

Marriage: Supersticion & Ritual

Symbolic living is an essential part of our existence. This is evident in all cultures and individual behaviour. Our victories, medals, cups, photo-albums, degrees, rings, cars, homes, clothes, jewellery, diplomas, etc are all symbols that we use to define our place and status in life. The truth is that, through these things, we seek some form of ritualised symbolic status. Our symbols are actually symbols of some form of victory in life – things that suggest that we can and do rise above our ordinary mortality. The real meaning of all of these things is that in acquiring and admiring our symbols we actually imagine that we become, in some small little way, immortal! We taste immortality in that we have achieved a victory over insignificance and our mortal ordinariness.

The little boy who runs toward the touchline after scoring a penalty and imagines he has won the world cup rehearses something about life – his desire to have a feeling of status, victory, and competence. He spits out the bad taste of human frailty and swallows the symbolic experience of his status, success, and significance.

When we apply the process of symbolic life to everyday psychology we come away with quite dramatic discoveries about human nature. In your everyday life the symbols of your status, significance, worthiness, and immortality are not found in medals, cups, and degrees but in any currency that seems to give or take away your self-value – your self-esteem. Like the price of the euro on the stock-exchange, the value you place on yourself is measured by everyday experiences that become symbols of your self-value. The symbolic measures of your worth can be totalled up by a host of what appear to be trivial things but which, symbolically, are given enormous weight. They can include the tone of voice with which your partner speaks to you in the morning; the tidiness of the kitchen after the night before; the willingness of your children to do what you tell them; the degree to which you are getting through your thing-to-do list; the degree to which your boss at work seems to be in good form; the quality of your hair; your comfort in your clothes; your feeling of competence as a wife; signs of affection shown to you; the approval of your mother of your decisions; etc. The list is endless. The point to be emphasised is that we, each and everyone, have a core list of behaviours which are given enormous weight in symbolising our worth and value as a person.

I cannot overstate the fact that the value we give these things are all symbolically and arbitrarily assigned. What causes us great difficulty in life is that the things to which we ascribe this symbolic value very often serve to decrease our sense of self-worth and diminish our self-esteem.

When things are given this symbolic value they then assume an exaggerated importance in our everyday life to such a degree that they can cause us great distress. For example, winning an argument with your husband or getting your way, or having your view of things approved become, for many people, literal symbols of their worth, status, and significance. So much so that if these things do not happen as you expected you may find yourself reacting with a desperate intensity.

Notice how often you may have got very distressed in an argument only to find yourself forgetting what the argument is about. All you know is that you are fighting

for something that seems to mean something to you – but you don't really know what it is. You are, in truth, fighting about symbols!

So the repetitive fight you have with your partners often has nothing to do with the content of your disagreements but more to do with perceived slights to your status and significance.

WE need to have our significance, worth, and status re-affirmed in life because we know that the brutal truth about life is that it does not guarantee any of these things – in fact because of death, dying, and the tragic possibility in living, we are forever seeking to rise above our animal and ordinary mortality. Conflict and abuse in everyday marital life is revealed as the disguised struggle against one's mortal inadequacy and the other's mortal flaws.

Because we are powerless over our ultimate fate in life we have an on-going fear driven tendency to become powerful over who and what is closest to us – those we love. And when our ultimate vulnerability and impotence is revealed by the very people we think will conceal this from us, we often respond with such overwhelming aggressive or avoidant intensity that our true motives are revealed.

When we appreciate that much of the currency in everyday marital and family life is symbolic we begin to see the potential for intimate relationship to become vehicles through which people expand their self-importance in symbolic rituals. (When he comes home from the pub he likes to have find a clean kitchen and his work clothes laid out by the fire. If not, he erupts into a rage.) We begin to get an understanding as to why the diminishment of another is done to find release from one's innate powerlessness.

To the degree that you can control another and reject their influences and everyday reminders of your vulnerability, you, in your own little head, feel the distant traces of what it is to be a God: To have power over another, to taste immortality.

Your partner, as the Face of God, as the Face of Mortality, as the Face of Love reveals all your brokenness and impotence to you. At times they seems to mock you. At other times love you. Because of the symbolic power we attribute to that face we have the awful potential to tear at it until it bleeds as much as we can caress its miraculous beauty.

Research with small babies now shows that the infant, at birth, is already hard-wired to recognise and respond to the human face. In that face is revealed all the wonder and helplessness of life.
