

Seeing the End Before it Appears Tim Schnabel, Columnist

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It happened once again and the work is painful all around where I combine being a therapist with being a mortician. I “saw” the end coming before they even showed up at my office. My brief telephone conversation with each member of the couple clearly indicated the wife had a foot already out of the marriage door...way out. And her husband was holding on for dear life.

There were lots of stressors that had been exacerbating the already existing stress fractures in the long term marriage – a move, different jobs for them both, an actual career change for one, a lot less pay and money to go around. The marriage had become conflictual and when kindness, closeness, affection and sex dwindle or disappear, holding on through increased conflict can often result. In this case, big time. And the good news? There never had been any physical violence.

Did they care about each other? Yes, but there are two other ingredients necessary to long-term successful marriages. One is trust and the other is respect and those had slowly eroded the past few years. And then, this had been a children focused marriage and by their out-of-awareness design, had in some ways not only lost “being a couple,” but also, lost a sense of who they are individually

Research and my experience indicates that the most vibrant and meaningful marriages are couple focused, not child focused. Now I imagine some reading this might be thinking that a couple focused relationship is being selfish? On the contrary! Couple focused means both/and. The theme is “We were a couple before we started having kids and we will be a couple after they leave.” Children of such a couple learn that their mom and dad actively nurture their own relationship in an ongoing way and by doing so is actually empowering. The kids not only feel safer, but they get to see love in action and what it means to be a highly functioning couple.

When all kids see and hear is conflict, especially unresolved, they sadly come to expect the same in their dating experiences and later, in their own marriages. When I work with teenagers who have parents living a conflictual marriage or even a loveless one, I give them homework to spend time in some of their friends’ homes where the culture is loving and cooperative.

What also occurred with this couple is that they waited too long seeking help. While seeing a counselor or therapist had been brought up the past couple of years there had been resistance. This is typically on the part of the husband. We men have been socialized not to ask for directions, to tough it out and follow a version of the often-heard mantra, “I don’t need any help and if I do, I can do it myself!” As part of their grieving they both deeply regret they waited too long picking up the phone.

The loss of being an individual, that is, having a sense of personal self inside a marriage is not only scary and painful, it is lonely. Sometimes when a partner is in such a place he or she thinks if the only way that I can be me is without you, then without you it is!

But these partners do care about each other, respect each other's work ethic and want the best for their kids. They are invested in designing a friendship rather than making the other wrong and getting the courts involved. So, the prospects for the future cooperative co-parenting of their children are hopeful, not hateful. And this is very good news.