

The Healing Power of Enduring Relationships DR. J. DOMINIAN FRC Ped, FRC Psy, D Sc
(Hons), M.B.E.

I started working on marriage counselling in 1959 and even now in retirement I still do part time work in the field. I have thus been involved with marriage for nearly fifty years.

This involvement is in four separate ways; namely, fifty years of my own marriage, celebrated in June of this year; in trying to understand and describe marital problems in several publications (1968, 1984, 2004); in developing the relationship between the Christian Faith, marriage and marital breakdown; and in discovering hidden Christian values hitherto unrecognised. For anyone interested in this wide range I have brought copies of my thirty-second and latest book called 'Living Love' (2004).

Today I shall concentrate on the healing potential of enduring relationships with Christian marriages in mind, although what I have to say applies to any enduring marital relationship of any faith, and of love and of friendship.

The need to concentrate on this subject is urgent for the figures of divorce, and its adverse consequences, are frightening, and point to great rises all over the world (Adams 2004). The increase ranges from 800% between 1960 and 2000 in Argentina (Jehin 1992) to 50% in France and the Netherlands (Haskey 1992).

This paper will not be concerned with the various explanations offered for this rise, but will simply concentrate on the universally acknowledged fact that, given that some divorce is inevitable and, indeed, beneficial for certain couples, the overwhelming majority are detrimental to the spouses and the children, if any. This paper will not describe these adverse effects, which are fully described in detail from the research organisation One Plus One, which I set up in 1971; (see 'Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation'; McAllister 1995).

In this paper the following factors are pertinent:

- 1) Contemporary marriage in the West is based on a companionate relationship whose survival is dominated by the affective interaction of the spouses, i.e. it is based on love.
- 2) Love is one of the most difficult words to understand. However, in the last hundred years or so there has been a wide consensus, starting with Freud, that it is based on the experiences between the baby and the parents, particularly the mother. Most recently, Neuro-physiology has been making the exciting step of showing how affective experience connects with the baby's brain (Gerhardt 2004). An eminent Anglican theologian, John Bowker, has taken the connection further and shown its significance in religion, in 'The Sacred Neurone' (2005).
- 3) Essentially, the love connection between mother and child is best understood through object relations described by psychologists such as Melanie Klein, Winnicott, Fairbairn, Bowlby and many others. These psychologists have shown the essentials of love as recognition and trust, registered through vision, touch, sound (particularly by the work of Bowlby), and feeling wanted and appreciated. In brief, love is understood as the ability to register and donate affection in inter-personal encounters.

The patterns laid down in the first intimate relationship are repeated in subsequent intimate relationships of marriage and friendship. We can see here how the healing possibilities of Psycho-analysis and Psycho-therapy can spread in all intimate relationships in life.

This is really emphasising the important fact that, although our patterns of love can be good and positive in the first intimate relationship, and repeated in the second, we can also be damaged and wounded in the first intimate relationship, something we repeat in the commonest second relationship, namely marriage.

When I lecture on this topic, there are extensive cries at this point as to whether, if the first relationship is negative, are we therefore doomed for life? The good news is, not necessarily so, and most of the lecture is about healing in the second relationship. To make sense of this possibility we have to understand the unfolding history of love.

Love in marriage begins with the falling in love stage. Falling in love is a mystery in which, using Bowlby's attachment theory, we make an affective connection through vision, sound, touch and smell and we find suddenly or slowly another man or woman the most beautiful, attractive person with whom we are most comfortable. Our relatives whisper behind our backs "I don't know what he sees in her or him" but we know we have found the most perfect, ideal person. We idealise, finding little or no fault with them. We want to be with them as much as possible. Until thirty or forty years ago, at this point we reached the stage of marrying; now cohabitation often intervenes.

Whatever happens, after an interval of months or sometimes years, the idealisation subsides and then we notice more clearly what the world calls faults and I call wounds. The reason why I call them wounds is because the problems arise out of defective patterns of attachment laid down in the first intimate relationship, or through genetic factors, or a combination of both.

