

Creativity and Couples - Using Movie Messages in Marital Treatment

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Part One - Does the Institution of Marriage Stand a Chance in Today's World?

I believe in marriage, as an institution, as a concept, as a lifestyle choice. I think lasting lifelong marriage between two people is possible, even in this time where one of two marriages ends in divorce. Not great odds, to be sure. But as long as there are humans on the planet, there will be people with the biological drive to connect emotionally and intimately and want to share that connection in the same household. And for many of those humans, that means marriage, with all of its messiness and drudgery, the routine, the boredom, and the taking for granted of each other.

Let's stop for a minute and remember that the wedding is not the marriage. It's easy to make a great party for a day, and to wear the pretty dress and the fancy tux and get the presents and eat the cake and dance with friends and family and have that celebration. That's just the beginning. I haven't met a couple yet that didn't have detailed memories of their wedding day. Not that those detailed memories are always positive. But all the same, every married individual I've encountered has stories to share about the wedding day. That's a significant milestone marker and easy to document, catalogue and review. It's in the day to day, in and out, hard work of marriage where the details get much more fuzzy and less specific. It's where couples get bogged down in maladaptive coping strategies, difficulty with communication, built up resentments based on failed expectations and disappointment, lack of similar goals, and the overall letdown that is the real life, real world of a shared life with the same person.

So why do it in the first place? Why get married at all? Here's where the movie messages begin. In the film "Shall We Dance?" Susan Sarandon's character explains, "We need a witness to our lives. There's a billion people on the planet....I mean what does any one life mean? But in a marriage, you're promising to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things....all of it, all of the time, every day. You're saying your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go un-witnessed because I will be your witness."

The above quote is a positive interpretation of how people feel about being married. And it comes from a place of strength, positive self esteem and peace within themselves. But many times this is not the reason people want to be married. The idea drummed into us by family, religious organizations, and societal messages in general is that to be unmarried is to be 'alone' and to be 'wrong' in some way. For many people, to be alone is a concept too difficult to face. For this reason, many people get into a state of desperation that they must find someone to marry otherwise there will be some kind of negative impact on their lives. When this happens, self esteem flies out the window and rather than entering into this important relationship from a place of strength, abundance, calm and peace within themselves, we have folks rushing to connect with other in haste and out of fear. This is shown in the film "The Mirror Has Two Faces" with Jeff Bridges and Barbra Streisand, who enter into a marriage based on Jeff Bridges' notion that they should have a marriage based on friendship and common understanding and interests, because he has found that to be passionately and romantically involved with someone never works out for

him. Barbra Streisand agrees to this arrangement because she has feelings for Jeff Bridges but also because she is coming from a place of low self esteem, loneliness and neediness. Ironically, Barbra Streisand's character is a college professor who lectures about love, passion, and all of the positive things that romantic love can provide.

Part Two - Saving the Relationship or Not? Reasons Why Couples Enter Treatment

So the marriage begins and the two people in it might realize that they are not as committed as they thought they were, or they realize the other person doesn't love them as much as they thought, or they become bored living with the same person day after day, or kids coming into the picture and that creates chaos, or the dynamics of family create a negative impact on either or both members of the couple, or all of the above. The honeymoon is over, the thank you notes have been sent, real life happens with a vengeance and this can be a wake up call.

I have read many times that real love begins when infatuation ends. This is the real life mentioned above. But for so many couples, when real life sets in and the hard work of marriage begins, it becomes evident to one or both that they can no longer avoid or hide from problems between them. Some of the problems include difficulty with communication, not being able to disagree like grownups, not getting past resentments, not letting go of expectations, not bringing family of origin issues into the marital relationship, and a host of others.

The film "The Story of Us" with Bruce Willis and Michele Pfeiffer, illustrates a number of the above points. They are a married couple with teenage children, who choose to try separation during the time when their children are at sleep away summer camp. When they separate, they continue to communicate with each other and their conversations are spent reflecting on the tale of their married years together. In one scene, they are discussing a couples therapist they had seen who talked about not bringing family of origin issues into their marriage, specifically into their intimate life. In the next scene, Willis and Pfeiffer are shown in their bed and next to each of them are the actors who play their parents. A good point though, in that so many couples are caught up in a power struggle of sorts where they believe however their parents did something was the only 'right' way for it to be done. Simple things like how to load the dishwasher or how to fold the towels in the linen closet can become huge hot button issues.

