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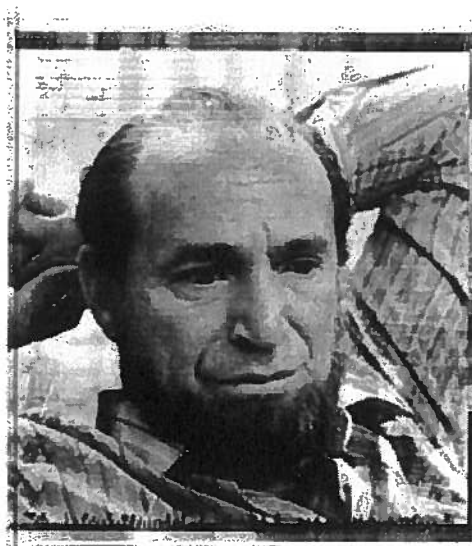
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A cooler head prevails

Psychologist Robert Firestone rejects the quick fix for bad marriage.

By Fred Branfman

Nov. 16, 1999 | Marriage counseling is a growth industry in which the quick-fix expert reigns supreme. John Gray, of Mars and Venus fame, repairs marriages on Oprah. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, in private performance of therapeutic miracles, helps patch up the first marriage. In cozy offices and giant workshops around the country, couples rage before couples therapists who chant "I hear how much you love one another," often to no apparent effect. Spouses share feelings, listen, repeat what they hear and pledge to continue the process until next time.

And yet.

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A cooler head prevails

Psychologist Robert Firestone rejects the quick fix for bad marriage.

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Marriage counseling is a growth industry in which the quick-fix expert reigns supreme. John Gray, of Mars and Venus fame, repairs marriages on Oprah. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, in private performance of therapeutic miracles, helps patch up the first marriage. In cozy offices and giant workshops around the country, couples rage before couples therapists who chant "I hear how much you love one another," often to no apparent effect. Spouses share feelings, listen, repeat what they hear and pledge to continue the process until next time.

And yet.

Divorce is a growth industry, in which the weapons spouses use against each other -- restraining orders, allegations of abuse -- have become more varied and more extreme. Quick fixes fail to produce lifelong happiness, and the stats show not a dent for our earnest efforts at "active listening."

So why, exactly, do people continue to get married, to invest in the fantasy of happily ever after? Is it the pastel spell cast by the special wedding edition of "Martha Stewart Living"? An abiding belief in Tom and Nicole, nifty, go-go role models for the perfect marriage?

Santa Barbara psychologist Dr. Robert Firestone offers no instant or easy solutions for troubled marriages. He is often the first to suggest that it makes no sense to stay married or even get married in the first place. His painstaking brand of existential therapy has little in the way of sound bites to recommend it.

But his ideas -- that success in marriage often requires changing oneself at a cost of emotional pain; that spouses must respect each other's personal, professional, and sexual rights and boundaries; that maintaining a marriage by way of "emotional bondage" is more tragic than ending it -- have gained currency in the rush to save the institution. Call it a backlash -- the slow but steady tack is back in grace.

A collaborator of R.D. Laing, Firestone has written seven books,

including the newly released "Fear of Intimacy," which looks at marriage and relationships For the last 20 years he has led associates and numerous friends in a group interaction that functions as a living laboratory for his approach. These unscripted sessions -- in which members hash out the issues in their own marriages -- are featured in Firestone's instructional videotapes.

As HMOs put time limits on therapy and therapists respond with instant solutions and medication, Firestone's approach -- classic talk therapy -- and his philosophy -- tough existential reckoning -- are offbeat in their connection to orthodoxy of the past.

He believes it works. A genial, tough-talking man with 40 years of clinical experience, Firestone spoke with Mothers Who Think about his work.

Dr. Firestone, marriage today appears to be in peril. Why?

People use marriage to support a destructive fantasy process. When two people want to get married, they really intend to make a go of it over a long period of time. But they can't really make an emotional commitment for all time, because it is impossible to predict how we will feel or whom we will meet in the future. So the tendency to make it into a fantasy of foreverness is, I think, the dangerous issue.

