

# Making Marriage, Domestic Relationships & Family Work

## Part XXXIX

By Don Burnard

There is such a negative emphasis on marriage that anyone contemplating marriage or anyone involved in marrying needs to ponder the pros and cons of marrying.

Marriage is the butt of many jokes. Marital conflict and domestic violence provide better dramatic material for press and television than marital harmony. Lawyers, Psychologists, Counsellors and Social Workers have a vested interest in marital breakdown. There are not the same spoils when marriages flourish, families are stable and parenting is positive and nurturing.

Immediately after the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, marriage, especially in a religious setting was banned. The bans did not last long.

The people most likely to choose marriage are those who come from stable families where parents remained committed. Yet many people who have come from stable marriages choose not to marry. Many remain single and many more choose to live together. The challenges of marriage are numerous. Partners need to do well in life before they can do well in marriage. By doing well, I mean becoming well-rounded human beings. Many pursuits such as becoming rich, gaining power over others, looking good do not prepare people to be married partners, even when they help partners to become good providers.

According to Psychologist R. J. Havighurst, there are particular skills which both partners need to acquire, if they are to make marriage or a domestic relationship work:

- Partners need to be able to make a decent living which means developing attitudes and skills which make them employable. What determines success? Children need to grow up seeing their parents in productive work, whether paid employment or not paid eg primary carers, looking after children. A civil and just society needs to ensure there is work for every able citizen. Society needs to ensure that workers are paid a minimum living wage and that Australia does not follow the United States on those occasions when low unemployment occurred because it tolerated millions of its citizens joining the ranks of the working poor. This policy meant that an increasing number of parents were paid a wage which could provide sufficient food, adequate shelter, education for their children and proper health care when needed.
- Each partner needs to acquire social skills through community involvement. These social skills provide the basis for acquiring and developing the interpersonal skills which are today an essential feature of a successful marriage. Developing interpersonal skills is directly related to the ongoing personal growth of each partner.

## **The Importance of Growth**

People define love in many different ways. One thing is certain according to Philosophers and Psychologists. The fruits of love are:

- **Attachment**

In families, the attachment needs to have a mental, emotional and appropriately physical dimension. What is appropriate between adult partners is the two dimensions of physical love – affectionate and genital. Children need to grow up in families where physical affectionate love is spontaneous and open. Couples need to frequently express physical affectionate love if they are to maintain genital love.

- **Growth**

Why is love associated with spring more than any other season? The outstanding feature of spring is growth. Every spring is a puberty, a spurt, a kaleidoscope of growth. Trees reach up, branches shoot out, leaves burst forth, flowers bloom, vegetables and fruit grow in greater abundance. In human affairs, there needs to be a season like spring characterised by a resurgence in support, sharing and celebration. To experience the spring of love, we need to sow if we are to reap. The sowing phase in marriage requires planning, a lifestyle including the practical and the mundane, making time to notice and enjoy new positive experiences and doing the hard work that is involved in commitment. Growth requires connection, commitment and above all the ability to give and receive support.

- **Communication**

What is communication? We are talking about interpersonal communication which is both the language, the rhythm and the repeating cycle of love. Communication is the mutual flow of thoughts and feelings between two people. It is not manipulation, propaganda, indoctrination or passing on information.

- **Interdependence**

All emotionally committed lovers need to give up the single life style where each was responsible for their own choices and happiness with little need to consider others. Interdependence requires each partner to maintain responsibility for meeting their own needs. However, both need to take on a new and challenging responsibility. They need to take responsibility for supporting their partner's efforts to meet their own needs. Lovers support each other as they try to define and prioritise their needs and then set about meeting them. When partners obstruct each others efforts to meet their own needs, marriage is at risk.

- **Freedom**

Marriage is for free men and women. Marriage is very difficult for prisoners, slaves or serfs. There are many forms of slavery in our world as rapid pace, increasing stress and technological wizardry take pride of place. Some of us are slaves to the internet, others to fashion. Many are slaves to addiction whether it be gambling, social status, pornography, alcohol or drugs either prescribed or illegal. Others are slaves to novelty, instant gratification, advertising or the celebrity cult. The challenge in making committed relationships work is to avoid both distractions and addictions.

## **Need for a Marriage Foundation and a School for Marriage**

By a school for marriage, I mean an organisation offering experiential, interactive programs for adults seeking to improve the quality of their couple and family relationships. The success of these programs will require a cultural shift in the community. The shift is from the populist view that anyone seeking to improve the quality of their relationship must have a problem or be immature to a recognition that anyone not seeking resources to maintain and enrich their family and marriage is in fantasy land. The risk in waiting till there is a problem and then seeking marriage counselling or marital therapy is that too often it is too late. A further risk is that couples will end up in a bitter contest in a family mediation centre or worse in a costly, emotionally draining Family Law Court hearing.

## **Paradox is the Companion of Love and Marriage**

One of the many paradoxes related to marriage is that some of those who sing its praises would deny marriage to gay and lesbian couples. If marriage is such a life giving experience for most people why deny it to almost two million Australians who do not belong to the heterosexual majority.

The most significant paradox in a loving committed relationship is that loving which is an action is so often confused with the experience of contradictory feelings that occurs between lovers.

Seventy years ago the musical group *The Inkspots* sang “*You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn’t hurt at all*”. The brilliant songster poet Leonard Cohen returns to the theme of love and hate as a challenge that faces all lovers. In “*Dance me to the end of love*”, he sings:

*‘Dance me to your beauty  
with a burning violin.  
Dance me through the panic  
till I’m safely gathered in.  
We are both of us beneath our love  
we’re both of us above.’*

Understanding is an essential quality if we want to practice the verb called love. We all need inspiration. For this reason when we are hurt in love we need to refuse to disguise our pain as if it were a blemish. Loving is at times an open wound. All lovers need healing. Loving at times is a series of uncomfortable self discoveries which require the gentle balm of understanding. The isolation of modern life and the demands of our ego are the enemies of love. All lovers need to repair themselves and reboot their circuit of love. This is much easier if lovers discover that we are all members of a tribe that can learn from each other. The way ahead in love is helped if we share a communal dawn and awakening. We need to help our family, our friends and our neighbours face the reality that love and hurt are inseparable. Love can sooth our pain. A pain that is not soothed eats away love.

At RELATEWELL I see this happening every time I am part of a program where lovers share their strengths and joys and then “flip the coin” to focus on the changes each partner need to make, the

growth that strains for expression and the pain when the flowers of love are choked and submerged in the weeds of self absorption and endless distractions.

Love is for all but to get there we need to avoid any phoney substitute. That means lovers need to be real people not phoney. We all need to take a leaf out of Holden Caulfield, the hero of “The Catcher in the Rye” who recognised that so much around him was phoney and began a journey to being real and seeking out others who were in similar quest.