

**Marriage as a Developmental Task  
Natural and More Necessary Than Learning To Walk  
and Fraught with as Many Falls  
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"Stay in that marriage. That's where you grow up." This was a statement made most emphatically at a state marriage and family conference. The speaker was Dr. David Schnarch, author of *Passionate Marriage* and one of the more sought after speakers at any marriage and family conference these days. With this admonition Dr. Schnarch was telling his audience about a developmental task, not commonly recognized, but absolutely vital to a healthy marriage and good mental health.

Donald Williamson in his book, *The Intimacy Paradox*, describes this same process which he says "takes place during the fourth decade of life and the years following." That is some time in our 30's and following.

In the very beginning of Schnarch's book, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, he has the following piece by Peter McWilliams which captures the essence of this "growing up."

I must conquer my loneliness alone. I must be happy with myself or I have nothing to offer you. Two halves have little choice but to join; and yes, they do make a whole. But two wholes when they coincide...that is beauty. That is love.

To designate this "growing up" process, Schnarch uses the term, "differentiation," introduced by family systems theorist, Murray Bowen. Williamson describes the same concept as "personal authority." The task is to take responsibility for one's own well being, to be able to self-validate, rather than to depend on someone else to validate one's worth. If I am half a person, I need someone else to complete me and give me worth. If I am a whole person, I know who I am and why I am and I can share myself with someone else without fear. The other person's response to my self-disclosure or the sharing of myself is of little consequence.

To accomplish this level of differentiation or personal authority, we must be willing to share ourselves without trust or our partner's affirmation. Yes, a frightening thought, a risk, but one of courage and much accomplishment. By doing so I validate myself.

As each of us grew up in our families of origin, we learned there were limits on how much we could trust the adults in our world. Yet, we were each in search of all-powerful parents who would protect us and validate us. Williamson says this is a yearning that persists throughout life. He says it is a difficult desire to give up, "and the longing to recreate it never fully disappears." But as we give up the need for our parent to be parent, we assume more and more responsibility for ourselves. This is the developmental task [which we call "growing up].

Williamson summarizes his view of personal authority as "the ability to claim authorship and responsibility for all of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions and to do so voluntarily. This ability exists in concert with the ability to choose consciously and spontaneously to be connected to and in relationship with other persons--especially those in the family of origin--to whatever degree of intimacy one desires..."

In the 70's classic, "I Never Sang For My Father", we see two adult children of a family who are struggling with this dilemma. The daughter has moved across the country to escape the emotional entanglements of her parents. This is hardly an independent decision. If it is a decision she has made in reaction to her parents, specifically her father, it is hardly one for which she, herself, is taking responsibility. The son is staying right close to the parents in an attempt to

care for them and win the father's approval which he has never felt. To follow these patterns the children are giving up the freedom of choice as they act out of emotional reactivity. These children needed to grow up and realize their parents were incapable of giving what they wanted, and in return, the children needed to choose to give unconditional love to their parents.

I began this discussion by referring to the marriage relationship and am now addressing relationships in the family of origin. That is because we choose mates with whom we can continue the struggles from our families of origin. That is the crux of this developmental task--to turn loose of old struggles from our families of origin. When we cannot, we place these same struggles on our mates, our friends, our churches and even on the work place.

If we are to accomplish this developmental task we must turn loose of the need to find validation from a parent figure and begin to approach all persons as peers. It is the failing attempt to get this need for validation met from a partner that brings a couple to what Schnarch calls gridlock. Schnarch says, "Gridlocked couples experience themselves as `falling out of love.'" He goes on to explain that a couple cannot truly learn to love until gridlock has occurred.

When a couple comes in describing this experience, I tell them they are in the perfect spot to accomplish this developmental task and turn loose of old battles from their families of origin and learn to give in the relationship, expecting nothing in return. This is adult giving with no strings attached. It is giving out of fullness rather than emptiness. It is giving out of choice rather than emotional reactivity. This is agape.

As we give and share and disclose, expecting nothing in return as in Luke 6,<sup>1</sup> we grow stronger and we do validate ourselves. Often there is the benefit of our partner or others with whom we have a close relationship, learning to do the same. But whether they do or not, we have the benefit of becoming more as God would have us be. This same passage says when we can give expecting nothing in return, then we are children of the Most High, the ultimate validation.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:32-35 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even `sinners' lend to `sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."