



A man with glasses, wearing a light-colored striped sweater, is shown from the side, looking out towards a background of trees with soft, out-of-focus foliage. The lighting is warm and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

WHAT WORKS WITH COUPLES? WHY MARRIAGE IS FOR GROWN UPS

BY NOEL GIBLETT

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A DAY IN THE LIFE

Case 1

The couple who have just made their first appointment with me by phone are like many couples I see and, I believe, like many couples in western society. They've been together for about 10 years. There are no children, although I gather not for want of trying. They've had their joys and sorrows. They've had their accomplishments and set-backs. They were meandering along okay, or so it seemed, when she discovered that he's been having an affair.

According to her, this has been the wake-up call that has brought them both to the point of being ready to seek help. They both, according to her, 'want to get back on track' and believe that they have 'something worth saving'. I look forward to meeting them both and getting a fuller picture. However, I wonder if they know what's ahead of them, what it will take to clean out this wound, heal and rebuild their relationship.

Case 2

The couple I saw yesterday for the first time are one step further along the track. They've laid out their history (20 years together). They have four young children. They've catalogued their major stresses, hurts and heartbreaks (and they've certainly had more than their fair share of these). They've enacted their communication difficulties in front me—the all too common feedback-loop that keeps them stuck, neither of them feeling acknowledged by the other, both feeling alone. It came as no surprise to me that, in this context, she had an online affair.

I've given them some preliminary feedback and I've laid out in broad terms what I think lies ahead of them—in short, 'major surgery'. To their credit, they've committed to the assessment sessions—an individual session with her, then one with him, then one with them both—so all parties can more fully discern whether my approach is a good fit with their needs and capabilities, whether they are each on board with

my approach, and whether they are willing to risk the courage, honesty and self-examination that I've flagged will be necessary if they want a different marriage.

Case 3

The couple I will see later today are, in many ways, several steps ahead of both of these couples. They've also been together for about 20 years. They have three young children. I've been seeing them, on and off, for about a year. She is a survivor of child sexual abuse over many years, something she has started to address with her own counsellor over the past twelve months. He is a blue collar worker who for several years was in a fly-in fly-out job in the mining sector. They called a halt to the FIFO work eighteen months ago to try and save their marriage.

To their credit, they have faithfully kept all appointments (despite living more than an hour's drive away) and they have done their best to follow through on learnings and breakthroughs from each session. I have long admired their perseverance and goodwill.

However, despite their best efforts, they've been on the verge of separating a few times and their future together is far from secure. She is understandably very fragile and finds it hard to hang in there with the two-steps-forward-one-step-back pattern that often accompanies change. Their main tension has been around sex and intimacy—she is arguably intimacy phobic; he is arguably separateness phobic. They've long fallen into the pursuer-pursued pattern, over and over again. Only occasionally have they been able to be more collaborative and join together around the issue rather than polarise.

She has hung in there, waiting and hoping that something will shift then getting despondent (sometimes desperate) when he reverts to a sense of entitlement. He has vacillated between that sense of entitlement and a genuine willingness to get alongside her and become more skilled as a husband. It's

been hard work, for both of them.

Two sessions ago he opened with these words, 'I think I've had a bit of an epiphany,' he said as tears welled up and his bottom lip started to tremble. In halting sobs he said, 'I've realised... it's okay for her... to say no.'

It was a simple but profound breakthrough for him, one that I'd tried many times to facilitate (along with interventions for her) but with little success. He could now fully and freely admit that he'd failed to really love her as she is and be patient with her as she seeks to heal from childhood wounds. The rest of the session went to a new level of tenderness and openness between them.

At the end of the session I looked him in the eye and said, 'I knew you had it in you.' For a moment we locked eyes, two men tearing-up and neither of us breaking that moment. I knew what it had taken for him to come to this point, and he knew that I knew. It was one of those truly moving moments that reminded me of the privilege of this work and why I decided to train as a therapist over thirty-five years ago.

A Therapist is Hatched

I'll never forget my first exposure to Gestalt Therapy in 1981. Not knowing what to expect, but on the recommendation of a friend, I signed up for a 'taster' workshop over two days. The format was quite simple—the visiting therapist gave a brief introduction about the tenets of Gestalt and then invited people to come forward and sit with him (one-to-one) if they wanted to explore some unresolved or painful issue in their life. One by one most of the participants stepped up and opened up.