There are two more films that point out how easy it is to get caught up in negative patterns of communication but also show the difficulties for couples to connect after the romance has waned and real life sets in. In "The Break Up" with Jennifer Aniston and Vince Vaughn, there is a scene where they are throwing a dinner party together and afterwards, Jennifer Aniston asks Vince Vaughn to help clean up and he says something to the effect of wanting to do it later and the situation erupts into an argument during which Jennifer Aniston says "I want you to want to do the dishes." This illustration of the expectations each person has of the other points out how those expectations lead to resentments and then to anger and then to arguments. But in the beginning of the film the tale of this couple is told through photos of their early courtship, and they seem so connected and happy with each other, or more accurately with who each other is. So how did they go from being in love to being enraged? The film "About Last Night" with Demi Moore and Rob Lowe is another example of a couple who fall in love, move in together very quickly and then experience the growing pains of how living together ups the ante of the

relationship stakes. Demi Moore says to Rob Lowe at one point “I thought it was supposed to be how it was with my parents.” There we go, back to those expectations based on the marriages of our parents.

For the reasons above and many more, when things unravel, one or the other member of the couple might call and ask for some therapy to try to improve the marital relationship and/or to save it.

Part Three - Assigning the “Homework” of Movie Messages

With any couple, if there is willingness from the start to work on the issues mentioned above - unmet expectations and their related resentments, difficulty in communication, not being able to argue like adults, waning romantic connection, and many others - then that willingness needs to come from both parties. If both members of the couple are committed to staying in that couple relationship, then couples treatment can and often does work well.

In assigning ‘homework’ movies may be used. The couple is instructed to watch the movie once for the story - not to try to relate to any character, but just to see the story for what it is. After that, the couple might be asked to each watch the film separately and come up with some points that they might relate to or disagree with, or ways in which they might see their partners’ traits in one or more characters in the movie. The assignment of the homework gives me a lot of information about the couple that I can use. Example: one person in the couple watches the film and the other chooses not to do so. This helps me gauge the couple’s willingness and commitment to therapy and ultimately to their marriage.

The overall idea is to remind couples that their problems, while unique to them, might be more common across the board than they realize. Sometimes by the time couples come to treatment, they are so beaten down by the repetitive negative patterns of behavior that they believe they have the world’s worst marriage. In those instances viewing couples in movies might remind the couple in treatment that any couple relationship is not without its problems.

To illustrate this, I offer one my favorite films of all time - “Two For the Road” with Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney. In this film, we watch the story of a ten year marriage told in the present and also in flashback to earlier years of their courtship and marriage. Of course it doesn’t hurt that the film is set in a glamorous French backdrop, but regardless, the emotional pain of both individuals comes across clearly. There is also humor in the story, and this is what sustains the couple throughout their many quarrels and other obstacles as they revisit the tale of their ten years together. Sometimes I assign this film just to remind couples of how provoking marriage can be, and how through the ups and downs it’s good to be reminded of the beginning to see how far they have come. At the beginning of any couples treatment I do history gathering anyway, and ask each member of the couple to give their own version of the beginning to the present day. One film points this out well. Throughout the film “When Harry Met Sally” with Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal, director Rob Reiner has inserted interviews with older couples, each telling the story of how they met and fell in love.

Part Four - The Creativity of Couples - How Do They Make It Work?

With regard to the above, I mentioned humor as a necessary tool for couples. It helps to be able to laugh in certain moments. “The Four Seasons” is a story of three couples in long marriages who are good friends and who travel together every season. Two of the three couples demonstrate marriages that are healthy and working. These two couples - played by Alan Alda and Carol Burnett, and Rita Moreno and Jack Weston - are not always in a positive place. But there is definitely humor in each of their marriages and there are a number of scenes which illustrate this point. They can be arguing one moment, and at some point the argument crosses over the line into humor. These moments show the resilience of individuals in long coupled relationships to be flexible enough to be able to disagree and get past their disagreements. The love they feel for each other overrides their conflict and the conflict is resolved. In one scene, Len Cariou asks Alan Alda about his marriage to Carol Burnett. Alan Alda explains that sometimes he and his wife are so in love that they can't wait to see each other, and at other times they drive each other crazy. This is a key point to any long relationship but is especially true in a relationship where two people choose to share a house, bed and life with each other.

