

Rowing Together

And like growing a sturdy tree amidst the ever-changing seasons, it takes a lifetime to get the rhythm right between two people. This is not a matter of love but of finding “normal.” Each of us brings a different idea of normalcy into our relationships. I have seen this over and over again. Both parties tend to think that their ideas are the right ones. They are rowing in the same boat but often in different directions.

We bring baggage into our relationships, whether we are conscious of it or not. Our personal histories, experiences, and personalities carry a combined weight that influences every area of our lives. How do we manage the household? What kind of furniture do we buy? What do we eat and when do we eat together? When do we make love? How often? What does each one of you expect in the bedroom? How do we parent? When should we discipline the children and how will we do it?

We generally have different traditions and conflicting ideas. Because we were not from the same tribe, we inescapably experience a culture shock. The minister says a few magic words and shazam!—we’re in the same boat. The only problem is that we don’t know how to row together and often don’t understand how to communicate with one another. This has always been the case but now with each partner having equal responsibilities, along with the absence of quality time, we don’t have time to learn how to row together!

Of course, some people row together more easily than others. But none of us masters it without a few close calls. Today many married people are like the slaves who jumped off the boat before it landed. Imagine the fear and anxiety that made them choose suicide over slavery.

Forgiveness

We all make mistakes. As human beings we are all flawed. Perfection only exists in God our savior. Recall Jesus’ words “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:34 (KJV) Truer or more significant words have never been spoken, and there are few concepts more important to remember in a long lasting union. While it is perfectly normal to feel anger, it is a natural human reaction to feeling wronged or disrespected; there is a difference between healthy anger and the caustic emotion of bitterness.

Grudges spread through a marriage or relationship like cancer invades our healthy cells, attacking organs at a rapid speed. Dr. Angelou said on a recent episode of the Sundance Television program Iconoclasts:

“...[bitterness] feeds upon the host. It does nothing to the object of the displeasure.” In this case, the host is the marriage, and forgiveness is the medicine and the cure.

You can always rely on God for forgiveness no matter what you’ve done. When you are tempted to withhold forgiveness, remember a time when you needed to be forgiven and reconsider. Treat your loved one with the love, respect and the forgiveness and mercy with which you’d like to be treated. It is the Golden Rule “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Luke 6:31 (KJV) Offering the forgiveness you wish to receive is a good way to work to ensure your marriage remains healthy and free of the disease of bitterness.

Not good choices either way. Some people feel just that trapped in relationships. They don't know how to work it out and they don't know how to get out. They can't live with their spouse and they can't live without them.

They self destruct, and while the rest of us eat our dinner, the news blares about husbands murdering wives, suicidal love triangles, and mothers killing their children and themselves. What weight must these souls bear to resort to such horrendous and extreme measures to escape their relationships and its responsibilities? Or what of the damaged homes and hearts of those who live under the harsh whip of domestic violence? Abuse has ravished so many families, leaving them scarred for life, if not completely destroyed. The impact of a dysfunctional relationship shatters the window through which we look out into the world.

Similarly, but far less lethal, we find those who choose to leap into the aching abyss of divorce or disgrace. The reactions are different but the symptoms are likely similar as the pressure mounts between those who live in cramped emotional spaces like slaves in a ship's cellar. Yes, we share the space with people we love, but many times age, gender, and personality make it difficult to share effectively. The wife may have one primary agenda for the place they call home, while the husband has another. Add children and a couple of pets into the mix and it sounds like the Tower of Babel, each one babbling in a different tongue!

If you are talking about people who jump ship, you need not go back through the middle passage to find them. I see them in my office all the time. Most jump ship because too many things hit them at the same time. They jump because they are afraid that the future holds no newness, no release, no hope of happiness, or no sense of growth. They feel stuck in cramped quarters, afraid of the darkness in their burdened soul, and they want out. They feel left with no solution but to abandon the relationship as it reminds them of yet another area of failure!

Yes, some people continue to jump ship in our contemporary context. But others become like those captives who were pushed off the side because they were too argumentative, rebellious, or unsuitable for enslavement. The slave traders didn't think they were physically healthy enough or emotionally trainable to bring a price at the auctions. In keeping with the metaphor, I must point out that some people don't give up: the other spouse pushes them. Maybe they do it because they feel like the spouse they chose isn't marriage material or can't be domesticated properly.