The commonest wounds we see are difficulties with registering or showing love, feeling insecure with marked fears of abandonment, lack of self esteem., feeling sensitive to criticism and rejection, difficulties of intimacy, appearing cold, aloof or over anxious, lacking in confidence, laden with feelings of guilt, being obsessional, tending to lose one's temper very easily, being domineering or moody, with a tendency to depression and so on.

We know from clinical studies, and from the literature, that all these factors, collectively known as neuroses, which are a mixture of anxiety-laden neuroses and personality disorders, are a major contribution to marital breakdown. How we respond to these traits plays a significant subsequent role in the outcome of the relationship, or in the survival of the friendship.

We can adopt a judgemental, critical approach and say "The trouble with you is", "You only think about yourself", "Pull yourself together", "Grow up" or we can recognise that these traits are wounds from childhood over which our spouse has only partial control, and in any case the exercise of will power is not enough to cure the problems. What is constantly needed is an expression of large quantities of love. Healing here takes the form of what happens in Psychotherapy and I believe in any enduring intimate relationship. Transference, deconditioning

and emotional growth are the key healing processes. Through transference we reach the original wound and alter it. We also reach the original damaged patterns and de-condition them, and through emotional growth we replace the faulty patterns with alternative positive ones.

The simplest way of describing the process is by saying that for lack of love we offer buckets of love, for feelings of rejection buckets of acceptance, for lack of confidence buckets of reassurance, and so on and on. This is of-course a very crude and simplistic way of describing healing. In fact at the moderate level of personal wounds this is precisely what happens, and in my opinion there is more healing in millions of good relationships than on all the Psychiatric couches of the world.

Let us look at the model a little more closely. There are three possibilities recognised in practice. The first is the combination of a very mature, loving person in relation to a very hurt, damaged spouse. Here healing is one way. This model is rare.

The second model is that both spouses are wounded but not severely and the wounds of one correspond to the strengths of the other so that there is mutual and complementary healing.

The third model and the most damaging is when both people are so needy that their mutual needs exceed each others healing resources, or one person is so destructive that, unconsciously, they do not want healing, but only seek damaging destruction. This pattern is rare, but the outcome is very negative, and at the level of marriage, breakdown is the common result.

We can see that only enduring relationships can serve for this healing to take place. Original wounds take time to emerge, are strongly reinforced over time, and nothing less than a lot of time is needed to recognise the origin of the wounds, and then slowly clarify them. We usually think of the nature of marriage as an enduring, faithful commitment, and the common emphasis is on faithfulness. In my view the advantage of enduring relationship is nothing less than what is needed for healing, which in the long run prevents unfaithfulness and breakdown of relationships. The Christian insistence on permanence is understood because of Christ's teaching against divorce, and we treat it as a moral obligation. In fact, it contains the seeds of the most profound human potential for healing, and it is one of the most powerful and commonest instruments of humanity's Psychological healing.

Christ taught what he knew was best for humanity, and the religions which accommodate easily to divorce do so at the risk of endangering the good of humanity in the name of being kind to the weaknesses of people.

Those of you who are dynamically orientated, or involved in therapy, will know that we build defences against our wounds, one of Freud's great discoveries, and that healing needs the dismantling of these defences first. This appertains in marriage and friendship.

I shall finish this paper with a detailed description of healing of one of the commonest human problems. I refer to the dismantling of the defences built up in childhood, with subsequent adult desire for love. Paradoxically, the dismantling is fought every inch of the way in giving up the defences, lest we become vulnerable to being hurt afresh.

