

Successful Loving: An Exploration of Loneliness, Togetherness and Shared Spirituality

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- What is it that constitutes a fulfilling, intimate, satisfying relationship? The kind of relationship that ideally forms the heart of marriage?
- What Rodney Daingerfield said is what most people experience: My wife and I were happy for 20 years, then we met.
- Many people think they know what constitutes a happy marriage. The reasons why so many books are written about how to have a happy marriage or about how to love successfully, is because so many couples don't have a happy marriage. And the books don't seem to help either. I have a big practice and many unhappy couples come to me. But how will we know what works? (story of couple married for 50 years on honeymoon to Grand Canyon)
- Embedded in the heart of every successful love relationship is friendship and intimacy. When we experience no intimacy, no togetherness in our lives, we feel lonely. Loneliness literally can crush us like a rock falling on our heads. When people are very lonely they slip into depression, some commit suicide, some embark on self destructive behavior. Do people

really feel lonely in their marriages? How do we find intimacy? What is it that works for most people or at least for those who say they have a happy marriage?

- The new national study.
- The development of three unique scales

We will focus on three particular scales: first the “loneliness” scale, which measures feelings of loneliness. What is distinctive about this scale is that it measures loneliness within a marriage. Secondly, the “shared spirituality” scale is a unique scale in that it measures the experience and practice of the spiritual development of each of the persons in the marriage and correlates this with the loneliness scale and the third scale, the “expressed marital satisfaction” scale. We have not been able to locate any similar scale in the extant scientific literature. The third scale, the “expressed marital satisfaction scale” measures the levels of positive bonding and interactions between the two married persons in view of verbal communication, physical communication, shared interests and expressions of affirmation.

There are literally hundreds of correlations which can be made between these scales. We will choose only some of the more important statistical correlations for this presentation. Of course, there is one basic

thesis which begs to be tested by this study. That is the function of loneliness and shared spirituality in relation to marital satisfaction. We can hypostasize that if one or both of the couple experiences significant loneliness, then the shared spirituality and marital satisfaction scales will be low, and conversely, if the shared spirituality scale is high, the expressed marital satisfaction should be high also, and the experience of loneliness should be low.

In this paper I will explain the three scales and then some of the results of the survey. These scales are unique and were created precisely for this study.

The Loneliness Scale

Peggy sat on the side of the bed. “Another weekend,” she thought. “What shall I do?” She had that empty feeling in the pit of stomach. “I’m really bored,” she thought. “If I only had someone to talk with. God, sometimes I feel like I’m losing it.” She got up, went to the bathroom, put on some clothes and went down to make some breakfast. But instead of making breakfast she paced around in the kitchen, picking this or that up, feeling distracted and angry. She sensed that feeling of depression slowly

creeping over her like a suffocating blanket. Empty, alone. “I wish I had something to do. The same old thing day after day. She thought about calling a friend. “Why is it I always have to be the one to call first. Am I doing something wrong? Why doesn’t anyone like me?” She plopped down on the chair. She just felt sad, not that she wanted to cry, but just sad and alone. She could feel the depression and feelings of dread rising up inside. “I wish I had someone I could really talk with.” Then, Jack, her husband came into the kitchen, “Hi.” he said. She didn’t even bother to reply.

In the scenario just presented, Peggy obviously feels a great deal of loneliness. Her feelings embrace an experience of being alone, feeling like a victim. She feels agitated, abandoned, slipping into depression. I disagree with Peplau’s statement that “loneliness is not felt” but is experienced often with the more vague feelings of dread, desperation, and agitated restlessness (Peplau, 1955, p.67). My experience after many years of listening to people in therapy is that loneliness is not only felt, but is clearly identified as loneliness. When married women would come in to the office and express dissatisfaction with their marriage I would ask initially two questions which would give me an indication of how far the intimacy in their marriage had disintegrated. First I would ask them if they felt lonely in their marriage. They never would question the meaning of the word “lonely.” There is an

intuitive understanding (Root, 1982, p.591) of the meaning of the word, probably because of the universal experience we all have of loneliness. The subsequent description of the feeling of loneliness the person might have while with their spouse would give me a good indication of the depth of the disintegration process in their marriage. The second question I would ask was whether they sometimes would cry while having intercourse. If they had affirmed that they felt very lonely in their marriage the response to the question about crying during intercourse was “yes” surprisingly often.

Loneliness can have various internal or external causes such as rejection, inability to communicate and socialize effectively, fear of taking on risk, conflict, or lack of motivation. In this study, the loneliness scale is very specific in that it measures levels of loneliness within a marriage. In other words, a person can have very elevated feelings of loneliness even when he or she is in close proximity to a committed other. Intimacy is the opposite of loneliness and because shared spirituality leads to high levels of intimacy we hypothesize that a low spirituality scale correlates with a high intimacy scale.

