

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Are You My Mother?

I am often reminded of the Dr. Seuss children's book written by P.D. Eastman, entitled "Are You My Mother?" as I work with couples in my psychotherapy practice and contemplate the dynamics in my own marriage. In the book, a little bird questions different animal type mothers to see if perhaps she is his missing mother. It is almost uncanny how we (as humans) unconsciously scan and search available mates and find an almost perfect fit in which to play out what is familiar and what we seek to continue to work through. Of course, it does not have to be a duplicate of our mother

necessarily. It could be a version of our father or a combination of both. Perhaps it is safe to say it is the caregiver who has had a profound impact on our developing sense of self. Usually it pertains to wanting to be seen, understood, respected, valued, and taken seriously. If we are fortunate enough to get that kind of attention growing up, we naturally migrate to a mate who can easily and freely provide these important relational dynamics. Also, because of the good modeling we have received, we are capable of interacting in a loving, supportive, facilitating manner ourselves.

Unfortunately, as we know from the high incidence of divorce and people we know who exist in unhappy relationships, many marriages are not so healthy. Many are characteristically unhealthy and unsatisfying or downright sadistic, destructive and harmful. Sometimes the damage in partners is so

severe that it becomes a matter of "I cannot be there for you and attend to your wounds for fear that I will bleed to death from my own." Couples get locked into a dance where neither feels heard or understood and are perpetually hurting within themselves and causing pain to the other.

Some obvious questions, when reviewing the dynamics of a marriage that does not seem to be working, are: "Why does a person choose to act out in a repetitious manner something that is negative or self harming?" or "Why do we continue to find the same type of person?" or "Why are we duplicating what we had growing up, when it didn't work or feel good then?" These are important questions to explore and developing an awareness of why it is I am attracted to a certain person is valuable to understand. Unfortunately, many couples, or perhaps one member of a couple, choose to bypass the time and investment (emotional and financial) it takes to heighten awareness



and to establish understanding and healthier ways to relate. On the surface, a divorce may seem the obvious route to end the misery within the relationship. Clearly, in some cases, some sort of intervention or separation is required if the relationship has become physically or profoundly emotionally abusive. But, in reality, a divorce does not solve the problem. If the issues and dynamics stay outside of awareness, then it is only a matter of time before the realization hits in the next relationship that similar dynamics have reappeared.

It is important to consider the following concept: It is worth my while to look as closely as I can within my current marriage/relationship and learn what I can about the dynamics and patterns, so that I don't just continue to repeat history over and over. The Bible says the "sins of the parents will visit the children" and it seems this is exactly what we are seeing when issues are not dealt with and instead marital partners act out the unconscious dynamics and trust issues that were handed down from the previous generation. I don't know any other way to change the

pattern besides shining light on the issues. I believe it is important to do the work needed (sometimes some psychotherapy) with a therapist who will hold the marriage in a safe place while things are being looked at.

Knowing yourself and being able to identify and express your feelings is imperative in a healthy relationship, but feelings can be deceptive in the throes of conflict. Tolerating a complete lack of attraction, satisfaction, and gratification for a season in a marriage while this important work takes place is difficult, but necessary. Common statements during this period in a relationship are things like: "But I'm not in love with him/her anymore" or "I'm not the least bit attracted to him/her." Repair and healing must occur in the relationship before healthy love appears.

Marriage is often the most significant human relationship we have. It is, by far, one of the most frustrating and the most gratifying. We owe it to ourselves, our children, and

our community, to do what we can to ensure our marriage is creating an atmosphere in the home that facilitates the lives of our family members, not depleting their energy and resources due to ongoing conflict and strife.

Most of us believe that purchasing a home is a sound financial investment, and yet if we don't attend to the emotional foundations of our home (which sometimes requires a financial investment), we are not going to create a family structure worth sending down to the next generation.

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