

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

Re-envisioning the Future

If you and your partner decide that having reflected on your past and having developed plans to reconstruct your present you wish to commit to re-envisioning your future together, my heart and my respect reach out to you. One of the greatest tasks for individuals in midlife is to re-envision their marriage. I want you to understand that you and your partner will feel at times like a small boat being tossed about on a very large sea--seeing neither the land you left nor the land you hope to settle. I want you to understand and accept that you are far from being solely responsible for the burdens weighing on your marriage at this time of your life, and to value that in critical ways you and other contemporary couples face more challenges than ever before experienced in marriage.

You and your partner exist in a macrocosm that demands constant accommodation to social change, tremendous challenge for daily survival, a place where paramount gender-role shifts have occurred within your lifetime, and where the status quo is rocked by second- to-second innovations in media that on a daily basis subtly but greatly influence our lives.

There are no longer distinct male and female personalities and roles--the archetype is changing. There is forming a female archetype that is different from your mother, your sister, and your wife, and a male archetype that is different from your father, your brother, and your husband. Likewise, there are no role models for today's individuated marriage. A difficult yet exciting part of your task is that you have both the responsibility and the freedom to design yours and your partner's vision for the individuated marriage. Part of the challenge and the reward comes from offering to your children and to the next generations your example as a pioneer of the individuating marriage by the way you navigate your own individuation within the marriage crucible.

I need to remind you that balancing the other side of the scale that challenges your creativity and vision into the individuated marriage are the qualities of resiliency, loyalty, and perseverance that have allowed you to reach this point in time in the uniqueness of your particular relationship. It is time for you to rebuild this foundation by re-envisioning realistic goals for yourself, your partner, and the relationship.

To do this you must determine your personal goals, those of your partner, and those of the relationship. Determine which of your personal goals can be met within the marriage as well as those which will require activities and relationships outside of the marriage. It has been my observation that one of the concerns about commitment in marriage comes from the assumption that one partner must be solely responsible for the other's success or failure, happiness or sadness. With this implication it is easy to understand how one might believe that individuation would be impossible in this type of "committed" relationship. Since individuation requires relationships, the need for diverse, adjunct relationships outside of the marriage is both a blessing and a necessity. The amount of time spent in other relationships needs to be continually reevaluated with your partner, and a balance negotiated--one that will offer you as well as the relationship quality time necessary for

personal solitude, intimacy with your partner, and time with others. It is the time spent with other relationships that will allow for personal rejuvenation and the opportunity to bring back to your marriage the messages and gifts that interacting with the world can offer.

I hope that I have offered to you a chance for reflection, reevaluation, rediscovery, and redefinition of your long-term marriage. I wanted to leave you with faith that you will find a new level of relationship with your life long partner, and the hope that you can achieve this as you grow and develop on your own path of individuation. I truly believe that with commitment and continued work on yourself and your relationship you will come to the dawning of the day when you will bless your partner and the relationship that has served you both so well for all these years, and with gratitude and a sense of accomplishment, with your partner by your side, open your arms and welcome the second half of life.

Love at Fifty

We came together shy as virgins with neither beauty nor innocence to cover our nakedness, only these bodies which have served us well to offer each other.

At twenty we would have dressed each other in fantasy, draping over the damp flesh, or turned one another into mirrors so we could make love to ourselves.

But there is no mistaking us now. Our eyes are sadder and wiser as I finger the scar on your shoulder where the pin went in, and you touch the silver marks on my belly, loose from childbearing.

“We are real,” you say, and so we are, standing here in our simple flesh whereon our complicated histories are written, our bodies turning into gifts at the touch of our hands.

Woodruff, M. (1987). In S. Martz. (Ed.). When I am an old woman I shall wear purple. Watsonville, CA: Papier-Mache' Press.