Each time someone came forward something happened in the therapeutic exchange that I felt was inspired, testament to the wisdom of the therapist or the courage of the client, or both. Or maybe it was something beyond both parties. Despite the lack of any spiritual

commentary at the time, I believe it was akin to what John V Taylor was referring to when he coined the term **The Go-Between God** - moments when grace and truth break in and split people open, enabling them to grieve their losses or shed their shackles and open themselves to life and to each other at a new depth, with a new quality of courage and candour.

I'd never seen anything like it. Another way of describing it that comes to me now is that this is what Martin Buber was referring to when he coined the term 'I and Thou' relating. Holy Ground. A deep reverencing of the human condition. A meeting of souls.

That reverence catalysed my desire to train as a therapist and, more importantly, it got me started doing my own work - the long journey of being a client of therapy and an intentional student of life. After a few years of Gestalt training, and with a social work degree under my belt, I started working in the field as a counsellor with Vietnam veterans and their families in the mid-1980s. It was the start of a challenging and rewarding apprenticeship.

Then in the mid-1990s I decided it was time to embark on a second apprenticeship of sorts, that of systems theory and learning the art of relationship counselling. It was a steep learning curve but one that I knew was necessary—I knew that I was not a separate or disconnected individual but a husband, father, family member, friend (etc) and I wanted to understand those relationships more fully. It was a difficult paradigm shift, moving from the intense intrapsychic emphasis of my Gestalt training to the discipline of thinking systemically and understanding relationship patterns. However, I knew I would be the better for it and I hoped that in the long run it would benefit my clients as I learnt to move between the intrapsychic and systemic paradigms more gracefully. This also led me into working as a relationship counsellor.

Soon after embarking on this second apprenticeship, I met two men who

revolutionised and radicalised my thinking about 'life, the universe and everything', including relationships in general and marriage in particular.

The first was David Schnarch on his two-day workshop for therapists entitled **The Sexual and Marital Crucible**. I was on the edge of my seat for two days. I had never before heard this kind of summary of the hard hitting realities of marriage. It had the ring of truth about it and his approach offered a framework for working with these realities. 'Marriage is for grown-ups,' he said, 'and it is marriage that grows us up.' It set me on a path of reviewing my own marriage and, more importantly, my approach to my marriage.

Then, about a year later, I met Richard Rohr on his five-day **Men's Rites of Passage** retreat. In it he offered deep insights into the nature of an authentic man's journey through life. 'We need a new head,' he said to the 125 assembled men from all over Australia. 'We need to clean the lens and let ourselves be transformed by an ever deepening surrender to the Spirit who calls us to wholeness.' Then, over five days, he laid out what he thought masculine wholeness looked like. 'Everything belongs,' he said, which set me on a journey of self-examination and integration of the good, the bad and the ugly in me and in my marriage. As Richard said, 'the problem with life is not suffering per se but wasted suffering - suffering we don't learn from.'

Each event in their own way was life-changing. On David's workshop my mind was blown. On Richard's retreat my heart and spirit were split open. In the months and years that followed, the combination of David's psychological insights and Richard's spiritual wisdom set me on a path of personal and professional soul searching that continues to this day.

Then, a few years later, I realised something deep in me was calling me to write about what I'd learnt from each of them. Thus began a twenty year journey of trying to pull together David's and Richard's insights into a book that

I hoped would be of benefit to couples and therapists alike.

The early versions were, by and large, indigestible. I ran out of friends willing to read early drafts. And I ran out of energy time and time again. But then I'd be drawn back to the project. With tongue in cheek I often reminded myself of the Blues Brothers' famous quote, 'We're on a mission from God!' I figured I was either crazy or on such a mission, or both. Whatever the case, I could not rest until the task was complete.

Why not? There were three main reasons and they are still true to this day.

Firstly, I'm tired of the pop psychology literature on relationships, the books with the slick formulae and the five easy dot points that promise the equivalent of **Your Guarantee to a Happy Marriage or Lifelong Fulfilment in Your Relationship**. Real life is not like that. Real love takes work.