In trying to approach relationships in a more realistic way, people should realize that while [relationships] appear to offer potential fulfillment, they very often have disastrous effects. Nearly 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, and according to the National Center for Health Statistics, the average length of marriage in 1993 was seven years. So the picture for relationships in general is relatively negative unless people can challenge their defenses and develop to the point where they have more tolerance for love and intimacy.

You've also written that the couple creates an illusion of connection or "fantasy bond" to ward off the existential pain of aloneness and death's eventuality. What do you mean by that?

We all protect ourselves from the pain of separation anxiety and death anxiety, the ultimate separation. We unconsciously withhold loving feelings from our partners in order to protect ourselves against the pain of their potential loss. But we pay a heavy price by doing so, ultimately developing a reduced level of aliveness -- that is, emotional deadness, a lack of spontaneity, the dulling of interests -- and retreat into an inward posture characterized by a reduction in emotional exchanges.

Are you saying that most married people don't really love each other?

They don't necessarily, if you go by any reasonably objective definition of love. Loving operations include such observable things as overt affection, companionship, honesty and integrity, a genuine concern for the other person rather than only seeing them in relation to our own needs. But often people's personal relationships are ruled by an inner sense of desperation and an intense need for fusion which seriously interferes with the development of love, respect and concern for each

other's humanness.

Why do most relationships fail?

It's not due to the causes traditionally ascribed to the failure of marriages, such as religious incompatibilities, cultural differences, sexual difficulties and financial problems. They primarily fail because real closeness is precluded by psychological defenses formed early in life.

Most people say that they want love and positive acknowledgment, but relatively few people can tolerate real love and respect from another person because it threatens their defenses. They tend to retreat, pass over it and sometimes react with actual aggression.

Many movies and songs focus on this phenomenon, saying people have a hard shell and self-protective tendencies that must be overcome before they can accept love from a caring person. Just watch how most people react to a simple compliment. They usually parry it, evade it, deny the reality and many times respond with annoyance or provocation. An unavoidable truth about human beings is that, very often, the beloved is compelled to punish the lover who appreciates and acknowledges [the beloved's] positive traits.

What are we defending ourselves against?

Pain. We suffer pain when we are emotionally deprived, beginning in infancy. And we suffer anxiety and deep sadness when we learn of our personal death, often at a far earlier age than most people realize. We develop psychological defenses to protect ourselves against this pain.

You seem to be saying that we all develop these defenses, and that they damage us.

Yes, absolutely. All children suffer varying degrees of emotional deprivation. When the parental climate is characterized by emotional rejection, insensitivity or outright hostility, the child forms defenses to cope with psychological pain.

The parental environment can vary considerably in meeting the emotional needs of the child. The more positive the original attachment, the more likely the child is to find satisfaction in adult relationships. The converse is also true. The extent to which people come to rely on psychological defenses is proportional to the degree of pain they experienced in their formative years.

Why do you call the "fantasy bond" the core defense?

The fantasy bond is originally an imagined fusion formed by the infant with the mother or primary parenting figure. We imagine that we are fully protected from deprivation and death. It is highly effective as a defense because a human being's capacity for imagination provides partial gratification of needs and reduces tension. When we project this childhood fantasy bond onto our adult partner, and inevitably find they

cannot meet our unconscious emotional hunger, we increasingly move away from loving operations and real affection and friendship.

What would be an example, from your therapy practice, of how the fantasy bond operates?

An angry couple came to see me in therapy. The husband criticized his wife from one end to the other, and then she did the same. As far as I could see, they were both pretty accurate. I then asked them: "Why do you stay with each other if you hate each other so much?" They replied: "Because we love each other." It was difficult for me to see the love in this type of warring couple. A fantasy bond creates an illusion of closeness at the expense of real closeness.

Most married couples are involved in a pretense of love, a mutual pact of self-deception, that other people -- including many therapists -- are reluctant to address. Intense anxiety and rage are aroused in both partners when their pretense or illusion of love is challenged.

People claim love and closeness is their primary goal, yet so many couples become estranged. Why the contradiction?

