



SOUL CARE

CHRISTIAN COUNSELING • SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

(Adapted by Nathan Shattuck for relational intimacy in a marriage context from M. Scott Peck's 'Stages of Community-Making' for a small group context in his book 'The Different Drum'.)

Note: While pondering the patterns described here, their helpfulness and lasting impact to us is often increased when we remain curious about how patterns similar to these show up in ourselves through our thoughts, feelings and ways of relating to our spouse. Understandably the painful experiences and emotions these 'stages' speak of in our lives often initially lead us to be more emotionally impacted by the description of how and why our spouse has related to us unhealthily. And that experience can be very true and good. But over time the **most** powerful and lasting freedom for each of us always ultimately comes from our seeing and actively repenting of how patterns like these in ourselves (2 Tim 2:15, Luke 6:39-42) guide the ways we relate to our spouse and even distort how we experience our spouse relating to us. As true, unhealthy and damaging as our spouse's ways of relating to us may be, in the end it is seeing those patterns in ourselves that most powerfully leads us again and again to the Cross and the ongoing life-giving gospel of grace and perfect truth and love that further transforms us into a different kind of man or woman in Christ. May it be so... -Nathan

Stage 1: PSEUDO-INTIMACY

In all relationships we must be aware of the limits and dangers of superficial or instant intimacy because real intimacy always requires time as well as effort and sacrifice. In the pseudo-intimacy stage two people attempt to 'purchase' intimacy quickly and cheaply through varying levels of pretense and little desire to explore inconvenient realities. Naturally, this almost always characterizes the early part of any relationship, but sometimes settles in as the status quo for decades. For the most part it does not begin as a conscious pretense of black lies. Rather, it is a largely unconscious, gentle process whereby people who want to love and be loved attempt to achieve this by telling little white lies and by presenting only convenient, incomplete pieces of truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid disappointment or conflict.

The essential dynamic of pseudo-intimacy is conflict-avoidance. Genuine, healthy relationships may experience lovely and sometimes lengthy periods free from conflict, but that is because they have learned how to work through differences and conflict rather than trying to avoid them ever surfacing. Pseudo-intimacy is primarily conflict avoiding while true relationship is conflict resolving and thus intimacy building.

What is diagnostic of being in pseudo-intimacy is the minimization, the lack of acknowledgment of or curiosity about, or the outright ignoring of differences. But this crushes individuality, diversity and complete honesty - ingredients without which real intimacy is not possible. And the longer it lasts the duller the relationship gets. Think about whether the expression of individual differences is encouraged or discouraged in the average relationship, in your relationships. Could there be many relationships that do not even know that there is anything beyond pseudo-intimacy, beyond just trying to keep differences from surfacing or ignoring them when they inevitably come to the surface?

Stage 2: CHAOS

Once individual differences do emerge (often after significant time together and accumulated disappointment and resentment that has decreased motivation to avoid conflict) most relationships eventually move into the chaotic stage of development. But to those in the chaos stage it feels much more like degeneration or to some an indication that something is fundamentally unsustainable about the relationship than it does the stage of development toward the possibility of real intimacy that it is. The chaos that emerges in the relationship, or in the experience of it by the person(s) in it, centers around well-intentioned but misguided attempts by each person to 'heal' and 'convert' the other in areas where they are different in some way. But by and large people resist the attempts of others to change them, so a healer/convertor will then try more repeatedly, creatively or forcefully to overcome their spouse's resistance to being healed or converted. Eventually the target of this 'gets their back up' and starts trying to return the favor by healing the healer and converting the convertor! And at any given moment who the healer/convertor is shifts back and forth depending on what difference is being focused on. And it is indeed chaos.

That being said, it's important to understand that chaos is not merely a state or an obstacle to be overcome, it is an essential part of the developmental process toward real intimacy. If a relationship has not gone through any significant phase of chaotic struggle, it likely remains in some form of the first pseudo-intimacy stage. In the chaos stage individual differences are, unlike in pseudo-intimacy, right out in the open, uncomfortably so to those who feel the stark contrast with the seemingly blissful ignorance before the chaos. In the chaotic stage, since trying to hide or ignore these differences has become futile, the attempt is now to obliterate them in the other.

Difficult to admit to ourselves is the fact that underlying these attempts to heal and convert our spouse (or the 'other' in any relationship) lies not so much the motive of love as the motive to make the other the same for our comfort and perceived sense of safety. Nonetheless, fighting and struggle are not the essence of the chaos stage because fully developed, intimate relationships will be required to fight and struggle throughout their relationship, only they have learned to do so lovingly and constructively. In contrast, the struggle during the chaotic stage is not merely noisy it is unproductive. The disagreements that inevitably arise from time to time in a healthy, mature relationship are loving and respectful and often remarkably quiet as the individuals work hard to listen to each other's heart and desires. In contrast, the predominant feeling an outside observer is likely to have in response to a relationship in the chaotic stage of development is that of despair. The struggle is going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. This stage is no fun...

