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Unraveling the Mysteries of Relationships: An Introduction to Imago Relationship Therapy Part II

By Kenneth A. Sprang

Have you ever interacted with your spouse or your significant other/domestic partner and suddenly had a sense of *déjà vu*? The feelings and dynamics of the moment seem a lot like ones you have experienced before. Or perhaps you observe that your partner reminds you a great deal of a former relationship or spouse, or of one or both of your parents. There is, of course, a cogent explanation for the experience, and Imago Theory provides a helpful way to use that knowledge to nurture rather than damage our relationships.

When children come into the world, they are born in a relaxed, joyful, free state. Watch them play of children when uninterrupted by adults and observe their imagination, their freedom to simply *be*. Sadly, this state does not last very long—at least for most of us. Even children born of the very best of parents are sometimes wounded emotionally by their parents, as well as by siblings, other relatives, and peers. For example, assume two conscientious, loving parents who have small children. One of them is transferred and the family must move, or one of them becomes seriously ill and is unable to respond to a child's needs. Perhaps one or both of them are required to work long hours to care for the family financially, and are not always available when their children need them emotionally. Those experiences cause emotional wounding (unintentional of course) of the child.

In truth, few of us get story book parents. Some of us experience physical or emotional abuse and some of us deal with substance abuse problems. Others cope with emotional abandonment following divorce, and some deal with parents that are angry, cold, or aloof. Even when parental nurturing is reasonably good, many of us are the victims of the cruelty of other children or life circumstances beyond our control.

It is the amazing reality of nature that we are attracted to persons with characteristics of our primary caretakers, usually our parents, and often the negative similarities outweigh the positive one. The reason is that unconsciously we are seeking healing and yearning to fulfill wants that were not met in childhood.

Imago, borrowing from a long history of human developmental studies, illustrates where and how we are wounded, and how these wounds factor into the attraction process. For example, watch a toddler as she wanders off exercising her new-found mobility to explore her world. It is a marvelous time of discovery and exploration. But note that the toddler will only go so far, before she scurries back to be certain that Mom or Dad are within sight. Once she is sure that they are nearby (and that she is therefore safe), she toddles off again.

Ideally, the parents will always be present, both physically and emotionally, when the toddler looks back for security, and they will be free to let her go off to explore and discover this rich and wonderful world. If parents are able to both “let go” and “be there,” the child develops the priceless ability to go out into the world feeling safe and connected.

Unfortunately, many of us get either a parent who is protective and will not let us go off to explore, or we get a parent who lets us explore, but who is not consistently available and present when we look back for reassurance and security. In the first instance, the child feels smothered and therefore distances herself to alleviate the smothering—she becomes a “distancer.” In the second instance, the child feels neglected and unsafe. Therefore he seeks reassurance. He becomes a “pursuer.” And, of

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course, it is this distancer and this pursuer who fall in love. Sound at all familiar?

Given these unconscious memories and responses, in the relationship the distancer often asserts her need for space and freedom, while the pursuer partner complains that his distancer partner is never there when he needs her or that she pays more attention to other things or other persons than to him. This conflict leads to an emotional “power struggle” between the spouses or partners. Unless they learn to understand the dynamics of the struggle and to *consciously* change the patterns, their relationship is at risk.

The power of Imago theory and practice is that it first teaches the couple why the conflict arises, and then gives them tools to resolve it in a way that affirms both partners, celebrating and acknowledging their differences, rather than battling over them. It also provides singles a rich resource with which to build relationships.

As we begin a new year of Visions, I would like to invite you to write with questions you have or with topic suggestions. The

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