We bring our childhood defenses into our adult relationships. These defenses keep us from being vulnerable, the key quality needed for the development of intimacy. The very defenses that we form early in life in an attempt to cope with emotional pain make us dysfunctional to varying degrees our adult their personal relationships.

As a result, most people can only tolerate affection, love and respect in fantasy. They react adversely when they are acknowledged and loved in reality, because being loved threatens defenses formed early in life, when the child faced emotional stress.

What about the expectation that each of us is going to find our one true love, our soul mate, and live happily every after?

It doesn't work that way. People come across relatively few potential partners whom they choose and who, in turn, choose them. Often we end up with those who are not necessarily high-level preferences. For example, people often choose each other based on compensatory defenses to make up for inadequacies or personality deficiencies in themselves. An aggressive person will tend to be attracted to a passive, submissive person and an individual who is parental will choose a child-like person. But they can eventually come to resent and even hate the very qualities that they sought. It is true that "opposites attract," but also true that "opposites may eventually repel."

People have a certain core emptiness that can never be filled by finding another. If we are looking for a person to fill our needs, we're certainly not going to find them. No one can fill a deep emptiness in ourselves. We can never extract from our partners what was missing in our early lives.

It is my opinion that relationships based on similarities and mutuality are

more likely to succeed than relationships based on compensations for deficiencies. What we can do is work toward developing our own independence in life, achieve greater emotional maturity and relate to each other as autonomous adults.

What should we look for in our personal relationships?

There are a number of key characteristics that people should look for in a potential mate: 1) nondefensiveness, i.e., openness to feedback and other issues without reacting with aggression or avoidance; 2) honesty and integrity; 3) respect for the other person's boundaries, priorities and goals separate from oneself; 4) a person who is physically affectionate and comfortable with the sexual role; 5) a person who is empathic and understanding.

They should try to avoid people who possess toxic personal qualities such as manifestations of superiority and vanity, people who are controlling, domineering or overly submissive, hostile or rejecting, and especially individuals who indicate addictive personality characteristics.

Do you consider it tragic that so many relationships fail?

No, it can very often be a positive sign when a relationship ends. People grow at different rates and one person may outgrow his or her partner and choose to go on. The marriage or the couple is an abstraction: it is the individuals who matter.

In "Fear of Intimacy," I argue that it is absurd to serve an abstraction, to place primary value on any social institution, whether it be the couple or family, without considering the well-being of the individual men, women and children.

What about the idea that people should stay in marriages for the sake of the children?

The battleground at home often has an even more destructive effect on the children than the termination of the relationship. Generally there are problems but, assuming that both parents are sensitive to their children's needs and well-being, workable solutions can be found that minimize the damage.

You make a strong case in your writing for individual human rights in relationships, an issue often overlooked in other books on relationships.

Yes, very often people injure, intrude and manipulate each other in ways that violate their human rights. Couples manipulate and deceive each other. Dishonesty fractures a person's sense of reality, which causes anxiety and leads to actual symptom formation. Mixed messages are a fundamental causative influence on mental illness. This is a significant moral issue because of the damage it causes. People can successfully intimidate and imprison one another through these manipulations and forms of control, but they inevitably damage themselves and the other person.

Besides deception, what else would you consider a powerful violation of human rights?

Domination, such as aggressive power plays; violation of each other's boundaries -- talking for each other; coldness or rejection; and verbal or physical abuse. A manipulation that is often overlooked is the tyranny of weakness -- controlling the other by falling apart (suicide threats being the most extreme example).

What about the subject of sexuality in our culture? You've mentioned R.D. Laing's quip that the bedroom is the most dangerous room in the house.

Social mores represent the pooling of our individual defenses. Social attitudes today damage nearly every adult in their sexual development. Our suppressive culture, in which people learn early in life to be ashamed of masturbation and to be self-conscious about their naked bodies, has serious repercussions. These cultural prerogatives can be considered an institutionalized form of sexual abuse in that they limit each person's potential satisfaction and security in his/her sexual relationships.

