

INSECURITY AND CHILDREN OF DIVORCE



Two Important Issues

Introduction

Jesus says our most important instructions in life are to "love God" and to "love our neighbour as our self". Whilst the secular world seems to focus all its energy on the subject of "self", whether self-worth or self-gratification, the Christian world seems to ignore the subject altogether. But deal with it we must, especially within the context of marriage. Our "self" or "identity" is the private lens through which we view ourselves and our world. A foggy distorted lens means a foggy distorted world and a foggy distorted view of marriage. For some people, marriage preparation and enhancement can be largely meaningless until the fog and distortions of the self are identified and dealt with. In this article, We raise awareness of two major issues that influence our sense of self - namely "insecurity" and "children of broken homes". Both these issues are very common. Both produce surprisingly predictable patterns of relational behaviour.

Issue 1 - Insecurity

The first big issue is insecurity. Everybody agrees that, at core, human beings have an insatiable need to connect with one another. We need acceptance for who we are - regardless of what we do. Insecurity is the foggy lens through which we doubt or fear that we will never be accepted for who we are. Insecurity makes us do odd things in order to make people accept us.

Leading marriage educators Les & Leslie Parrott put it like this (see References below). "If you try to find intimacy with another person before achieving a sense of identity on your own, all your relationships become an attempt to complete yourself." In other words, we are like an incomplete piece of jigsaw puzzle desperate to match up with somebody with whom we might fit. When we meet someone, two things might happen:

- If that person is fairly secure, sooner or later they will find our neediness unattractive. We may be rejected and they seek somebody less needy.
- If that person is fairly insecure, like us, we now have two unstable and needy people together. Again, sooner or later one of us will find the other unattractive and may seek better fit elsewhere. Either way, we end up looking for a new "right shape" together with whom we believe we can be made whole. The cycle of short-term relationship and disillusionment then repeats itself.

The two lies to watch out for are "I need that person to be complete" and "If that person needs me, then I'll be complete". Until these mistaken beliefs are dealt with through personal growth, development and maturity, intimate relationships are most likely doomed to failure. One-to-one counselling can be a good way of dealing with faulty beliefs. But a mature and sensible friend should be able to help just as well in most cases.

One possible agenda is as follows.

- * Confront your hurts and forgive. What are your major memories? What is so significant about these memories that you remember them at all? You will probably find that its not the detail that matters, it's what the memory symbolises. Discussing memories openly can be surprisingly helpful in understanding why you think and behave the way you do. It can also help you forgive those that have hurt you. Being able to forgive is a vital part of becoming mature.
- * Be aware of your social "masks". How do you behave differently in front of people than when alone? Do you like people to think of you as "capable", "homemaker", "nice guy", "tolerant", "perfectionist", "in control", "manly", "feminine"? None of these "masks" are wrong. But you need to be aware of the masks you wear in public before you can learn how to make it safe enough to remove the masks and reveal the real vulnerable you in private.
- * Plan ahead and take charge of your life. Instead of allowing life to happen to you, take a more active role. Think about where you want to get to and make a plan for how to achieve it. This may sound prescriptive to some but the most successful people plan ahead, have strategies and goals, and are prepared to delay their gratification.

Issue Two - Children of Divorce

Children of divorce need to know that they are not uniquely odd. In fact they tend to behave in fairly typical ways as a result of their shared experience. It can be hugely liberating for children of divorce, and those marrying children of divorce, to become aware of this. Discovering that the way you think and behave is normal - if not always healthy - can be a huge spur to accepting one another in marriage and working out a better way ahead. Mentoring with another couple can be especially helpful in this - for some people the Mentors' marriage will be the first normal marriage they have witnessed at first hand. Knowing what normal marriage looks like, with its ups and downs, is especially important to the child of divorce.

But once again, awareness of the problem is half the battle. Judith Wallerstein is a world leader in the study of the long-term effects of divorce on kids (see References). She outlines typical patterns. In each case, the way the child handles the divorce deeply influences the way they seek their own subsequent adult relationships. For children, divorce is not a one-off event but a cumulative experience that peaks in early adulthood. At the point of breakup, most children are

surprised. Few are relieved. Mostly, the reasons for the divorce remain a black hole. Even where there is violence, children don't link it with the decision to divorce. They are frightened and angry, terrified of being abandoned, often feeling in some way responsible. Looking back as adults, they remember having to adjust to a confusing new world with little support from their parents. They presume that all relationships are fragile and unreliable, including their own relationship with their parents. They remember loss of an intact family and loss of their newly preoccupied parents.

Resilient children are able to draw on other resources, people or abilities. But taking responsibility for themselves, and maybe for others in their family, often comes at the cost of their own childhood. Those with less resilience view their parents and childhood with sorrow and anger. "I never want a child of mine to experience a childhood like I had." Teenage experiences with sex, alcohol and drugs are more common.

But it is as adults that children of divorce suffer most. For many, divorce remains the central issue of life. They lack a healthy model of love, intimacy and commitment. "No one taught me," they complain. They often end up with unsuitable or troubled partners. They are anxious about their relationships. They are wary of trust and commitment. They fear disaster and loss when things are going well. They fear abandonment and rejection when things are going badly. All children of divorce struggle with differences and even moderate conflict in marriage. Their first response is often panic and then flight.

Children of divorce say things like this:

- "What is to keep the same fate from happening to me?"
- "Marriage can work for others but not for me"
- "I fear that any marriage can just dissolve"
- "People think they know me but they don't. I've learned lots of times it's better not to feel."

So what can children of divorce do to improve their odds? They can read Judith Wallerstein's book or get a tape of one of her talks (details at the end of this article). They can become aware that their behaviour is probably quite normal, if unhealthy. They can discuss the subject with greater awareness and insight with other children of divorce, with their pastor or mentors, and with their spouse or future spouse. They can make themselves aware of their doubts and fears about relationships and how that translates into self-destructive behaviours, especially when under pressure. By doing this, they will become more aware of themselves, more accepting of themselves.

Children of divorce know that love and good marriage exists somewhere. The trick is to help them realise that, with work, it can be that way for them.

References

Parrott, L. & L. (1998) Relationships: An open and honest guide to making bad relationships better and good relationships great. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Blakelee, S. (2000). The unexpected legacy of divorce: a 25 year landmark study. New York: Hyperion. We strongly recommend that anybody interested in the effects of divorce on children as they become adults reads this book. Playing a 40-minute tape of Judith Wallerstein's talk to the 2001 "Smartmarriages" conference is an easy way to initiate a discussion group amongst children of divorce. The tape also includes an excellent talk by Paul Amato, another leading researcher. It can be obtained via: www.the-resource-link.com, click on CMFCE, then search for "Item number" 751-3.

Harry Benson