Secondly, I've lost count of how many couples I've counselled who've read those kinds of books but find that the reality of their relationship doesn't match the slick formula. I'm convinced it's not their fault. We're all imperfect fallible people and we need a way of thinking about our imperfect fallible relationships.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I've needed to make sense of my own marriage - more than once! How come I married one of the most decent, generous and loving people on the planet and yet at times I've felt deeply dissatisfied? And how come, despite my best efforts, my wife tells me from time to time that she's dissatisfied? Are these dissatisfactions necessary lessons in the nature of life and love?

So, I set about living (and writing about) the thesis that I figured was at the heart of David's and Richard's wisdom. However, I hasten to add that I am a very imperfect expression of it. As I often say to my clients, I'm on my fifth marriage... to the same woman. We've been through at least four watershed transitions in our 40 years together and on each occasion

we've both had to dig very deep. We've had to give the old marriage a send-off before a new one could emerge.

Interestingly, that proved to be one of the key ideas that seemed to stick with my clients. They got it straight away and it encouraged them greatly which in turn encouraged me to get writing and, when I doubted my ability to complete the project, keep writing.

A Book is Born

Twenty years and four major re-drafts later, **Marriage is for Grown-ups** has finally come to fruition. During that time, I've had and lost a publisher (two years of multiple revisions and alterations, as requested, all came to a sudden halt in an email advising me that he had changed his mind), had and lost an agent (fortunately only six months from enthusiastic support to cold feet), and (as can happen in such intense projects) I've called into question my own marriage more than once.

Then, over the final twelve months of the project I became very unwell and eventually came to the point of feeling unable to carry the book to completion. I felt I had to let it go. However, by the grace of God even this was not the end of the story. On the very day that my prospective agent dropped the project, a friend called me up (not knowing any of this) and offered to steer me through the Amazon self-publishing process. In the end he carried me and the book over the line. Thus **Marriage is for Grown-ups** has at last been born.

In the style of Robert Fulghum's **All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten** and Gordon Livingston's **Too Soon Old Too Late Smart**, this book proposes that marriage (and de-facto marriage) are an invitation to grow up—which we don't necessarily like—and that our relationships offer us the vehicle for that growth, if we're willing to take the journey.

Fundamental questions are embraced throughout the book:

- What is marriage, or de-facto marriage, and what does it take?
- Why does it often go 'off-the-boil' or worse?
- How should we understand these changes and difficulties?
- What can we do about them?

Thirty short sharp chapters take the reader through five key tasks, developed over five sections: Cleaning the Lens, Mapping the Territory, Moving Forward with the common nitty-gritty issues, Showing up Differently, and Staying Grounded.

The book concludes with an Appendix entitled 'Essential Survival Skills for the Emotionally Intelligent Marriage' that walks the reader through 'The Three Point Checklist for Everyday Life' and 'The Five Step Process for Difficult Times or Delicate Conversations'.

How and Why Do I Believe This Approach 'Works' with Couples?

Firstly, this approach scopes the task. It asks, what is long-term marriage and what does it take? As Leonard Cohen said, 'Marriage is the hardest spiritual practice in the world... People wonder how anybody can sit on Mount Baldy [the Buddhist Monastery he stayed at] for hours on end, weeks, months even, but it's nothing compared to marriage. If you're really there, really present for marriage, it's self-reflection 24/7. In other words, who you are is reflected back to you in the mirror of your marriage partner, daily, minute by minute, hour by hour. Who can take that?'

Secondly, this approach *normalises the difficulties* rather than seeing them as a pathology. Over the course of the book I unpack my definition of a true marriage: two consciously imperfect people... committed to living together in close proximity ... taking the journey of love... over the course of a lifetime of changes and challenges.

Thirdly, the book *empowers and enables* people to respond constructively, rather than react destructively, to the journey of marriage.

By honouring the inherent difficulties and challenges of marriage and de-facto marriage, and giving the reader a clear map of the terrain and the necessary equipment for the journey, **Marriage is for Grown-ups** aims to resource the reader for the time honoured goal of a long-term or lifelong relationship which many still aspire to and regard as the gold standard.

The bottom line is this - this approach 'works' for those who are willing to let their marriage work on them.

My hope is that **Marriage is for Grown-ups** will enrich and radicalise the discourse about relationships in general, and marriage in particular, in our society. Because, God knows, we need it.