The hypothesis in this case would then be that a lack of shared spirituality contributes to the feelings of loneliness. This should be

confirmed by a low score on the marital satisfaction scale. We will see if this is verified in concluding look at the data.

The Shared Spirituality Scale

It had been a long day. They were lying in bed, turned towards one another. There was a crisis earlier in the day with his mom; she had fallen and Jill had to run from work to see if she was o.k. Thinking about her generosity John reached over and laid a hand on her side. He felt gratitude, and a deep sense of togetherness. She seemed to sense his feeling and slid over a little and snuggled closer to him.

As he held her he felt in a vague way that there was something more, something other, than just the two of them, drawing them together. He placed his hand on her forehead. "Dear Father," he said, and then paused. It was always hard for him to just spontaneously express his feelings in a prayer. He felt a little uneasy and his voice quavered a little. "Dear Father," he repeated, "I want to thank you for putting Jill in my life. She is my joy and such a beautiful part of your creation. Thank you for the goodness you put in her. Teach us to love better. Help me to learn from her." Jill's voice in the darkness was silky and warm. "Bless John, dear father. Help him in his struggle to care for his mom. Help his mom, too, to find you in her

sufferings.” Then she fumbled in the dark until she could hold John’s face and kiss him on the lips. “Good night, my prince, I love you.” John felt at home, secure, at peace, loved. He fell asleep easily.

To share the experience of the presence and mystery of the loving source of our being not only bonds two people together, but leads them to an ever more meaningful spirituality. The shared spiritual scale in this study measures that spiritual bonding and its resulting intimacy. We then correlate the level of spiritual sharing and expression of each of the persons in the marriage with the expression of marital satisfaction as spelled out in the third scale.

The second scale, that of shared spirituality is a unique scale in the scientific literature. It crosses between mystical experience, which is the basis of spirituality, and emotional fulfillment. The topic of mystical experience leads us to discuss a number of presuppositions which underlie this scale. There are three such presuppositions which are of particular significance, and which fall within the areas of philosophy, theology and psychology/anthropology. They form the ideological underpinnings of this scale and need to be explicated.

The first presupposition is philosophical. It can be formulated as follows: The human person possesses an a-priori openness to mystery. There is a realization that all reality is foundationally dependent upon mystery, and that mystery by its very nature is incomprehensible. However, the human subject as part of the mystery possesses a basic openness to that mystery and provides the basis for the experience of transcendence.

This transcendence, or openness to mystery, gives rise to the second presupposition which is on the theological level. This presupposition is that the presence of the ultimate mystery which grounds our possibility for transcendence is communicated to the subject in an immediate way. In other words, it is immediately accessible as part of our experience in an unthematized way and once we reflect on it, it becomes thematized or categorized in consciousness. In other words the presence of the ultimate mystery becomes close and immediate. It is, so to speak, in the marrow of our bones. Karl Rahner, the great German theologian makes the distinction between transcendental experience (the a priori openness of the subject) and supernatural or spiritual experience. The spiritual experience occurs when divine transcendence is no longer remote but is communicated to the person (who is, by nature, open to that communication). This immediate experience of the incomprehensible is what constitutes the basis for all mysticism.

Mysticism is nothing else but recognition of the presence of the incomprehensible mystery. I prefer the word mysticism to the word spirituality because the word spirituality often connotes ritual and institution. The root meaning of the word, “mysticism,” comes out of the Greek philosophical world of Middle Platonism (Plato, Plotinus and Proclus) where the Greek philosophers struggled to explain the union of experience (Nous or intellect) with that which is beyond all thought and being yet resides in us. In reality, it is a very simple concept. One of the great mystical doctors in the West, Teresa of Avila, describes unthematized mystical experience in her autobiography in this way:

“I unexpectedly used to experience a consciousness of the presence of God of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision: I believe it is called mystical theology.” (Teresa of Avila, p. 110) This immediate experience which Teresa describes is accessible to everyone. Our reaction to that experience is what constitutes ritual, prayer and institution. This is what we denominate as “spirituality.” Despite the simplicity of this immediate experience as described by Teresa, in the contemporary mind the word mysticism often is linked with extraordinary phenomena, such as visions and other paranormal experiences. Consequently, this survey and

study will use the word, “spirituality,” which connotes a broad range of religious ritual, practice, organization proceeding from the underlying mystical experience. The spirituality scale covers three basic expressions of spirituality. Questions one through five cover religious practices, questions six through ten cover spiritual growth and eleven through fifteen cover social involvement and commitment.

