

PROTECTING OUR MARRIAGES

by Joseph Shaub

I'm a *divorce lawyer*...so what was I doing at a national convention for people who want to preserve marriages? Ostensibly, it could be summed up in two words... continuing education. Family therapists have to fulfill these requirements too, and what better way to do it than take a tax deductible sojourn to my old haunts in Southern California. The highlight of the week (aside from the 80 degree heat in October, filthy air, bumper-to-bumper traffic and repeated apologies for Arnold) were the workshops. They spoke to therapists who want to strengthen marriages. Among the finest presentations was that of Bill Doherty, Ph.D., a marital therapist out of Minnesota. His message, and his book, *Take Back Your Marriage - Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart* , are particularly relevant for attorneys. I'd like to summarize the high points of Doherty's presentation in the hopes that you can take even one helpful piece back to your homes and enrich your love lives this holiday season.

Our marriages are threatened by entropy. So many forces in the world tend to pull us apart. As Doherty simply states, "We are too busy for our marriages. Between work, raising children, and managing daily life, many of us don't think we have enough time to make our marriage relationship a high priority in daily life." This, of course, is particularly true for lawyers who often, and quite naturally, permit their work to consume their lives.

Those who study the natural trajectory of a marriage observe that after the initial stage of romantic intensity, most unions settle into a predictable routine of daily life. While on one hand, no relationship is more central to our well-being , none is more taken for granted. There is a myth that is held throughout our society that once we get married, this institution in our lives ought to run on automatic pilot. Think of the conscious attention we give to our jobs or to raising our children - to give the two most prominent examples. Now consider how much mental energy goes into *thinking about our marriages*. I attended an excellent and quite popular WSBA time management seminar run by Frank Sanitate last month, and one of the exercises involved listing and ranking our priorities. While "family" often made its way high on the list alongside free time to pursue non-legal passions, our "*marriage*" as a distinct priority often did not make the list....and without *conscious attention* any marriage will tend to fade.

In fact another excellent workshop put on by a colleague of Doerty's, Jeffrey Larson, Ph.D., was entitled, *The Marriage Tune-Up*. Larson compared a marriage to an auto engine, noting that if either do not get a periodic tune-up, then a major maintenance will be required at some point in the future. These periodic, and usually quite undramatic, acts of love, kindness and attention (which will be described below) are the binding agents of our marriages. It's a matter of habit, in a way, and the metaphor of our physical health is apt. If we continually eat poorly; fail to manage stress and fail to exercise we will, over time, exact such *cumulative and incremental damage* to our bodies that one day we will suddenly find ourselves dealing with a heart attack, stroke, diabetes or some other disabling condition that was simply the fruit of our inattention.

A point well made by Doerty is that children are avid consumers of our time and will suck up every bit of it unless we set clear boundaries. He observes that in recent years, many couples enter his office complaining that they have no time with each other; then upon some probing he finds that their children have no set bed-time. Doerty notes the guilt of working parents who feel they are *already* giving insufficient time to their children. Add to this, the truly unbelievable schedules we are setting up for our kids these days and the time left for you and your spouse is squeezed into seconds. Even 15 minutes/day of couple time can provide that critical connection, if it is honored every day.

Aside from our children, jobs, adult schedules, individual hobbies or recreational pursuits and television/Internet "veg-out time" are "competitors for our daily time (which) are far more assertive than we are about our marriages." An important suggestion is that when work (for example) makes a demand upon us that is unalterable and invades important *couple* time, don't get defensive or dismissive about it, treating such commitments as natural and inevitable. Instead, express genuine regret to your partner and make a point of arranging a very special connection which is, again, solely for the enjoyment of you as a couple.

Doerty cannot overemphasize the value of personal *rituals* of connection which partners repeat. These are quite simple and can include good-byes in the morning, greetings in the evening or going out for coffee and conversation.

In order to be a ritual it needs to be "repeated, coordinated and significant to both of you." Another observation is that talk, even more than sex, is the force that initially attracts and binds us to one another. Yet so many couples who find their marriages becoming moribund have allowed all other life responsibilities to swallow up time for talk. Doerty observes that "if you have kids, you won't have time for talk unless you ritualize it."

The point is that over time we so seldom say "I love you," through words or meaningful gestures, that we lose the feeling. As we become passively estranged through our inattention to the most important relationship in our lives, these "rituals of connection" may seem more contrived. You might feel silly saying anything about it or doing something that's different from your established pattern of benign emotional neglect. Jeffrey Larson points out in his discussion of prevalent marital myths that it is common to think, "I first must feel better, or differently, about my partner before my behavior changes."

As we head into the holiday season, we may be tempted to "show our love" with an extravagant gift. To be sure, these are fun to give and much appreciated - but they may not be unnecessary. Often what our partners hunger for is just a little bit of one-on-one time for conversation; a daily "I love you" that's meant; a call in the middle of the day to check in or a card or flower. A willingness to explore how you can make your marriage the most important relationship in your life may be the best holiday present you could give to your partner. It'll certainly make the Winter nights a lot warmer.