According to Fairbairn, a most perceptive psychologist, the universal traits of the personality are not sex and aggression which Freud postulated. Fairbairn believes that we are people-orientated; in other words the "Other" is what we crave, and what we crave for in the other, is "Love", which originally parents provide. I will not describe in detail Fairbairn's theories, but suffice to say that, from infancy, what we crave is love, which most parents provide. But no parent is perfect, and also in the depths of all of us there is always a spectrum from a miniscule deprivation of love to a huge lack, and this deprivation is accompanied by an appropriate feeling of anger which bursts through when the absence of love is touched.

All human beings, but particularly Christians, need to adopt the scouts motto: Be Prepared. We do not know where the next opportunity for loving may emerge. It can be our spouse, a friend, a neighbour or a stranger. In my life I strived to adopt the scouts motto of being ready to love the next moment. After a lifetime of success and disappointment I want to share with you some of these experiences both in marriage and friendship.

Healing love cannot be imposed. So many of us are frustrated and disappointed because we try to love and are rebuffed. We must be patient, one of the most difficult of human traits. We need to have our antennae sensitive to hurt, and need them constantly active. We need to read the signs of hurt and read them carefully. These can be agitation, the shadow of depression and anxiety, worry, confusion, perplexity, asking for advice, telling a tale of woe, trying to ingratiate and please us, clinging onto us and so on. We know how and when to pat a dog or stroke a cat. We have to learn to recognise and appreciate the changing signals for love sent out by humans. The mother knows how to love her baby because the baby's signals are there in abundance.

These can apply to adults but are often well hidden. One of the commonest defences of hurt people is to pretend that they do not need love. One such person said she was content, had no complaints against her parents and immediately continued "But I am bringing my children up differently". Their defences are showing us that they are self sufficient and can do without love. As we get to know them they show every sign of this defence. Some people, whether they are our spouse or friend, keep this defence up all their life. When we get near them, they withdraw and repeatedly remark, "I am all right" when clearly they are not, or say "I don't need your help", "I don't need charity" or simply "I don't need you". They go to extraordinary lengths to show their independence by hard work, staying aloof, struggling with their difficulties alone. I repeat: trying to love this group particularly needs a lot of patience and continuous enduring relationships.

During this time we need to create an atmosphere of confidence and trust. These are essential prerequisites for any revelation of themselves however small. When this happens, we need to listen with immense affection and inexhaustible patience. One of the reasons for feeling vulnerable is that, in the past parents in particular, but others also, never had enough time. The potentially traumatic home is one which reverberates with the sentence "Not now dear, mummy or daddy is busy, later or tomorrow" and tomorrow never comes!

If childhood trauma is revealed, as inevitably it is, we must be sympathetic but not join in mutual criticism of parents. On the surface that is what is being asked, confirmation of their anger.

Corroboration of hurt is important, but there is also danger. We can try to be sympathetic by discussing, ignoring, or making light of the hurt. We say "It was not so bad" and what was meant to be a gesture of alleviating the pain can unleash much fury. How dare we trivialise their pain? What do we know about it? We have lost them, and even more seriously, can jeopardise their trust in us.

While sympathy must be shown, and we need to empathise with their pain, we need to be careful about collusion in the vilification of their parents. Despite all appearances to the contrary, people want to feel that their parents loved them, and at whatever stage of life they are, there is a yearning for reconciliation. At the same time we must be careful about accepting an idealised picture or retrospective interpretation of family life. Often at the start a spouse will say about their parents "They were not too bad". Only time and confidence will allow the full trauma to be revealed. This maybe their continuous absence of love, approval or acceptance, a preference for a sibling, a lack of affirmation or being wholly wanted only when appearing clever and achieving academic results; in other words, not feeling loved for oneself.

If revelations are made, what Freud called transference may appear, in that your intimate neighbour may project on you their experience of their parents. In particular, if you say something wrong or make a mistake, they are liable to say "You are just like my mother or father, what a fool I have been expecting anything different". In these circumstances, without the training of a therapist, we can get upset, angry or irritated. We must not show our anger even if we feel it. Just quietly point out that you are not the parent. If you are trained, avoid being technical or using psychological jargon. You are likely to be met with the sentence "You are trying to fob me off with psycho-babble. I do not want to be treated like a case, I am a person". This applies particularly to professional therapists, their spouses and friends.