What is significant in this study is the presupposition that not only can a spiritual life, dependent upon mystical experience, be accessed by everyone, it also presupposes that this reality can be shared with another person. We have found no scientific research on the subject of shared spirituality or shared mystical experience even though historical literature is full of anecdotal accounts. There are of course, numerous accounts in the New Testament, such as at the Transfiguration when Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain and is transformed before them, or the account of the joint mystical experience on the feast of Pentecost when the disciples of Jesus, after his death are gathered in an upper room, despondent over Jesus being killed and they together share a mystical experience which is symbolized by tongues of fire and a fierce wind. The experience energizes them and totally changes their lives. In the Old Testament and Koran there are many examples of shared mystical experience

One of the most beautiful and oratorically powerful accounts of a shared mystical experience in western literature is that of Augustine and his mother, Monica as related in the Confessions. Here is the passage (edited my translation) with Augustine speaking to God.

As the day approached when she was to die you arranged it that she and I stood alone, leaning on a window frame, from which the garden of the house we occupied at Ostia could be seen; at which place, removed from the crowd we were resting ourselves for the voyage, being exhausted after our long journey. We then were conversing alone very pleasantly and “forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are before,” we were seeking between ourselves in the presence of that Truth which you are, what is the nature of the eternal life of the saints. We opened wide the mouth of our heart.....And our conversation had arrived at that point, where not the highest pleasure of the senses or the brightest of lights could compare, and yet we ascended with even greater intensity towards that thing in itself. And we walked gradually up to the heavens themselves from whence the sun and the moon and the stars shine upon the earth, and yet we went even further, internally contemplating, speaking and admiring your works and came to our very minds and we transcended them also until we came to the region of unending fullness where life is wisdom, through whom are all these things, both those which have been and those which will be.....and while we were speaking we gaped with wonder (*inhiamus illi* – desire intently), we touched it, lightly, with our hearts being pierced (*ictu cordis*), and we gasped and there we left bound the first givings of the Spirit, and we returned to the sound of our mouths, where words both begin and end.” (Augustine, Bk. 9, n.10.)

Augustine here is describing extraordinary levels of mystical experience, where the spirit of the created catches a glimpse of the source of its creation. However, the principle of transcendence which underlies the extraordinary experience of Augustine and Monica is the same which can

also be realized in ordinary, everyday life. The mystery of the presence of the uncreated can be accessed in many ways, through simple religious practices, through acts of kindness, through ritual, and through prayer. We shared this experience of transcendence with others, because we are all created. And when a couple commits to one another in an exclusive, permanent relationship, this shared response to the experience of the presence of God is what in Christian theology constitutes the sacramentality of marriage.

Consequently, the uniqueness of the spirituality scale in this study is not that it focuses on individual spirituality and religiosity, but precisely in that it studies *shared spirituality*. Which leads us directly to the third presupposition, the psycho-social.

This presupposition recognizes that we express through symbolic actions both spiritual and psychological realities. We do this through communal activities and gestures. Expressing spirituality is not an individual exercise; it is done with others. And the married person's first, immediate community is one's spouse and immediate family. In other words, mystical experience gives rise to a shared psychological and emotional experience which we can share primarily with our spouse.

This shared experience, psychologically, creates in the individual a satisfying response called intimacy. Intimacy is the opposite of loneliness. There are four qualities to intimacy. First, intimacy entails a risk in the approach to another person because we must leave our secure world and venture into areas where we can be hurt and rejected. The second quality of intimacy is communication which allows the sharing process to take place. Without communication there is no intimacy. Next, self-donation of both individuals is necessary and finally, uncritical acceptance of another will allow the bonding to take place. As intimacy increases, the expression of marital satisfaction increases. If any of the four elements necessary for intimacy is missing, intimacy will decrease.

Shared spirituality, the act of taking the risk of praying with one's spouse, giving and receiving in the presence of the shared mystery will increase intimacy. If shared spirituality is not present in a marriage we hypothesize that the couple will experience significantly higher levels of loneliness and lower marital satisfaction. Consequently, the couple who progresses more directly and intensely into their shared spirituality should, we hypothesize, experience less loneliness and greater marital satisfaction. We will see if the data bear this out.

The Marital Satisfaction Scale

She had a sullen scowl on her face. She sat quietly and just glowered at him. “Why don’t you understand,” he asked, frustrated, waving his hand. She sat silent. “This is real simple,” he said condescendingly. “Screw you,” she sneered.

They were sitting across from one another in my office, where they had come to try to make their marriage better. I wasn’t very optimistic at that point. I had started out the discussion by trying to get them to talk about what they enjoyed doing together. “Just about nothing,” she replied. “See,” he looked at me with triumphant justification. “She never wants to do anything.” That topic quickly disintegrated into a replay of a fight they had last Saturday night when he told her in bed that he could not understand why they couldn’t have sex as often as other people. Somehow her mother got dragged into the argument. At this point I was wondering if there wasn’t an easier way I could make a living.