Another key point is to remember that what happens in each marriage is unique to that individual couple. In “Sex and the City Part 2,” Carrie Bradshaw says it best: “Every couple has the right to make their own rules.” Even if the “Sex and the City” television series and films are often over the top, there are some important messages to be found buried under all of those wardrobe changes and outrageous fashion choices. The point of that statement about each couple making their own rules is important to bear in mind when working with couples and goes back to expectations. No matter what we might think we want, we need to sort out which parts of what we want are what we think we're supposed to want as dictated to us by our families, other couples, our friends, society, etc. Then we get to the real thing, which is what we actually do want, with no influence at all from any of the above voices. What is important is each person finds his/her own voice, which enables them to be so much more capable of being a healthy evolved grown up on his/her own. Think how much healthier that will make them if/when they decide to enter into a romantic relationship like marriage.

In couples treatment it is important to remind couples of some key points. One is a question I always ask couples to consider when a conflict comes up. I ask them to remember to say “Do I want to be right, or do I want to be happy?” Another question I ask is “How important is this really? Will it still matter in ten minutes, ten hours, ten months or ten years?” I also use written exercises during sessions to get more clarity if the couple is on the same page, and I ask couples to consider gratitude for one another. Sometimes in a moment of conflict, the best thing a person can do is be conscious of gratitude. What does the other person bring to the relationship that makes staying with them worthwhile? In his pamphlet Defining Mental Health as a Public Health Issue (copyright September 2005), William Glasser MD talks about the seven caring habits that improve all relationships: supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences. All of these ‘habits’ are indicators of the health of each individual in the relationship not to mention the health of the marriage. And that is a key point as well - for both individuals to remember that there are three personalities in a marriage - each individual and the one they form together as a couple. It is essential for each person to maintain his/her own ‘individualness’ in order to bring more to the marital relationship.

Part Five - When Couples as Clients are Past the Critical Point - Ending With Honor

No matter how much two people may try to work things out in order to stay together, in some instances there is a point at which the forward motion of a marriage comes to an end. Perhaps the marriage ends because of infidelity, addiction, or abuse. Perhaps the individuals in the couple realize they have outgrown each other and are no longer able to grow together. Perhaps one individual grows tired of the other and wants something else or someone else. There may be a thousand different reasons why a marriage ends in divorce. Sometimes divorces are acrimonious, full of power struggle, bitter disagreements over everything from children, to money to even household items, as pointed out by Billy Crystal who stars with Meg Ryan in “When Harry Met Sally.” Newly moving in together couple Carrie Fisher and Bruno Kirby are setting up their apartment and Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan drop by with a housewarming gift. Billy Crystal has just run into his ex wife who left him for another man, and in the aftermath of that painful moment, he says the following: “Right now everything is great, everyone is happy, everyone is in love but you got to know that sooner or later, you’ll be screaming at each other about who’s going to get this dish. This eight dollar dish will cost you a thousand dollars in phone calls to the legal firm of that’s-mine-this-is-yours.”

Is it possible to end a marriage with honor? And I’m not talking about the concept known as ‘good divorce.’ Seriously, if divorces were so good, we’d all be getting one! I’m talking about finding ways to work through the process of feeling feelings. Remember hate is just as strong an emotion as love. And when a person has strong feelings for someone even if they are negative that is an indicator that the person still cares on some level. Being aware of this can be helpful in working with couples on civility and dignity during a separation or divorce process. So when the couple is sitting in your office screaming at each other, there are coping strategies for getting through those difficult and exhausting sessions. These strategies have to do with changing the mood in the room through tone, eye contact, and setting clear boundaries. It all goes back to communication, regardless of whether the couple is working toward staying together or stepping apart.

