremost "comrades." According to Gladden:

. . . if they were of the same sex they would find it a joy to live together. . . There are many families in which passion often flames and sentiment frequently flourishes from which a real friendship is sometimes sadly absent. These are husbands and wives who often convince themselves that they love each other dearly, who are not nearly so good friends as they ought to be."

Friendship, furthermore, held a spiritual characteristic, at least when conceived in the context of marriage. Friendship is based, according to Gladden and *Good Housekeeping*, not on sentimentality or passion, but rather on a "communality of interest in the realities of character." Intimate relationships that endure are based on shared values and rules (called "character" in 1912).

What was the nature of these, shared values and rules? There was general agreement about certain values and rules at the turn of the 20th Century in most modern societies. For instance, most of the writers about marriage -- who were inevitably men -- declared that marriage is intended primarily for the reproduction of children. In keeping with this purpose, young men should "decide whether he and [his prospective bride] are sufficiently robust and represent a sufficiently healthy heredity to warrant the bringing of efficient children into the world." (*Ladies Home Journal*, 31, p. 4, July, 1914) Women similarly should select a husband who can help her produce healthy, intelligent children. Even a liberal visionary like Scott Nearing (together with Nellie Nearing) proposed in 1912 (*Ladies Home Journal*, 27, p. 7, March, 1912) that:

. . . it is upon that 'yes', or 'no' -- that selective choice of the woman -- that depend the mating of this particular man and woman and the possible transmission of a combination of their qualities to some of the children born into the next generation. Not only is it the man's future misery or happiness which hangs on the balance of the woman's choice: she also determines, in part, the characteristics of a new generation.

At the turn of the 20th Century, marriage was also considered a moral commitment, a sacrament that was intended to further God's purposes and preserve the morality of society. A very young Winston Churchill declared in a 1913 *Good Housekeeping* article that happiness and unhappiness in marriage is linked directly to religious commitment. Churchill speaks of marriage being based in rebirth -- a process whereby we "find, by some means, the secret of our individual existence, to discover the work we were intended to do for the service of humanity." Churchill suggests that while society and individuals may require legal protections based on the laws of marriage and divorce, neither society nor individuals need protection from the spiritual established in rebirth and based in a spiritual succeed: "marriage is the supreme responsibility. A marriage

commitment will be the most sacred undertaking of all." In a similar manner, other writers of the time speak of marriage as a social arrangement, a social duty, a religious sacrament "the greatest and holiest of adventures" (Cabot, 1912, p. 834).

Clearly, there is no room in such a world for any alternative mode of intimacy that would neither produce children nor contribute to social stability. Life outside the bounds of matrimony was clearly forbidden, as was any form of homosexuality. Beyond these clear points of agreement, there is some dispute among the advisors of this first decade of the 20th Century for many societies were in transition with regard to the appropriate role to be played by women in the family and world in general. There were also some strong differences of opinion with regard to family values. Obviously, our current debates regarding these matters are not recent, but go back at least one hundred years!

From the perspective of Pyke in 1902 *Cosmopolitan* article the surest sign that love exists in a relationship is the woman's willingness to abandon her pride, so that she might rightly subordinate herself to the man she loves and admires. With the fall of pride comes the beginning of immortal love and the formation of a relationship that shall endure. One year later, in this same magazine, focusing in a chauvinistic manner on American couples, Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen declared that "there is nothing more worthy of a woman's best thought and devoted effort than to create and maintain a true home. The first sign of the degeneration of a race is the gradual breaking up of the home-idea and the splendid mental and physical characteristics of Americans of today as a race are due more than anything else to the yearning of the American bride to gather these sweeter and tenderer influences around her."

From a more "liberated" perspective, ten years later, Gladden suggests in the *Good Housekeeping* article that women must recognize their unique role in the family and recognize the important role played by their husband as the primary breadwinner. This does not, however, mean that women should be subordinate to men. This was already considered old-fashion in 1912 (at least in women's magazines). Gladden suggests with regard to:

. . . the management of the home, in business interests and in property interests there ought to be intelligent cooperation between the husband and wife. About many of the

details of her husband's business the wife would not venture an opinion; but on the larger aims and purposes of it, on the principles by which he is guided, the judgment of a clearheaded woman might be worth much to him. Above all, the husband and the wife ought to be good enough friends so that they shall confer freely upon what is prudent and possible in the family economy.

Contemporary Images of Intimate Relationships

What has occurred since this time? Have there been major changes over the course of the past century? There has been a clear decline in the emphasis in marriage on reproduction and for many people the moral and religious obligations associated with marriage seem to be quaint, if not totally irrelevant. We have also witnessed the emergence (or at least more visible and acceptable manifestation) of alternative types of intimate relationships. We observe many men and women living together out of wedlock, and the gradual acceptance of both lesbian and gay relationships, at least in most urban areas of our contemporary societies.

Yet, intimate relationships continue to be a sacred or spiritual union for many couples (Moore, 1994). Furthermore, marriages continue to play a critical role with regard to the preservation of the social fabric of our society. Other types of intimate relationships also gain greater importance. In many ways, intimate relationships are even more important today than they were at the turn of the 20th Century, for a majority of men and women in many societies now work at least part time outside the home. In many instances, men and women travel for at least a half hour to their work place. This in turn means that many adults spend most of their waking hours away from home. We no longer know our neighbors and rarely have time to meet with friends other than at work. In many cases, the relationships we have established at work are the only meaningful connections we have with people other than members of our own family. The workplace, in other words, often serves as the new neighborhood for many of us. Given this relative isolation from other people, we become increasingly dependent on our partner and other members of our family. They must meet needs that earlier in the 20th Century were often met by people outside the family, such as recreation, intellectual stimulation, humor, and drinking companionship.