“You would be happy if we had sex every day,” she spat out.

“It would help,” he replied sarcastically, “As a start.”

And then, her solution, which I was getting used to at this point:

“Screw you, buddy.” This is going to be a long session, I thought.

This example is the flip side of the marital satisfaction scale. However, it expresses the elements found in what constitutes marital satisfaction: good communication, shared feelings, affection, sex (which is another form of communication, shared activities and having fun together, touch and an overall sense of intimacy. The result will be friendship which leads to a relative absence of conflict and what the French call the *joie d'être*, the Germans, *Gemutlichkeit*. Life will be an adventure, full of excitement and growth.

This scale is the pivotal scale in the study, against which the loneliness and spirituality scales are correlated. It is supplemented by correlation with the other scales in the study. Correlations also are made within the scale itself.

Some of the questions which come to mind are: can a couple rate high on communication questions and low on the shared activities or sexual areas. Can feelings of affection be high and touch low? Then, we can correlate with other scales, for instance: how do the general expressions of marital satisfaction correlate with the argumentativeness and verbal aggression scale. Can one experience a high level of shared spirituality and a low level of marital satisfaction? Hundreds of such correlations can be done against this pivotal marital satisfaction scale.

CONCLUSION;

- Intimacy surely must be present for a successful marriage.
- Prayer together, which is the mark of shared spirituality, is done by only a very small percentage of married people. Yet, those who do it affirm that it strengthens their marriage and gives them great satisfaction.
- Loneliness very strongly correlates with low marital satisfaction, and intimacy, which is the opposite of loneliness correlates with high marital satisfaction.

Hopefully, this study will serve those who deeply desire and are trying hard to love successfully. And then those couples will be able to say with Augustine, We gaped with wonder, we touched it, lightly, and we gasped and there we left and returned to the sound of our mouths, where words both begin and end.

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES – LONELINESS

There was a very significant expression of mistrust and loneliness in marriage.

- **The loneliness is created when I shut myself in my own little closet.**
- **Works in his office and spends endless hours avoiding me**
- **He watches too much TV and sports and radio talk – I feel left out and not important to him.**
- **Does not listen when I talk to him. Spends time with others when he could be spending time with me**
- **She likes to be away at the bar with her girlfriends too much**
- **We fight and do not talk to one another for days.**
- **He leaves to go to a friend's house and I have never met this person, have no phone number or address. He won't supply me with the information in the five-six months he has been going there.**
- **He doesn't come home and I do not know where he is.**
- **She shuts me out, withholds feelings, disrespects me, belittles me.**
- **Its pornography, he's constantly on the computer.**
- **She is not paying attention to me.**
- **He is not here with me.**
- **She is not here with me.**
- **(She) condemns me for not caring how she feels and not loving her for herself.**
- **She gets mad and walks around the hours not talking to me so I have to guess what is wrong.**
- **Is away or angry with me. Also when we go long periods without sex.**
- **She goes on trips without me.**
- **Leaves me at home and goes out drink with friends.**

- **On his two days off during the week he spends time doing everything but spending time with his family.(3) Before we got married we spent a lot of time together, parting on the weekends. Once we got married he decided we needed to stop (spending time together. He took up hobbies that did not include me. I became addicted to crack cocaine. My husband helped me kick that habit.**

AFTER READING THESE I WONDER IF ANTON CHEKOV, THE RUSSIAN PLAYWRITE HAD IT CORRECT WHEN HE SAID, “IF YOU ARE AFRAID OF LONELINESS, DON’T GET MARRIED.

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

PRAYER

- **More explicitly answered yes than no to praying when good events and crises points**
- **Most did not respond – only about 1/5 to 1/6 – indicates that not many connect prayer with the everyday events in their lives.**
- **“I cheated on my wife. It did weaken our marriage. Praying played big roles to get through this time”**
- **“When our teen age daughter became pregnant. It weakened our marriage for a while. But we survived and our marriage became stronger. And yes, we prayed.”**
- **“yes it was, prayer always strengthens a relationship”**
- **“Although we rarely pray as a couple when we have (prayed) it tends to strengthen our marriage & emotional bond with one another.” We tend to pray as a couple when faced with crisis.”**
- **“no, (we didn’t pray) we went to marriage counseling”**
- **“I feel that when I am spiritually connected to Christ I feel emotionally healthier. When I am disconnected from my church due to business for long periods I tend to feel weakened so I pray a lot for strength.”**
- **“Praying is always the key.”**

- **“Prayer was impact”**

Sources

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