

Re-Commitment in Midlife Marriage: A Letter to Couples, Part I

My Dear Friend,

It would be such a regrettably sad thing for you to leave this marriage at this time in your life. The years you have spent with your partner have given you a large piece of your identity and a foundation from which to carry on your life in the outside world. This particular individual will hold forever the piece of your history held by no other human being. In fifteen, twenty, or thirty-year marriages, this history represents most of your adult life. Your partner's presence will forever be in your memory as you observe and interact with your children and later your grandchildren. No matter how many new memories are accumulated with another partner, every holiday, every remembered event, every place revisited, every celebrated birth and death, and all of the fleeting thoughts in between, your consciousness will be flooded by recall of this long-term marriage and the associated feelings.

Before making a decision as final and as momentous as the decision to leave a long-term marriage, for the sake of your future, the future of your children and grandchildren, and the future of a society deeply hurting by separation and alienation, I ask your indulgence for just a small amount of time while you read my letter to you. Somewhere between the two places, your heart and your intellect, you will find the answers that are right for you.

Reflection on the Past

Remember how your partner looked when you first met, their mannerisms, their laugh, the way they walked and talked, their smell, the way they looked in their clothes, the way they attended to you and made you feel that you mattered and were special to them? Remember the things you really liked about them, the things you respected, and those sometimes unexplainable things you felt intense love for? Remember the feeling that you just could not believe that this special person wanted you in their life forever? Remember the mixture of the thrill and the fear as you got to know them better and better and knew that this was the partner that for a long time you had envisioned being with, the individual you would be so proud to be seen with at any occasion--the kind of person you wanted to have children with?

Aside from all of the wonderful feelings your partner evoked in you, remember on a more logical level those qualities in them that told you that this marriage would be a good thing for you and for your life? The likelihood is that those qualities brought with them beautiful expectations for your life as well as the relationship with this person and made you feel that this partner would complement and complete your life as no one else could. It is these expectations that I wish to talk about with you.

So often it is the very qualities that in the beginning you love in your partner that later appear as their largest limitations and are the focus of constant resentment and

bitterness between you as a couple. Perhaps he was so wonderfully laid back and had such a relaxed attitude about life that he beautifully complemented your anxiety and need for a fast paced- life. Perhaps it was he who soothed and comforted you when you were distressed, but now you find yourself describing this quality in him as unproductive, non-aggressive, or apathetic. Remember when you loved her outgoing, positive, confident sense of herself--how thankful you were that you had a woman who could take some of the pressure off of you in social gatherings when you experienced difficulty and discomfort at conversing in large groups? Perhaps now you experience that same quality as flirtatious, insincere, and sometimes evasive.

These qualities within your partner have not changed. What has changed is your perception of the value of that quality within your life. Rather than remembering that that mannerism or character trait is what makes your partner the unique individual that he or she is, and once was one of the reasons for your initial attraction, it now feels like a nemesis. The development of a maturing marriage requires a return to the original appreciation of the innate character of the person that you married, separating unacceptable behavior that may need discussion, from the belief that one's partner is no longer acceptable. The individuating marriage needs a large dose of good old fashioned good will directed at your partner, the kind you would not hesitate to extend to a friend, a business colleague, or a client or customer. It requires an honest dialogue between you and your partner who no doubt realizes that when they feel insecure, unlovable, and afraid, and in times of stress and distress, they display survival behaviors learned as a little child but inappropriate as an adult. Perhaps all that they need to open and carry on such a dialogue is a compassionate opening from you.

As you begin at midlife to review your life, the process can, on many levels, accelerate into a conflicted long-term debate with your partner. It is not uncommon, following many years of tending to the normal but often mundane tasks of family life, that there is a temptation to idealize the paths you did not choose during your years together-- the careers and talents you did not pursue, the travel you desired but left unattended, the relationships you chose not to experience, the many compromises acquiesced for the sake of the relationship, and your very precious individuality sacrificed so often for the sake of the union. It is so easy and automatic to blame your most significant other for your regrets and for the opportunities you perceive are lost forever.

