

## **Why Do So Many Marriages Fail?**

*By Margaret Anne Speak B.A., M.A., CCC*

Dr. Papero's upcoming conference on marriage has got me thinking about divorce. Why do so many marriages fail? There are of course, the demographic changes that make separation more feasible. Today we live longer and have fewer children so that by the time the last child is launched, we still have another twenty or thirty years ahead of us. Financially, it is often possible to divide our assets and still live a relatively comfortable life, and the social stigma around divorce has all but disappeared. Still, as the song says "breaking up is hard to do", so why do so many couples split?

At our last conference, Kathleen Kerr made the comment that you don't differentiate yourself out of a marriage. I'm not certain that this is always the case, but her point was a good one. She was suggesting that when things get rocky, leaving is not the option if you are working on emotional maturity. What then does it take, to stay the course in a troubled marriage?

Bowen believed that we partner with someone who is at the same level of differentiation as we are. Though this is often a hard one to swallow, it's a good place to start. If I am as emotionally immature as my partner, I've got a lot to look at in my own functioning. And if I can get the focus off of my partner and onto myself, I might actually be looking at something I can change.

Bowen described four developments to watch for in the struggling nuclear family: conflict, distance, symptom development in a spouse and focus on a child. I recently worked with a couple, (I'll call them Tom and Mary), where all four were present. Tom would get angry and drink heavily; Mary would get cold and distant, and both would get focused on their oldest son: she over-positively and he over-negatively.

Tom and Mary were still committed to the marriage and with some coaching they took on the effort to understand 'fusion' and its influence

in keeping them locked in a pattern of accusation and reactivity. In time, they got better at tracking the pursuing and distancing patterns that they had developed over years of attempting to express their feelings towards each other.

The couple's initial efforts were simply to become better observers, not only of themselves, but of all family members. They were quick to identify the triangle with their son. Mary knew that in some way, she felt the need to protect him from Tom's anger and that this contributed to the intensity between them. She worked at trying to step back from that role and Tom worked at getting clearer about his anger: the who, what, where, when and how of it. Mary grew interested in the influence of her family of origin, particularly the communication patterns between her parents, and was surprised to find that she was more like her mother than she liked to think. Tom's work had always been central to his identity and he realized that recent changes in management, and his uncertainty about his future with the company, were contributing to his irritability at home.

These are just a few of the dynamics that this couple was ready to examine. Their ability to extend their focus beyond the emotional intensity between them was central to their success.

At a conference a number of years ago, Dr. Papero made the observation that it's important to remember that just as our partner is a challenge for us, we are a challenge for them: that the question, "What is this person up against living with me?" is relevant, and that if you find yourself too focused on how your partner is holding his or her fork, you're in the wrong place!

Dr. Papero will be speaking in Vancouver on October 26 & 27, 2007. He is an excellent presenter, an authority on Bowen Family Systems Theory and a survivor of a long-term marriage.

*Margaret Anne Speak is the conference chair & a contracted counsellor with Living Systems*