

When marital squabbles become a fetish:

One of the extraordinary things I see in couples therapy is how everyone uses marriage in order to cope with the conditions of life. The conditions of life are a mixed blessing.

The harsh conditions are our mortality; our innate anxiety; our felt inadequacy; our powerlessness over our fate; our isolation; and our tragic vulnerability. The affirming conditions include our freedom; our capacity to love; our imagination; and the exhilaration in being alive.

However, because of our survival instinct we tend to focus more on establishing our security, avoiding danger, and securing our survival. We thus seek to avoid, wherever possible, any experience that reminds us of our vulnerability and mortality. This applies to marriage and intimacy also. We invariably make marriage and intimacy a place of security and safety than a place of vulnerability and passion.

So, because of our evolutionary heritage, we try to escape and deny the harsh truths about life. We do not want to be reminded of our anxious vulnerability. We want applause and status. So many people use their marriage for this sole purpose. They need their marriage as a place where they are reminded of their status, control, and power. Because they feel so inadequate in life in general they want their home to be their kingdom over which they rule and feel powerful. I see this in women as much as men.

“Here is someone”, we conclude “who should make me feel more secure, confident, important, significant, and worthy than I have known”. “Here is someone who should help me forget my vulnerability, inadequacy, isolation, and sense of confusion. Here is someone who should help me forget my mortality and all it evokes.” The narcissist might seek a trophy partner, the dependent might seek a partner to lean on, and the control-freak might seek a submissive. To greater or lesser degrees, we all seek someone who makes us feel good and righteous about ourselves.

The quite extraordinary thing about intimate relationships is that all of the above is never acknowledged. Day after day I see couples going to the battlefield of their relationship to find Victory, to coerce the other into submission, to wrestle from the other a surrender, an apology. Every couple in chronic conflict do this. Each thinks righteously that what they want is right, and just, and necessary.

So many people in my office say, in effect, “If I continue to point out his flaws to him a time will come when he will thank me for it and realise he has to change, because I am right.” Many people find it almost impossible to let go of this position because, in their righteousness, they are convinced. The truth is that the true character of love and respect requires something entirely different.

It requires the ability to be a separate dignified self that might want but does not need the other person to be any other way than they are. As soon as a want turns into a need then one resorts to tactics that become coercive or manipulative. However, the heroic lover must be able to state:

“You are a separate person to me. There is an inevitable distance between us, which we must not avoid. There are things I want from you, which I have shared with you. My hope and want is that you can respect and respond to these. However you are a free person and your role in life is not to meet my needs. Equally, my role in life is not to need you to validate and approve me. I am strong enough to do that for myself. I affirm and encourage your freedom to reject me. Our relationship has to be built on this freedom and respect. However, I expect you to have the courage to reject me with dignity. To say I honour and respect what you want but I cannot meet that for you. Then I can freely choose what I must do. But I ask you not to manipulate me, or ignore me, or dismiss me, or control me. When you do this you reject me with fear rather than with courage. If we can do this then we will learn to tolerate the inevitable distance that is between us and speak of it without fear or anger and most of all without a desire to blame each other for it.”

The extraordinary thing I see in relationships is people’s fear of rejecting the other person because of how exposed it makes them feel. People reject each other through manipulation, sarcasm, abuse, pressure, ignoring, sulking, silence, and abuse. These are all ways of making the other person feel bad *without taking responsibility for it*. Each person rejects the other with these toxic and often cruel tactics because of their childlike terror of the isolation that accompanies self-responsibility. A man would rather abuse, humiliate, or entirely blank his wife rather than say “When you do not meet my needs I feel I have to punish you for it. It is my perverse way of re-establishing some control over you. If I do not have that control I am actually terrified.” Or of saying “I do not love you. I find all sorts of ways to blame you for that. I have this perverted need to actually punish you because of my inability to love you or to be tolerant of the fact that you are so different from me. How crazy is that? No one deserves that. So let me have the courage to speak the brutal truth: I do not show love to you because my need to be right is more powerful than my need to love.”

Mature love actually includes the ability to reject the other person with respect and compassion.