If you will look closely and honestly at this blame and resentment, I believe you will find that in most cases you would identify that on some level you did make a choice and at that time did consciously select your path. Rethinking and reframing the issue of blame requires that you transform the feelings you have for your partner from criticism to an attitude of self responsibility for one's past choices. It is necessary for you to get to the place where perceptions of painful experiences of choice and lost dreams take on a new identity and are valued as events of life that propagated strength, growth, and wisdom, and in actuality, at this time of your life, account for many of your successes, and much of your self confidence and self pride.

Perhaps the issues of independence and dependence, domination and subordination have negatively contributed to your current marital situation. No other contemporary issue impacts the relationship between spouses and requires more honest self reflection than these. They are not issues that have the thin skin of a new fad--on the contrary, they are part of the male-female archetype deeply imbedded in your genes and in your soul. There is no simple interaction between economic and emotional dependency and only you, the man or woman genuinely searching for egalitarianism between you and your partner, can challenge yourself with inquiries such as these: Do I equate dependence with financial dependence and how does this influence my life and my relationship? How often do I make the assumption that because of my gender I am the stronger more competent one? How does my attitude and behavior indicate my innate belief in male privilege? How often do I make the assumption that because of my gender or level of financial dependence I need to defer to my partner and practice silence? How often does my fear of economic survival predetermine my role in the relationship and the degree to which I express my true self? How often does my perception that I am able to earn more money than my spouse find expression in my inability to see them as equally significant? Does my intent to love and protect reveal itself in ways that appear dominating? Do my expectations for love resemble neediness, and gain me treatment as a subordinate? Can I differentiate between sacrifice and self-sacrifice in my spousal role-- sacrifice given as a healthy tribute to your marriage, or sacrificing who and what I believe in because I feel less important than my partner?

Unless you address these issues honestly and candidly as a couple, the denial of Self and the ambivalence connected with playing a certain role that may change with the circumstances will cause behaviors to vacillate from childlike, needy, dependent, and clingy, to controlling, overbearing, withholding, overly independent, and distant. An honest assessment of your core beliefs regarding gender equality, a commitment to self reflection regarding these primordial feelings and behaviors, as well as a discussion with your partner accompanied by openness to change is mandatory before moving into an individuating marriage.

No reflection of the past would be complete without an inventory of family of origin issues that in all likelihood continue to impact your current relationship. Understanding how you were influenced by the particular parents and environment that you call family may help you better understand family influence upon your partner. In turn, this understanding will allow you to experience more empathy and sensitivity toward yourself and your partner as you bring those issues into your current relationship. Looking closely at the families of origin will enable you to understand how you learned to be in relationship, with whom you had your strongest and earliest attachments, what part you played in maintaining those relationships because you were a dependent child, and how you learned to trust. Did early family patterns represent a healthy closeness, a dysfunctional enmeshment, a forced distancing, a chosen aloofness, or a bonded but affect-free collaboration? Did you live in fear of an adult(s) who never dealt with their own wounds and anger? Did these inherent values and resulting behaviors bring harm to your marriage because there were inappropriate boundaries between you, your spouse, and members of your family of origin? How did your parents view their marriage commitment and what kind of communication patterns were observed by you as a child? How were

problems in your family of origin resolved? What were the prevalent values expressed and expected in your home? Were emotions allowed and respected? How was money spent? Who disciplined the children and how was discipline administered? All of these things impacted your personal development, how you work and love in the world, and were carried forward into your marriage. It is time you choose carefully those values and behaviors that you truly feel are your own--those that work for your benefit and the benefit of your marriage--and then allow the others that served to protect you when you were a child to fall away. You have carried dysfunctional, unproductive, damaging childhood tapes much too long into an adult relationship that has no place for a child's belief system. It is time to discard some of that heavy baggage.

Looking closely at your family of origin, the qualities in you that once looked at the traits in your partner with excitement and great expectation and are now perceived as bitter limitations, the perceived lost opportunities, and the quality of the egalitarian spirit within your marriage are necessary first steps in evaluating your decision to remain in your marriage. Reflecting on your past will perhaps be the most painful part of your decision-making process, but it is on those days when your faith will wane and your hope seem nonexistent that the best tonic in the world will be moments spent in remembering those early days of your relationship when you and your partner were fully involved, fully in love, and believed that together you could construct a wonderful life. It is through those reflections that you will be able to get in touch with the original love you felt for your partner, unencumbered by the layers of unattended feelings accumulated over the years.