

Recreating the past in marriage needed to impact the present relationship.

**BY STEVE GENGENBACHER
TODAY'S CATHOLIC, San Antonio TX Oct 29, 2004**

"But, Steve, I feel no connection with him," Betty said, a pained and distressed look covering her face. (Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.) "I don't know what to do."

Referring to Bill, her husband, of 10 years, she said, "He's a good provider and father, but we never' talk. He goes into his space and I go into mine. I get ready for bed about 9:30, and I'm waiting for him to come to bed, and he's found the Sci-Fi channel and falls asleep on the couch. I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want to feel this lonely."

Betty's story is probably repeated, with minor modifications, a thousand times a day across this country. Bill's reply would probably be along the lines of: "I don't know what she expects of me. I'm doing my best. I'm tired when I get home. Work has been really taking it out of me. I watch Sci-Fi because I enjoy it. I don't bother her when she's watching something she likes. And I'm sorry; I don't mean to fall asleep. I just relax and, bingo, I'm out."

To many people, Betty and Bill would seem to have a problem with communication, or at least a difference in what they each want from a marriage partner.

To some extent, both conclusions would be right. What many people may not recognize is that Betty and Bill's difficulties are rooted in something much deeper, more pervasive and largely not in their awareness: "family of origin" issues.

Until these family background experiences are adequately unearthed, explored and addressed, no amount of training in communication or discernment about expectations will be helpful.

The extremely powerful reality is this: if any person does not know his or her partner's family background, i.e., what it was like to live in his or her partner's family, and does not comprehend from that information what he or she will need to do or give their partner in a way that gives life to them (e.g., affection, respect, laughter, etc.), that person gives his or her partner one of two choices: die (emotionally, spiritually and/or psychologically) or leave the relationship.

The greatest task of marriage is to discover, for your own self and your partner, the two or three very specific things needed for life, and then commit to doing those things for each other. A serious pain occurs when each realizes that, usually, whatever it is that his or her partner needs for life is exactly opposite of what that person is naturally inclined to do, and probably elicits much anxiety when it is done.

Three points are especially important here:

- Each person must learn how to love his or her partner in ways in which the partner understands, needs and feels love. Because of family experiences, what needs to be done is most often opposite of a person's natural inclinations, and must be intentionally chosen.
- Each person marries his or her own worst fear. People are unconsciously attracted to mates who have very similar, if not exact, personalities and characteristics of their primary caretakers (usually parents, but may be grandparents, siblings, other family members or guardians).

The positive traits of these caretakers don't pose a problem, since a partner acting out of similarity with these positive traits creates safety and comfort for the partner. But human beings are driven to bring some healing to the painful dilemmas and events experienced in past family relationships. Each person in marriage recreates the roles and interactions of the past.

- Each person must be fiercely and equally committed to personal discovery, discernment and change. Each person must take responsibility for how his or her learned needs and behaviors from their families is currently affecting the relationship. If only one person is committed to this process, then no real marriage is possible or can ever exist, and the partner will become a martyr. Yes, personal sacrifice is required to make a marriage work. Martyrdom is never required and is, in fact, deadly to a relationship.

If you would continue listening to Betty, you would discover that she comes from a family in which she experienced a father very disconnected from the rest of her family. She even describes her father in the very same way she describes her husband: "He provided well, but he (her father) would come home from work, eat supper, then plop on the couch and watch TV until he fell asleep."

In addition, she reveals that he divorced her mother twice. Once when she was very young, and again when she was in her teens, leaving her as the oldest to take care of her younger siblings. It is no wonder she would be attracted to a man like Bill, who, in her own words, is a good provider but not connected to her.

Of course, Bill's behavior is also his unconscious creation from his family of origin. His father and mother divorced when he was yet an infant (and he didn't see his birth father again until he was in his 30s), and his mother left him to be raised by his maternal grandparents.

The message he learned from his family experience: he was never good enough and could never do enough to be loved by the most important people in his life.

He would be naturally attracted to someone who needed a lot of connection, which would be his worst fear.

For him to be connected in his family of origin was to always experience neglect, rejection and failure to be acceptable/successful.

Betty and Bill are perfectly suited for each other in some very painful and distressful ways. Bill can't seem to be able to give Betty enough (successful/acceptable), and Betty can't seem to get enough (connected/special). Neither is "bad" or "wrong." Both Betty and Bill are "good people" who happen to be perfect except for two basic flaws: they each are human, and they have a past!

So Betty and Bill are stuck, locked in an unconscious, unhealthy and hurtful pattern whose origins are rooted in their experiences in their own families. It will be the most difficult work in their lives for each to face himself or herself in total and complete honesty about who: they each are, and how their pain I from the past impacts their present relationship.

This, then, is absolutely the most terrifying task in any marriage: to face one's own fears, because facing those fears feels like facing death itself.

For Betty, disconnection feels like death. For Bill, connectedness, which has always led to rejection and denial (substitute "death" for either word), always leads to "death" of self.

The task for them, and every couple, is to create a safe and life-giving marriage, rather than living in an unconscious and reactive relationship. To do so requires intense self-reflection, fearless honesty, and great courage. Marriage is definitely not designed for the faint of heart. Each is required to "die to self" so that the other can live.

Steve Gengenbacher is director of the Office of Family Life for the Archdiocese of San Antonio TX