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

By Kenneth A. Sprang

Over the months that I have been writing this column, I have often mentioned Imago Relationship Therapy, and suggested that it is a central tool in our coaching and counseling practice. I thought perhaps this first column of the new year was a good time to discuss Imago Therapy more fully, and tell you why we think it is such a valuable resource for couples and individuals seeking an intimate relationship.

Prior to my divorce after a 25-year marriage, I had spent years in couple's therapy trying to make the marriage work. In addition, I had done a lot of personal therapy both before the separation and after. For us traditional marital therapy was not terribly helpful. The limitation of traditional models, at least in my experience, is that they generally provide couples few if any concrete tools with which to work on their own when they are not with the therapist. In traditional therapy, the therapist is the "hero." In Imago, the couple becomes the hero. Imago therapy might have saved my first marriage.

Imago builds on long established theories of human development. It empowers a couple to look at the "why" of their relationship conflicts, and offers resources to resolve those conflicts in an emotionally satisfying way.

For example, my first wife thought that working in the yard together was important— "the family that works together stays together or something like that. So we "contracted" under the therapist's guidance that I would join her in raking leaves.

Unfortunately, I really do not like yard work. Once in awhile on a beautiful spring or fall day, getting outside in the dirt is relaxing, but for the most part, I would rather hire someone to rake leaves while I go to the theater or read a book (or write this column). The message for me was that in order for a marriage to work I had to do some things I really found unpleasant and essentially be someone I am not. Something seemed wrong with the picture.

Had we had the resources of Imago Therapy, I would have learned about the underlying emotional connection for my first wife between love and working in the yard. I would have experienced my then wife's request not as a demand or a *quid pro quo*, but as something I could stretch to do that would bring her some real emotional comfort.

On the other hand, she would have realized that to *require* me to work in the yard brought back memories of my childhood when I was convinced that the only reason parents had kids was to work them as slaves. My mom and I did all of that work while my stepfather did nothing. No wonder yard work pushes emotional buttons for me.

If we had understood the underlying reasons for my wife's request and my response, we would have worked enthusiastically to find an alternative activity that would have served the same purpose. Note this would *not* be a compromise where she gave a bit and I gave a bit, but rather a complete alternative that we could both embrace out of our commitment to one another.

Fortunately, my wife Carol and I discovered Imago in our first year of marriage in 1996, and it has truly been a priceless tool in our life together. Imago Therapy was developed by Harville Hendrix, who shared his ideas in two best-selling books, *Getting the Love You Want*, which is aimed at couples, and *Keeping the Love You Find*, which is helpful for both singles and couples.

"Imago" is the Latin word for "image." Imago theory teaches that the images we have of our

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early childhood caretakers, e.g., our parents, are instrumental in our selection of our adult partners and in all of our relationships. We are drawn to someone who has both positive and negative characteristics of our primary caretakers.

Because our partner reflects an image of the adults who shaped our lives while growing up, we tend to unconsciously respond to our partner in the same way we did to the adults of our childhood. We continue to use the same coping techniques we learned in childhood—tools that served us well as children, but which may be problematic as adults. For example, persons growing up in an abusive household may withdraw—a good technique as a child, but not a helpful one if one wants to build a relationship.

Imago work helps us to better understand our socialization and why we are attracted to a particular person, as well as why he or she sometimes irritates us in particular ways. It also helps us to re-image our partner with a new understanding, and to engage in a *conscious* relationship, in which we respond to our partner in a conscious, adult-like manner, as opposed to an unconscious response left over from childhood. The difference consciousness makes in relationships is truly profound. Without Imago, Carol and I might have simply repeated the mistakes of the past. With it, our lives have been immeasurably enriched.

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

Kenneth Sprang, MA, JD, and Carol Sprang, MA, RNC direct Bethesda-Chevy Chase Counseling & Consulting in Bethesda, offering Imago Relationship Therapy, relationship and executive coaching, individual and couples coaching and counseling, and business consulting services. (301) 907-3377. ken@bccounseling.com. www.bcccounseling.com