



7-1-1981

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Recommended Citation

Chidester, C. Richard (1981) "An Additional Dimension to Marriage Enrichment: A Change of Heart," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 7 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol7/iss3/3>

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AN ADDITIONAL DIMENSION TO MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT: A CHANGE OF HEART

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AMCAP Workshop

April 1981

Over the last several years I have been involved in the marriage enrichment movement in one form or another. My initial involvement began as I created a marriage enrichment program for my doctoral dissertation. That led to my attending marriage enrichment workshops by David and Vera Mace and then to helping organize other marriage enrichment programs and classes. The major emphasis in all approaches I have encountered has been on teaching couples how to share feelings and to communicate better. As helpful and positive and growth-producing as that can be, I always felt something was missing in our approach. I was constantly troubled by the nagging reality that what we were doing was not really striking at the root of the issue of improving marital relationships in a lasting way. I was troubled by the research feedback which indicated that marriage retreats and workshops tended to be a flagpole experience and that people eventually tended to gravitate back to old ways of behaving a few months after attending a workshop.

Thanks to Terry Warner and others at BYU who have been attempting to develop a philosophy of human nature and behavior which is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I think the missing link to a large extent has been provided. By so stating I am not suggesting that the theory they have developed is the final answer or is even complete in its present form. What I am saying is that I think the theory puts the focus where it really belongs: on the attitudes of the individual rather than on one's ability to master certain communication techniques in order to have functional interpersonal relationships. Let me hasten to say that I am all for learning to improve and perfect communication skills, but I don't see that as the lasting solution to marital discord. I think almost all people can communicate reasonably well when they want to, when their hearts or attitudes are right. They know how to listen, be respectful and kind when they want to. They do it with customers or clients or the bishop or their friends much of the time. The question becomes, why do people communicate so poorly at home where it really counts?

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I think Warner's theory explains why relationships go bad and what needs to be done about them. I have seen more substantial and lasting change in myself and my clients as a result of applying the Warner principles than anything else I have tried. My goal in this paper is to briefly present some of those principles which I feel help people take responsibility for their happiness, feelings and behavior in a unique way.

We begin with a concept called self betrayal which is defined as doing what a person feels is wrong. Self betrayal is just another word for sin, because sin is going against one's knowledge and moral commitments. When a person betrays himself he immediately begins to live a lie in order to make his wrong doing appear justified or right or at least not wrong. In living this lie, the self betrayer does not see himself as responsible for any wrongdoing, but tries to make it look like others or his circumstances are to blame. His insistence that he is innocent and that someone else or the situation is to blame takes the form of concocted emotions. These emotions, although felt by the self betrayer, are not really feelings that others have caused, but are produced by the betrayer and are used to accuse others. By this display of so-called externally caused emotions (anger, resentment, sarcasm, self pity, hate, fear, irritation, etc.), the self betrayer makes it appear as if he is the victim of the people or circumstances that are being blamed.

However, this insistence that they are victimizing him is, in reality, his way of victimizing and blaming them and making them look responsible for his misery. By making it appear that others are responsible for his emotional suffering rather than his own self betrayal and offense taking, he is avoiding responsibility for those emotions and attributing them to his victimizer who supposedly caused them.

The next step is the stunner and is referred to by Warner as "the dance of death" because it so often leads to the death of relationships or at least robs them of their vitality, intimacy or harmony. This process is referred to as collusion. Collusion is the process by which a self betrayer tries to get the person or persons he is blaming to actually do the thing he is accusing them of doing. By so doing he creates proof that they were to blame all along, and that his accusations against them were justified. However, he can get his proof only if the person he is accusing or provoking or

enticing gives in to his provocations and responds with the same accusatory responses and emotions.

Collusion, therefore, amounts to accuse-accuse, blame-blame, provoke-provoke, from both sides. The two parties mutually provoke each other into acting in the way they are accusing each other of so they can blame each other. By so doing they validate each other's lie and give each other proof that the other is to blame and is the one who needs to change. However, this very pattern of collusion renders change impossible because each is blaming the other; each is waiting for the other to change; neither is taking responsibility and the status quo is maintained.

To illustrate, let's take the example of a father arriving home after work at night following a challenging day at the office. His children greet him gleefully and ask if he will play ball with them that night. At the moment of their request the father feels it would be right to take time to play with the children. His own moral imperative is binding on him because he feels in his own heart it would be right to comply with their request. The father is now at a choice point because, as an agent, he can either yield to the moral feeling and act on it, or he can resist the feeling, go against it and betray himself.

Let's assume the father does refuse the children because he wants to work on his jeep instead. As he goes against his own moral imperative and betrays himself, he begins to live a lie and see the children as irritations who are encroaching on his time, making unfair demands on him and inconveniencing him. As such accusatory perceptions are formulated, accusatory emotions follow. The father becomes irritated and begins to give some very logical sounding reasons why he cannot play with children at that time, such as: they need to learn to play the game without him because he won't always be there; they usually just end up hassling each other anyway; he is too tired after such a strenuous day's work and it's not fair for them to expect him to wear himself out further, etc. He makes the children feel their request is a burden to him, unfair to him and even unreasonable.