Sexual attraction and responses are as natural as eating. There is no inherent shame in the body. For example, in Europe many women go topless on the beaches. They feel totally at ease. No one is leaping around or grabbing anyone, there's no increase in rape, men are not walking around with giant erections and there's no sign of chaos. It's just part of a pretty scene. It feels good. It looks good. It's natural.

One aspect of our unhealthy attitudes toward sex is the enormous deception involved in many adulterous marriages. Should monogamy still be the ideal?

Although monogamy is professed to be a major moral value, people's behavior in our culture repeatedly contradicts that value. So there is considerable deception and dishonesty in marriage regarding these extramarital relationships. The deception and dishonesty is more destructive to the people than the sexual "infidelity."

Are you saying you believe in open marriages?

Deep and intimate relationships tend to be the most fulfilling when they are not restrictive. But the problem with "open marriage" or sexual freedom for most couples is that it triggers each partner's insecurities.

Generally speaking, it is unwise for partners to be restrictive of the other's freedom because this tends to foster resentment in the other. But most people are unable to cope with a partner's sexual freedom without suffering considerable pain. This creates a serious dilemma for most couples. The most important thing is for the partners to agree on a basic policy that is respectful of each other's feelings and desires, and then stand by their agreement.

An open marriage, in every sense of the word, would be the best solution

for mature individuals. But for many it's unworkable.

How would you advise couples to cope with the problems that cause relationships to fail?

Therapy is an important consideration. In our therapy, we don't treat the couple; we treat the individuals. Our goal isn't to save the marriage: It's to save the people. Basically, this involves each partner developing himself or herself as an individual, becoming less defended and improving his or her own sense of security.

How does your therapy work?

What we do in couples therapy is to help people identify destructive thoughts and attitudes toward themselves and toward their mates, both of which predispose alienation. We help people discover and express their feelings about destructive thought processes in a technique which we call voice therapy.

We instruct participants to verbalize their critical and hostile thoughts about themselves as though spoken by others. For example, "You're getting old, you're not attractive anymore" is one example of an emotional attack that a person might direct toward himself. In other words we have people express their negative attitudes toward themselves in a second-person format that brings out deep feelings.

In a similar manner, we have them give away their angry critical feelings toward their mates. For example, "He doesn't care about you anymore. All he cares about is himself! Men can't be trusted anyway."

How does this help the couple?

In recognizing these self-destructive and aggressive thought processes, and sharing them with their mates in a couples therapy interaction, both people tend to take back their projections, stop blaming each other for their personal misfortunes, and begin to see each other in a more realistic and accepting light.

While they're going through this process together, they develop a compassionate empathy that's unusual for most couples. This is the best therapeutic intervention. Ultimately, each individual must progress in his or her own personal development to succeed in his or her relationship. When you get down to it, only when people triumph over their individual defenses can they expand their potential for developing intimacy.

"Fear of Intimacy" also offers ideas that couples who are not in therapy can utilize to improve their relationships.

Yes, though bear in mind that practical advice is of limited value when one is up against psychological defenses of a long-standing nature. There needs to be a strong realization that to get what one really wants in a personal relationship, one has to "sweat out" the anxiety of changing established defenses and lifestyles.

However, people can attempt to: 1) recognize the signs that indicate that they have formed a fantasy bond and admit that they have become distant and that their actions are not necessarily loving; 2) become aware of their self-attacks and attacking thoughts toward their partners and subject those thoughts to objective scrutiny; 3) respect the equality and human rights of both their mates and themselves as free and independent spirits; 4) face the pain and sadness involved in trying to restore intimacy; 5) expose the fear of being a separate, independent individual as well as the fear of loss or the death of their partner and fear about their own death; 6) develop a non-defensive posture toward feedback and an open and honest style of communication; 7) move away from isolated couple interactions and toward an extended circle of family and friends; and 8) if necessary, plan temporary or long-term separations, and hopefully in that separation period, possibly refresh and reclaim their original feelings of friendship, affection and sexual attraction. By moving away from habitual modes of relating, people can awaken their feelings for one another.

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