

Chapter 1

Sharing

We join our lives with another person for many reasons: to be with our beloved, to build a life together, to have children, to grow old together. We look for love, support and companionship. We expect sexual and physical intimacy. All of these and more are aspects of a shared life. There is no relationship without sharing.

It is easy to forget that give and take—reciprocity—is the spirit of marriage, a spirit enshrined in traditional wedding vows. When we make a commitment to be together, we agree to be involved in all aspects of each other's lives. In an intimate relationship, we also commit to giving of our selves to each other. Sharing our lives and sharing our selves—these are at the heart of every real marriage.

Sharing our Lives

Contemporary relationships are based on equality. In the past, society accepted that each person had a specific role to perform, usually based on gender. This reinforced differences of power and freedom, with women coming up short. Inequalities still exist in society; prejudice and oppressive attitudes are common. However, inequality and imbalance does not make for good partnership. Coercion, unfairness and injustice are at the root of many failed marriages. A sensibly balanced shared life allows a relationship to grow.

With the complexity of our lives, it is natural for each partner to take on different tasks and functions. There are so many everyday activities to perform and decisions to make. These include tasks of daily life: working, making money, shopping, cooking and cleaning, child rearing and paying bills. They also include scheduling activities, making sure the home and car are maintained, getting children off to school--and a thousand other small and not-so-small responsibilities that allow our lives run smoothly.

When there is give and take, each member of a couple shoulders a share of the burden. At times, one may take more responsibility but both must be ready to take turns and step in

when necessary. Each couple must decide for themselves what feels fair and equitable.

“I don’t mind arranging the party. I just need you to do your part.” Debra is frustrated with Curtis.

Curtis’s face mottles red with irritation. “You always just go ahead and arrange it how you want to anyway—then tell me what I have to do. I’m just a fifth wheel. What do you expect?”

Debra: “I want you to be involved, but it’s so hard to get you going. It’s much easier to do it myself... But I really need your help—please.”

Curtis takes a moment to calm down. His face starts to clear. “I know you do a lot and I appreciate it—and our parties are great. I want to help; I just need a bit more notice and not have it sprung on me. Can you please do that next time?”

He gives Debra a half-hug with one arm. “OK. Let’s start again. What do we still need to do? I can go to the store this afternoon. Let’s make a list.”

Debra looks relieved: her shoulders relax. “That would be great. We also have to rearrange the furniture. We can do it together. Let me know when it’s a good time for you.”

We share our time and attention by doing activities together—going for a walk, out to eat or to a movie, watching TV or being a part of a social or religious group. When we have to be separate, we share by bringing back to the relationship our experience, whether at work or interactions outside of the home. While our partner may not participate directly in what we do, we create a sense of involvement at second hand. Sharing experience and interest is vital nourishment for the relationship.

Every shared experience strengthens companionship, teamwork and mutual support. Naturally, we all need separate interests and activities but these should not become an excuse for distancing. Sometimes, we get busy, distracted, immersed in TV or the Internet in order to avoid true engagement. If we slip into complacency, if sharing begins to decline, we find ourselves with nothing to say, no topics of conversation except the mundane scheduling of tasks.

Sharing a life demands that we communicate—but not just by talking. Touch, hugs, kisses, smiles, eye-contact—these non-verbal forms of communication affirm the value of the relationship. Verbal communication is essential but open to misunderstanding. Words do not always say what they mean.

Even, “I love you,” can have many possible inflections and meanings, far more than a simple hug. Non-verbal messages of love and caring are simpler, easier to understand. Couples fight about what each person said or what they meant. Tone of voice, gestures, and facial expression carry more weight than mere words. A smile goes a long way; a loving glance lifts the heart. Love is not just a warm fuzzy feeling; it is paying attention and taking action. As a relationship matures, so the ways we connect and communicate naturally adapt. Misunderstandings and miscommunications are inevitable but when we are utterly familiar with each other, communication becomes communion. We know the other person so deeply words are not so important. That is sharing at its most profound.

Sharing Our Selves

Sharing our lives is obviously necessary for a marriage. What about sharing our selves? What does that mean? In counseling, many couples complain about lack of intimacy. They may initially think this is about sex, but often they are not just talking about sexual intimacy but about a deeper dimension of sharing. They want to know whom they are living with, understand what the other person is thinking and feeling, what is going on inside that other person’s head and heart. We yearn to know that we are not alone; separation is one of life’s greatest anxieties. We hope our loved ones will invite us to gaze into their souls.

Sharing our selves naturally intersects with sharing our life. Being connected means offering thoughts, opinions and emotional reactions about whatever is going on. But intimacy does not stop there. There are more and deeper levels of sharing. Beyond the everyday, we share what we wish for, what we imagine, what we fantasize. We share our vulnerability, painful memories, struggles, fears and hesitations. More profoundly, we share our dreams, our subtle intuitions and spiritual aspirations. Our souls are limitless; there is no end to sharing.