As dad displays himself as being victimized, he does so with strong emotions of anger and resentment. What is the source of those strong feelings? Some of the doctrines of the world would suggest that the children "made him mad" by their inconsiderate behavior, as though he had no free agency. However, when a person is living a lie he generates his own strong emotions by insisting that someone or something else other than his own wrongdoing is to blame. He therefore acts and feels as though his emotions are caused by the children but that is only because he is perceiving dishonestly and accusingly. Consequently his emotions are not "caused" by outside influences but are the result of his own view of reality, his own

perceptions and offense taking.

This point brings me to a concern I have about some of the ways we may be dealing with "feelings" in counseling and marriage enrichment. I wonder sometimes as we discuss people's feelings of hurt, anger or resentment how much we are reinforcing their own self deception and offense taking, since taking offense can be just another way of giving offense and appearing victimized, just another form of victimizing. As I understand the gospel, offense taking and hostile anger are two of the behaviors we are supposed to be repenting of, not justifying. There is such a thing as honest or righteous anger that is motivated by love, caring and the Spirit and which communicates concern without attacking another person's self-esteem. However, the dishonest kind of anger which is blaming and accusatory and which stems from personal self betrayal and/or offense taking is the kind I often see clients display in an effort to justify themselves and cover up their own wrongdoing and make someone else such as a spouse look blameworthy. To merely empathize with this form of anger is to justify and reinforce it, in my view, and that prevents people from taking responsibility for their own lack of patience, long suffering and charity. We need to be empathic as people share their feelings, but we can then help them see the root of the problem as their own offense taking rather than an externally caused emotion for which they have little responsibility.

We don't *have* to take offense at what happens to us but we can choose to by virtue of how we perceive or interpret what we experience. It is not what happens to us but how we perceive it that leads to our feelings and behavior. If it were not so we could not be free agents but victims of the external events of our daily experiences. Helping people see how free they are in spite of conditioning that has taken place in their lives is the great advantage of using the self betrayal model Warner has developed.

The essence of his approach is to help people realize that there is a moral dimension to human relationships and to help them see the difference between being responsible and being a self betrayer. A moral agent is one who feels that a particular course of action is correct and who is free to follow that course of action or go against that feeling of what is right and to begin to live a lie.

The solution, therefore, to a lack of personal peace or family harmony is not to be found in learning skills or techniques but in ceasing to live a lie and in not resisting the moral promptings within us; in taking responsibility for our own perceptions, feelings and behavior and seeing ourselves and others honestly, compassionately and unaccusingly. I have found that when my own heart is right and I am living

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congruently, I don't have to take thought about being loving or understanding or listening properly because I do it automatically. I already have the skills, as I think most people do, but I don't use them when I'm perceiving accusingly or self justifyingly and living a lie.

If we were all being true to the truth within us we would see things as they really are and feel compassion and love for each other. We would have no desire to offend or take offense, or provoke and entice each other. There would be no negative emotions to control because when we aren't living a lie we aren't concocting emotions with which to blame others. We would be living in peace and harmony as some generations have done and there would be no enmity in our hearts.

Getting back to marriage enrichment, I think some of the implications from this concept of self betrayal are these:

Teaching people that sharing their feelings is the key to marital bliss without teaching them responsibility for their feelings is to help them only partially and, I think, temporarily. On the other hand, by having them share their feelings and especially their positive ones as we typically do in marriage enrichment workshops, we are actually helping to soften their hearts towards each other and improve their attitudes.

Since there are honest emotions and dishonest ones and the latter are the ones that are generated in order to justify and accuse, people need to be taught to repent of these feelings. However, negative feelings which spring from honest concerns and not just from offense taking need to also be shared but in an unaccusing way so that growth instead of collusion can take place.

I am opting for a combination of skill training combined with a greater emphasis on the roles of personal righteousness and responsibility, attitudes, perceptions, compassion and forgiveness because I have seen in those troubled couples who have occasionally attended our marriage enrichment workshops how futile it can be to try to impose skills over accusing attitudes or, in other words, an accusing heart. The skills alone don't often solve the problem and can actually help them to become more adept at accusing, abusing and hurting each other. What they

need most is a change of heart.

Therefore, when marriage partners let go of the things they are holding against each other in order to justify their own unloving behavior, and begin to see each other honestly and compassionately, they don't have to take thought about how they are communicating; they rather automatically treat each other lovingly because their hearts are pure and they are not betraying themselves.

In conclusion, it's not hard to understand why many married couples are struggling to get along, given the realities of sin and the models of self deception which surround us. The Jews have a proverb which says, "You can't have Zion in Babylon" because Babylon will eventually wash over you. This is what I think is going on in the world generally and with too many Latter-Day Saints. They love each other, want to be together forever and prize their families above all else, but are relating to each other in the accusing and self betraying ways of the world rather than from an orientation of true charity. By helping them realize this and see how to perceive honestly and unaccusingly, and to concentrate on their own hypocritical behavior, they can begin to feel the promised peace the gospel offers those who truly love and who truly forgive and who are not easily provoked or quick to take offense.