Stage 3: EMPTYING

The best way out of the chaos stage is into and through a stage Scott Peck calls 'Emptying.' The stage of emptying, in stark contrast to the chaos stage that precedes it, is the most crucial and productive stage of the journey - the only bridge between chaos and real intimacy. In the emptying stage individuals in the relationship must empty themselves of barriers to having truly open, honest communication and connection without trying to achieve this through minimizing, ignoring or trying to obliterate their differences. Because of this it is much harder, and thus less popular, than to either end the relationship altogether or choose the other way out of the chaos stage, that of Organization (more on that in a minute).

There are 3 common, and interrelated, barriers to true dialogue and connection that we must empty ourselves of (repent of, really) in this stage:

The Need to Heal, Convert, Fix, or Solve:

During the chaos stage, when the individuals are attempting to 'heal' or 'convert' each other they believe they are being loving. Thus they are truly confused, and even surprised, by the chaos that results. However, almost all these attempts to convert and heal are not only naïve and ineffective but quite self-centered and self-serving. We hurt when our spouse is in pain. If we're honest with ourselves the most basic motive when we strive to heal the other is actually to feel better ourselves. When the fact of the matter is that often the most loving thing we can do is not attempt to heal the other but to share the other's experience or pain — to be truly with them even when we have nothing to offer except our presence and even when being in their experience of hurting with them is painful to us. The same is true with the attempt to convert. If the other's theology or ideology is different than ours, it feels like it calls ours into question. It is uncomfortable for us to be uncertain of our own understanding. On the other hand, if we could convert them to our my way of thinking, it would not only relieve our discomfort, it would also be further proof of the rightness of our beliefs and possibly even put 'a cherry on top' by casting us in the role of savior! How much easier and nicer that would be than extending ourselves to understand them as they are, where they are.

Preconceptions and Assumptions:

Creating intimacy is an adventure, an entering into the unknown. But we are all afraid of the darkness of the unknown. In fact, by the time we are adolescents we humans seldom ever go into any situation without preconceptions that we try to make the experience conform to. But until we can empty ourselves (and to the degree that we do) of preconceptions and stop trying to fit other people and our relationships with them into our preconceived molds we cannot truly listen, hear, or experience the other in relationship.

Ideology, Theology, and Solutions:

This emptying is not about utterly forsaking our sometimes hard won beliefs and understandings - there is a big difference between emptying (openness) and obliterating (denial or destruction). The difference here is between approaching our differences as if we had all truth in our back pocket vs. with humility and even a sense of humor. We cannot move very far toward intimacy or community with others when we are rigidly (and often fearfully) committed to our positions, and even worse, when we're assuming we have the one and only right position, ignore the inevitable existence of blind spots and distortions in us, and aren't curious about what we have to learn from those who see things differently than we do.

If we choose to surrender and enter the stage of emptying sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually, we come to realize (and hopefully repent of) that our desire to heal, convert, or otherwise 'solve' the interpersonal differences with

the other is a self-centered, ugly demand for our comfort through the obliteration of those differences in the other. Then it can begin to dawn on us that there may be an opposite way – the appreciation and celebration of those interpersonal differences.

As was alluded to above, other than terminating the relationship or going through the Emptying stage, there is only one other way out of the chaos stage - a tempting and popular shift into what Peck termed 'Organization.' While less chaotic, organization never leads to real intimacy. It is more of a negotiated settlement both parties contribute to out of their mutual dissatisfaction with the unproductive, and seemingly interminable, distance, disconnection and pain of the chaos stage. Organization is an attempt by those in the relationship to resurrect something of the corpse of earlier pseudo-intimacy, which the experience of chaos has made all the more appealing. But this time there is a calculated intentionality about it where the couple co-creates their own customized version of a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy with the desired goal has now been lowered further to pseudo-peace rather than pseudo-intimacy. Because of the pain of the chaos stage, the choice to 'organize' is a mutual, pragmatic willingness to tolerate certain differences in the relationship but only as transactional exchanges for the other spouse's agreement to stop attacking certain ones of ours. But whatever 'peace' it brings is the product of resignation and denial rather than true acceptance or opening to understanding and enjoying the differences in the other and no longer seeing the person and those differences as threats.

Stage 4: REAL INTIMACY

Well...that will have to be enough for now, because I unfortunately need wait to write about the real intimacy stage when I have more real understanding of it, and most importantly, more actual personal experience in it. - Nathan