Lack of love is intimately mixed up with anger. Do not be surprised that repeatedly, at the point when you feel you are getting somewhere, there is an outburst of anger with a torrent of accusation. You may feel "This is the thanks I get for trying to care and love, this is gratitude".

Often this anger is a way of testing how far they can go to provoke us and still retain our love. This is very much a repeat of the first intimate relationship of finding out how far we can go. We must be prepared for angry retorts like, "You just don't understand, nobody understands".

When you are really succeeding, and your neighbour or friend really begins to feel loved, they may suddenly take a turn for the worse and become depressed. This is difficult to understand. The fact is they have been familiar for such a long time, ever since their childhood, with the feeling of being unloved so that when that changes, it is a new experience that they have to learn from scratch. In this in between phase there is an interval, short or long, when they feel like an orphan. They do not know who they are, neither unloved nor securely loved, and they certainly are not sure whether the new feeling of being loved will last. They may be terrified of losing what they have gained, so that their reaction may be "I wish I had never started this I wish you had left me as I was".

We must be prepared for this no-man's-land state, which can happen repeatedly with healing. We need to be patient. Learning to be loved is like learning a new language. It is like letting go of

the familiar certainty of rejection and entering the unknown and insecure risk of acceptance. Both spouses and friends can drop us unexpectedly; friends who disappear to our surprise, may be experiencing the dilemma of trusting the new.

As I say, loving takes a very long time. Even when success appears through a growing sense of trust, feeling comfortable and reaching a comfortable mutuality, it can take a long time to consolidate these gains, perhaps years in some friendships, and marriages a life time.

After all, how many broken covenants did God have to renew to continue his love. Above all we must be patient with everybody's repetition of their stories.

In this paper I hope I have shown some aspects of the loving and healing of enduring relationships. It is for me the Christian answer to the world's 'disposable relationships', as described by the sociologist Professor Bauman (2003) in his book 'Liquid Love'.

For him, the concept of a "pure relationship" is the mutual acceptance of two people until further notice, that is to say, relationships should continue as long as the two people gain sufficient benefit from it to make its continuance worthwhile. To me, this is the ultimate humanistic utilitarianism and the denial of everything we know about the psychology of love in relationships. It is the very opposite of the views expressed in this paper and to be fought with every ounce of our psychological and Christian strength. For this, Christianity must move away from simply adhering blindly to rules and regulations, or the literal interpretation of the Bible. I have said repeatedly that psychology must become an essential tool of theology instead of it relying so much on philosophy.

Thank you.

References

- 1) Adams B.N. 2004 Families and Family Study in International Perspectives J. Marriage and Family Vol. 66 No. 5.
- 2) Bauman Z. 2003 Liquid Love Polity Oxford.
- 3) Bowker J, 2005 The Sacred Neurone Tauvis London.
- 4) Dominian J. 1968 Marital Breakdown Darton Longman & Todd London.
- 5) Dominian J. 1968 The Christian Response to Marital Breakdown Ampleforth Journal, Spring.
- 6) Dominian J. 1984 Make or Break SPCK London.
- 7) Dominian J. 2004 Living Love Darton Longman & Todd London.
- 8) Gerhardt S. 2004, Why Love Matters, Brunner-Routledge Hove.
- 9) Haskey J. 1992 Patterns of Marriage, Divorce and Cohabitation in Different Countries of Europe, Population Trends 69, Journal of the Office of Population Censuses and Survey London.
- 10) Jehin E. 2004 The Family in Argentina, Modernity, Economic Crisis and Practices In B.N. Adams and J. Frost (Editors) handbook of world families (Chap. 18) Thousand Oaks CA Sage.

- 11) McAllister F. 1995, Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation 2nd Edition, One Plus One London.