

Love's Myths: That intimacy should feel good.

Most people hold fantasies about love that suggest that intimacy should always feel good. Many people preparing for marriage or entering into a committed relationship have inevitable fantasies that the relationship will make them feel better about themselves than they already do – that the ‘other’ will fill-in the ‘missing piece’ or else be the ‘missing piece’ that completes the emotional jigsaw that is themselves.

These beliefs, expectations and fantasies come from different sources. At their most elemental they are human. By this I mean that the conditions and challenges of our very existence as human beings, not fully evolved, is that we are forever searching for something to relieve the anxiety of living. As well as that we are social beings whose self-esteem and self-status is very much influenced by the perception of others and because of this is never fully satisfied.

In marriage and intimate relationships we have to come to terms with the unfulfilled illusion that the other person would fulfil that promise to make us feel better about ourselves. However, the truth is somewhat different because intimate relationships challenge us to grow and develop beyond this myth, beyond the expectation that emotionally committed relationships make us feel surer of ourselves.

In fact what we discover in such relationships is that the other person reflects back an image of ourselves in all our broken, inadequate, humanity. Over time our partners do not airbrush out our imperfections and flaws, rather they even seem to exaggerate them, as if they deliberately taunt us with them. However, as we discover, it is at these points that love has the opportunity to mature. Elderly couples who have a seasoned love know that

“Marriage is on ordeal.”

Those who work at relationship learn pretty quickly that

“Intimacy is not for the faint of heart”.

Intimacy is often understood as necessarily involving unconditional love, acceptance, and recognition from one’s partner. This is what people expect if they are going to take the risk of revealing themselves in a relationship. We have warm and soothing images of couples entwined together in a mutually encouraging, tender, and blended sense of self. These are images of where “two become one”. They are irresistibly attractive.

However, emotionally committed relationships demand, what Martin Buber called, the I-Thou relationship within which separateness is defined and understood. Within true intimacy or heroic love, each partner is different and separate, each person, to put it in an existential context, inhabits his or her aloneness with integrity. Images of intimate love often promise a relief from one’s isolation and insecurity that can never be delivered. So

The myth we hold onto is that ones partner is there to soothe us and not heighten our sense of insecurity in the world.

However, true intimacy is characterised by our ability to maintain our sense of self when our partner does the opposite - evokes our sense of insecurity in the world. This is inevitable because they are the mirror through which we seek to have our sense of status, significance, and esteem validated and accredited – a role they can never fulfil entirely.

We are born with an innate expectation of being able to blend seamlessly with an intimate other. This has its origins in the infant-mother bond where the child expects that the other person will anticipate its needs and cater to them. This infantile belief continues into adult life when couples conclude that because they are having problems there is something wrong. And what is wrong, we conclude, is that our partner is not making us feel good about ourselves, rather he or she is making us feel worse!

One of the key realisations that couples need to come to is that

Trying not to have problems actually causes them!

The seasoned and mature couples learn to inhabit them in a way that is accepting and tolerant. True love implies that though you love the climate you don't have to love the weather!

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