Another component is acceptance. Acceptance of the fact of the separation or divorce is important in trying to get past the anger and hurt to a place where if couples need to stay connected they can do so without continued acrimony. Remember Glasser’s seven habits? They work here too. Even when a relationship has reached its demise, civility is a worthwhile goal. In the classic love story “The Way We Were” Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand just can’t work out their differences in order to stay married. It’s clear that they love each other but in the end they can’t live together. They end their marriage with respect and dignity, even though they know they still love each other. Of course it’s a movie, but it makes a worthwhile point for couples if they choose not to stay together.

Along with acceptance, the reality is that life moves forward and people need to learn to function in a post-marriage world. At the beginning of “Kramer vs. Kramer” Dustin Hoffman is bewildered by Meryl Streep’s choice to move out and to leave him with their six year old son. As a newly single father, Dustin Hoffman’s life seems to unravel when he attempts to juggle his work, which has been all consuming and his duties at home, which his wife was responsible for

prior to her exit. In several scenes throughout the movie, Dustin Hoffman is portrayed as feeling his feelings - anger, confusion, sadness, disappointment. As the film progresses he finds contentment and happiness in being able to figure out his life without his wife, and being able to navigate the post-marriage landscape of raising a child as a single parent. We might not like the new reality, but let's face it - life happens.

Part Six - Changing Our Choices - What to Do Differently the Next Time Out

In "An Unmarried Woman" with Jill Clayburgh and Alan Bates, Clayburgh's husband has an affair and moves out to be with the other woman. Jill Clayburgh goes through stages of grieving and eventually finds her way into a new relationship with Alan Bates. But in this relationship she works much harder at not making everything about her new romance. She realizes one of the mistakes she made in her marriage was in depending on her husband for everything - financial support, constant companionship, the things we hope for with any marriage but which we also realize leave us vulnerable if that relationship doesn't last. It goes back to coming to any relationship from that place of abundance, strength within ourselves and peace of mind about life on our own.

The above is true for both genders. The film "Bye Bye Love" with Randy Quaid, Paul Reiser and Matthew Modine takes a look at the lives of three divorced fathers and their perspectives on divorce. The film follows these three men as they handle their ongoing relationships with their ex-spouses, their changing relationships with their children and their attempts at rebuilding their social lives. Each of them comes to a realization or epiphany about the mistakes they made in their marriages, and ways they appreciate their ex spouses.

Repeating patterns are an issue for couples in attempts at romance following divorce. This happens frequently because many times after a divorce, the first thing on a person's mind is to 'get back out there' and prove to him or herself that he/she is desirable, attractive, that someone else will want them again. However, what they might find is that similar issues which occurred in the marriage that didn't work come up again with new potential romantic partners

An illustration of the above happens in the film "Stepmom" with Julia Roberts, Ed Harris and Susan Sarandon. This film offers a closer view a couple in a new relationship while the conflicts from the prior marriage continue to work their way into the new relationship. Ed Harris and Susan Sarandon were college sweethearts who married young and had children and then Ed Harris' career as a lawyer and Susan Sarandon's decision not to work outside the home create distance between them that leads to divorce. Along comes Julia Roberts, a never married successful fashion photographer with whom Ed Harris falls in love. But there are moments when Ed Harris puts his career ahead of this new relationship too, which is the chief complaint Susan Sarandon had about him. Ed Harris is seen falling into his old patterns of expecting the woman in his life to look after his children. Julia Roberts goes along with this to the detriment of her own career goals and choices.

Many times individuals who see their new romances heading south and realize there are patterns they are repeating which were partly the cause of the demise of their marriages are astute enough to come to therapy in an attempt to do things differently for a more positive outcome. They

might come to therapy on their own or with their new romantic partner. During those sessions, lots of residual feelings may come up and may be directed toward the new romantic partner. These feelings need to be felt and attributed to the relationship to which they belong, not displaced onto the new relationship.

The work with couples is multi-layered. Sometimes I think I should wear a black and white striped shirt and have a whistle to use. At other times I'm in awe of the way couples willing to utilize the tools they are taught come back to report their improvements. Through it all I'm honored to join with couples in their process of sorting through feelings whether attempting to reconnect and find their way back to the love they know they have, or finding ways to part civilly and respectfully if a couple decides to no longer continue with their marriage. By enhancing the couples work using movie messages, the outcome of treatment can lead to skills building, letting go of expectation-based resentments, and ultimately creation of positive change.