While the nature and purposes of intimate relationships changed dramatically during the 20th Century, many of our 21st Century images of intimate relationships and expectations regarding the needs that these relationships will meet have not changed. The words about marriage that appeared in the magazines of 1902 and 1912 have hauntingly contemporary rings about them. Somehow and in some ways we still want our intimate relationship to be based on an eternal commitment, a moral force, a spiritual journey--Churchill's "rebirth." We still participate in ceremonies that sanctify our intimate relationships and are still deeply disappointed when our most cherished dreams regarding a rich, enduring relationship tumble around us in conflict, separation and divorce.

Intimacy and Media

What then were the dominant images when you were 5-10 years of age? For men and women who were children during the 1940's, common images regarding the "perfect" relationship may have been Judy Garland and -- (the boy next door) in "Meet Me in St. Louis" or perhaps a slightly more realistic Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn in one of their many movies together (or Spencer Tracy, Joan Bennett and Elizabeth Taylor in "Father of the Bride"). What did these movies teach those of us who are now in our 70s and 80s about the appropriate role for men and women in a relationship or about how to overcome conflict in a relationship? Many of our older friends grew up during this era, as did some of the men and women we interviewed. They suggest that these movies portrayed women as affectionate, family--oriented and conciliatory, while the men tended to be oriented toward the outer society and often acted a bit foolishly when confronted with family matters.

Popular radio programs of the 40s—such as "Jack Benny" and "Fibber Magee and Molly" conveyed similar themes Popular novels (such as "I Remember Mama" and "Forever Amber") tended to portray women in relationships as either saints who are deeply embedded in family relationships or prostitutes or seductive mistresses who have no permanent relationships at all. The independent woman was inevitably described as in some sense "fallen" or at least "tainted," while men were either in charge of their relationship or cuckolded by a too-dominant female.

For those of us who were born in the 1940s and grew up watching Gordon MacRae and Doris

Day on the big screen and "I Love Lucy" or "My Little Margie" on the smaller television screen, a slightly different version of the perfect or at least sustainable relationship was portrayed—though during both the 40s and 50s we find an emphasis on "Father Knows Best" (though often in Dagwoodian fashion only thinks that he knows best) and on the woman as dependent and supportive of the male ego and initiative. We found the beginnings of a Hollywood-based image of women as independent (building on the models first offered by Mae West, Katherine Hepburn and, on occasion, Greta Garbo during the 1940s).

The 1960s say a quite different image of the perfect relationship. Movies such as "The Apartment," "Hud" and "Easy Rider" portrayed short term relationships that were intimate but never quite satisfactory, while other popular movies such as "The Graduate" and "Midnight Cowboy" explored intimate relationships that could by no traditional standards be called "ordinary." Not only does the "anti-hero" gain visibility in the movies of the 1960s, but the "anti-relationship" (the "couple from hell") also gains credibility -- sometimes as a problem to be addressed, but other times as a new type of relationship to be emulated. Marriages were no longer made in heaven, nor did the contract read: "until death do us part." People were supposed to stay together as long as they still loved each other, and young men and women were to explore intimacy before settling down to monogamy if they were to be successful as a sexual partner and if they were to know "what they were getting into" when they married that perfect boy (or girl) next door.

While television, as the new medium of the 1950s and 1960s, tended to still portray the nuclear family in very traditional terms (doting housewife and mother, 2.5 kids, and a bread-winning father and loving husband), people seemed to view these programs in wistful terms and looked at them for comic relief rather than for any penetrating view into the new 21st Century couple. Movies also offered comic relief, yet marriage often was the butt of the jokes in American film, and the "odd couple" was found not just in a bachelor apartment but also many late 20th Century homes.

We propose that the images established during our childhood reinforced by the dominant media of the time as well as our own parents and other significant adult figures in our lives continue to

hold a powerful, though often unacknowledged or even unconscious, hold on our lives. At some very deep level we look for the perfect relationship as it is defined by this old image, and are often depressed, angry or discouraged when we find that our own significant relationships fail to match or even come close to matching this image. We also tend to get quite confused when we inevitably mix together images of perfect relationships that come from different eras.

Conclusions: The Four Dominant Images of Intimacy

Our interviews suggest that there are four dominant images that are widely shared by men and women of our time and, in particular, by men and women who were born before 1965 regarding the essential ingredients of a perfect, long-term relationship: (1) a stable, satisfying routine ("Let's live happily ever after"), (2) an escape from past history and personal limitations brought about by the relationship ("You make me feel brand new"), (3) a non-changing compatibility of style, values and aspirations ("Like what I like, be like I'm like") and (4) an exciting, always gratifying sex life ("Still great in the sack!"). We assume that if we only have stability, compatibility, a "new self" and great sex, our life as a couple will be

In many ways, these four images have changed very little from the turn of the 20th Century. Marriage was assumed to be a stable, eternal institution in 1900, and was to be based on similar backgrounds and perspectives. Marriage in 1900 was intended to bring about a "rebirth" (to use Churchill's term), as well as provide an institution for procreation (the sexual dimension of marriage). In the following essays we will examine each of these images—cultural narratives -- and identify alternative models concerning how long-term, enduring relationships really operate, at least as described by the men and women we interviewed.