When we reveal our deeper self to our loved one, there develops a sense of closeness, gratitude and communion. It is expressed through affection, touch and sexuality. Sex has a deeper quality of sharing in which we enjoy each others bodies,

sensations and mutual pleasure. We take pleasure by giving pleasure. Sex is the rhythm of give and take, a mutuality of letting go and satisfaction.

Amy: I didn't sleep well last night—lots of troubling dreams and images. I feel kind of hazy.

..Jeff: I'm sorry. Do you want to tell me about the dreams?

..Amy: Most of them are gone now but I remember one: I was trying to hide a body—a man I think—I don't know if I had killed him or not but I was afraid the cops would find out and come after me.

Jeff: That sound's disturbing. Have you been feeling OK? Anything bothering you?

..Amy: Work has been routine... but I'm not getting on with things. I get bored and surf the web and the day just goes.

..Jeff (laughing): Do you think you might be feeling guilty? What about your boss—maybe you want to kill him!

Amy: I feel like that sometimes... but mostly I don't think I'm going anywhere. If we didn't need the money, I would quit.

Jeff: Well what about that? If it's making you unhappy maybe we should think about other options?

Amy: You're sweet. That makes me feel better. Let's talk about it this weekend.

Sometimes we forget we are not the same as our partners; we are different people with distinct ways of perceiving the world and the relationship. We each have our own childhood experiences that shape how we react and relate. Sharing is essential to help us understand who our partner is. Many marital problems arise from misunderstanding; unless we really know our partner, it is easy to misinterpret their words and motivation. We get tangled up in in a web of mistaken expectations and intentions—believe we are on the same page when we are not even in the same book. Sharing is the key that unlocks understanding and acceptance of each other.

Difficulties with Sharing

For many, a shared life is a fulfilled and happy life. Sharing lightens the burden and makes life more interesting. It salves our loneliness. Yet, for all its benefits, sharing is seldom smooth and untroubled. Some of us are compelled to do more than our share: more activity, more daily tasks, more words filling every silence, too much familiarity too soon. Many of us hold

back, avoid doing what we need to, hesitate to show who we really are. Too much or too little, neither is authentic and balanced sharing.

We are all more or less selfish; we find it hard to give totally freely. That is part of our nature. As young children we had an acute sense of fairness and reciprocity but many times our impulse to share was blocked or distorted. Our biological families may have forced us to give things to our siblings; there may have been a sense of scarcity; a parent may have withheld toys, treats and affection to get us to behave; receiving a gift may have come with hidden costs. More pointedly, it may have been unsafe to tell what we were really thinking or feeling. Whatever the causes, we have to recognize our own difficulties with sharing.

For many, the idea of sharing brings up powerful feelings of discomfort and even fear. One concern is we will get the worst of it, not get what we need; we will expose ourselves and then get rejected, particularly when we ask for something. It is hard to bear being taken advantage of or ignored; it makes us feel stupid and worthless. Sharing our inner world, our secret thoughts and feelings makes us vulnerable and exposed. Hiding behind a screen of activity and words or holding back, staying stoic and defended—both arise out of a need for self-protection.

In relationship many fights are sparked by a sense of injustice: we believe we are doing more than our fair share, giving more than we receive. Without reciprocity from a partner, sharing is less likely. Who picks up the kids; who does the shopping, the cleaning, the cooking? Who works hardest, pays the bills, and contributes to the budget? These are all aspects of life that have to be shared and balanced. This is also where disagreements arise. One person says they are shouldering too much of the burden; the other disagrees and adds their own complaints. Communication breaks down.

No one likes to be criticized. As soon as we sense judgment from our partner, our willingness to share decreases. Often critical communications are met with defensiveness and anger which pushes a couple still further apart. Soon there is a standoff with each person feeling neglected and alone yet scared to get closer, afraid to open up. Resentment builds and each person closes her or his heart.

It takes courage to open our hearts to deeper sharing. Yet if we resist, our relationships cannot grow; it will plateau or even regress. Sharing our lives and sharing our selves is risky but the rewards are immeasurable. If we hope to transform a relationship, have it reach transcendent qualities, we have no choice but to move through our own hesitations and resistances. Then the exchange becomes richer and each person grows towards maturity and uniqueness—we become who we truly are.

Summary

- We have to share our lives and our inner selves for a relationship to thrive and grow.
- Without sharing, the quality of connection suffers and the relationship stagnates.
- We all have difficulties and resistances to sharing caused by experiences in our earlier life.
- To overcome our resistance to sharing, we have to continually re-open our hearts to our partner.

Practice

Think about the following questions. Jot down notes to remind yourself:

- What aspects of our lives do we share with each other? What do we tend to do separately?
- Do we share everyday tasks evenly and fairly? Do I do my share without being prompted or complaining?
- Do we share our opinions, thoughts and plans? Do we listen to each other without interruption or distraction?
- Do I share my innermost intuitions and? What do I hold back? What stops me from sharing more?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share your responses to the questions above.
- Discuss: What would we like to share more of? What interferes with us sharing more deeply and fully?