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Visions

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.

--Carl Jung

The Quest for Intimacy and Passion: Challenges for the ACD

By Kenneth A. Sprang

As you may know, I was given the privilege of writing "Heart Talk" early this year following the untimely death of Dr. Harriet Kramer Becker last December. When I assumed responsibility for the column, our publisher Sonya Bernhardt told me to "find my own voice," rather than simply to follow in Harriet's footsteps. Reflecting that evolving new voice, today my editor and I are renaming the column "Visions." In the weeks and months to come I will continue to seek to bring insight into intimate, familial and other relationships. In addition, however, I would like to paint with a somewhat broader brush, and share some thoughts on the human condition, general life reflections, and occasionally even a foray into the business world. I welcome your comments as this new direction unfolds, and I always appreciate your suggestions, responses, and stories.

As you may know, the divorce rate continues to hover around fifty percent, where it has been now for some time. If half of marriages end in divorce today, it is likely that many of you—like me—are ACD's—Adult Children of Divorce. How has our parents' divorce affected us and our own quest for love and happiness?

My parents were divorced when I was three. From childhood I vowed not to be one of the fifty percent—I was going to succeed where they had "failed." Yet, I too, became a statistic when my first marriage of 25 years came to an end, despite valiant attempts by my first wife and me to save it. So now my adult children, too, have joined the ranks of ACD's.

Much has been written about the effect of divorce on children. However, very little research has been done on the impact of divorce on adults and the challenges of ACD's in general. A recent study at the University of New Orleans sheds some of the long awaited light.

Among the findings of the study, is that for ACD's intimacy, trust, commitment, loyalty and passion are more complex issues than for children of intact families. For example, many of us crave the intimacy, yet female ACD's tend to experience more relationship conflict and to have an increased number of sexual partners than those from intact families, though the same is not true for men. There is some suggestion that in our quest for the intimacy we may confuse casual sexual relationships with emotional intimacy. We also have a tendency to get into relationships or marriage at a young age or to seek to fulfill our emotional needs in relationships that are not healthy.

ACD's also demonstrate an overall lack of trust with regard to intimate relationships and marriage. Sadly, many of us expect our marriages to fail, at least unconsciously, and we may even sabotage our intimate relationships because of a fear of rejection and lack of trust. Ironically, while we long for affection, seeking the affection which we did not

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see or experience at home, we may withdraw emotionally from our partners, repeating a coping mechanism learned in childhood.

The option of cohabitation and availability of divorce as an option also impact our attitude toward marriage. Adult children of divorce are more likely to prefer cohabitation to marriage or to say they do not want to marry in the future. Yet we ACD's are more likely to put ourselves in situations that promote marriage, such as cohabitation.

The most significant finding of the study is that ACD's are much more concerned with intimacy and loyalty as well as passion in relationships than are adults from intact families. Consequently, our expectations are sometimes unrealistic. We did not see a good marriage model, so we have created one in our imagination. The picture may be lovely, but it is not necessarily realistic.

On the other hand, the study found that ACD's often demonstrate residual strength and maturity and empathy for others borne of their family divorce experience. As Winston Churchill observed, "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Armed with that awareness and our residual strength, we can begin to change our patterns and create a new vision, to live our lives differently. One of the things that draws us to the use of Imago Relationship Therapy in our counseling and coaching practice, is that Imago allows persons in committed relationships to heal childhood wounds, whether from divorce or some other source. It is a priceless tool for creating the new vision.

Divorce is a terrible, painful thing. Yet I know that sometimes it is the only available resolution to a relationship in conflict. Perhaps with growing knowledge and understanding of some of the vulnerabilities that challenge us as adult children of divorce, we can move forward and experience healing. Perhaps we can even begin to reverse the divorce statistic.

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