

# 2221 Theory & Practice 1: Lecture 8

## Getting The Love You Want

Harville Hendrix

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Whether you realise the full potential of [the marriage] vision depends not on your ability to attract the perfect mate, but on your willingness to acquire knowledge about hidden parts of yourself (Hendrix, 1988: xiv).

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## Introduction



Hendrix’s work in the above title is essentially about **marriage counselling**. He begins by talking about his history in counselling others in failing marriages. He first used ‘problem-oriented, contractual marriage counseling’ (p. xiv) and when this approach failed, he turned to the individual counselling of each partner. However, the issue of finding a more helpful approach became more acute when he and his wife began to have their own marriage problems. Although, they were fully committed to their marriage and worked hard for about 8 years to try to save it, they were finally divorced. Hendrix felt a failure as a husband and as a therapist.

He analysed the failure of the marriage and sensed that behind all the reasons that each of them could give for breakdown a 'central disappointment' (p. iv) lurked. Out of his research and therapy with many couples, he developed what he came to call, 'Imago (ih-MAH'-go) Relationship Therapy' (p. iv). He describes his approach as eclectic, a bringing together of 'depth psychology, the behavioral sciences, the Western spiritual tradition<sup>1</sup>, and added some elements of Transactional Analysis, Gestalt psychology, systems theory, and cognitive therapy' (p. iv). He believed that only with such a synthesis was he able to finally see a reduction in the number of couples breaking up and divorcing in his practice.

## **Getting the love you want**

**The structure of the book is built on the classic, psychodynamic therapeutic tenet: 'make the unconscious conscious'. His message is, 'Those who are unconscious about themselves are doomed to have problems in marriage'. Therefore, in order to save marriages the partners have to become more aware of the baggage each is carrying.**

### **The book has three major sections**

#### ***Part 1. The Unconscious Marriage: The disillusionment path (5 chapters)***

##### **1. The mystery of attraction**

These chapter headings outline Hendrix's description of the disillusionment path of most marriages: first, attraction, then romantic love, and finally, the power struggle.

Very importantly, these heading also express his thesis for why marriages get into trouble: first, the significance of childhood wounds, and the concept of one's imago.

Hendrix asked couples how they first met. Some meetings are very startling, love-at-first-sight types. Other first meetings are quite ordinary but the relationship grows in a

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase appears to mean primarily Roman and its offshoot Protestant Christianity. The phrase could include Christianity as it has been developed in the West, meaning Europe, UK, Nth America, and Australia.

run of the mill way, perhaps over a number of years. (Some contend that the latter relationships will tend to last all other things being equal.) Attraction seems to be based at least partly on a female's ability to bear children (clear skin, bright eyes, shiny hair, red lips, rosy cheeks) and on a male's ability to support a family (status and money) (p. 5). However, attraction is more than biology.

He scans other theories of attraction but dismisses these as being unable to account for the fact that we tend to be attracted and fall in love with a comparatively small number of people. Singles will often contend, for example, that 'there are just no good women (or men) out there'. Hendrix interprets this comment to mean that 'there are few people out there who fulfil my search for a specific set of positive and negative traits'.

The other curious fact is that, of those people that we are attracted to, we tend to be attracted to those who resemble us! Often we have both their good points and some of their bad points too!

Hendrix mentions Freud's unconscious<sup>2</sup> in passing and then uses a simplified model from neuroscience which divides the brain into 'old brain' and 'new brain'.<sup>3</sup> The OB is largely hardwired and determines most of our automatic reactions (p. 8). The NB is what we might describe as our rational brain. The NB can moderate affects of the OB but often is unable to override them. We are more aware of the operations of the NB than we are of the OB; nevertheless, a constant interaction occurs between the two.<sup>4</sup>

The old brain (OB) operates largely on the principle, 'Is it safe?' So, if you had a frightening experience with water or with a spider when you were a child you may later experience all the difficulties of an annoying phobia. Your rational mind tells you that there is nothing to be afraid of but your physiological experience is telling you the opposite. Guess which one wins? The present also looms large for the OB: 'everything that was, still is' (p. 11).

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<sup>2</sup> However, Hendrix's understanding of the 'unconscious' is qualitatively different from Freud's and more in line with recent cognitive psychology.

<sup>3</sup> 'Old' and 'new' are named according to their time of appearance in the evolutionary chain but that is not of direct concern to us.

<sup>4</sup> This point appears to run counter to Freud et al. views of the unconscious.

**If we take this knowledge, and apply it to the issue of mate selection, we find that that what we do is to look for someone with the predominant traits of those who raised us!**

**Why do we want to find such specific people? Because the OB is trying to re-establish our original family situation, believing that within that setting our old, childhood wounds can be healed.**

**Hendrix believes that we fall in love, sometimes dramatically, because our OB area confused that loved one with our parents. The OB believed that we had found the ideal**

## **2. Childhood wounds**

All children begin with a sense of oneness in the womb, which continues in the first few months of life. Hendricks rhapsodises about this period of life calling it a 'primitive spirituality, a universe without boundaries' (p. 14).<sup>5</sup> The sense of oneness, which the writer claims is described in many myths, including the story of the Garden of Eden, is what each of us is trying to restore through marriage. Deep unhappiness results when the partner fails to do this.

All children receive some wounds in childhood from their parents and from the environment, according to Hendricks. Fear is inspired by meeting scary dogs, spiders, people and machines. Parents fail to meet the developmental needs of their children for a host of reasons including their own childhood wounds.

Some children grow become 'fusers' or 'isolators' because of the frustration of desires for independence or closeness, respectively. Others can not think, feel, or take action because of the way they were socialised in their families. Others are

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<sup>5</sup> These terms have strong Eastern religious connections.

disconnected from their bodies because of the supposed danger of bodily feelings expressed in the family.

Hendricks spends some time itemising the areas of the self that will be brought into marriage hoping for healing from the partner. In summary, he believes that we come into marriage looking for healing for our wounded selves and looking for completeness for our incomplete selves.

**Hendricks' understanding of the human story is somewhat 'romantic'. We were each born whole<sup>6</sup> in Eden, 'have fallen' because of the shortcomings of parents and the deficiencies of society (socialisation), and are now trying to get back to our original, whole state. This understanding is not that of the Hebrew-Christian scriptures.<sup>7</sup>**

### **3. Your imago**

Hendricks believes that readers will often have a hard time accepting the view that they searched for a partner who resembled their parents!! Don't many of us say that we did everything we could to make sure that we avoided those who were like our parents! And *consciously* we did try to do this but *unconsciously* (out of awareness) something else was happening. We ended up picking someone who had some of the positive *but* also the negative traits of our parents and the *latter* were very influential in our choice.

Additionally, we find that partners pick others who complement areas that have been repressed because of socialisation. Hence, the non-spontaneous will be attracted to the spontaneous; the low feelers, to the affective; the non-artistic, the artistic; the non-optimistic, the optimists.

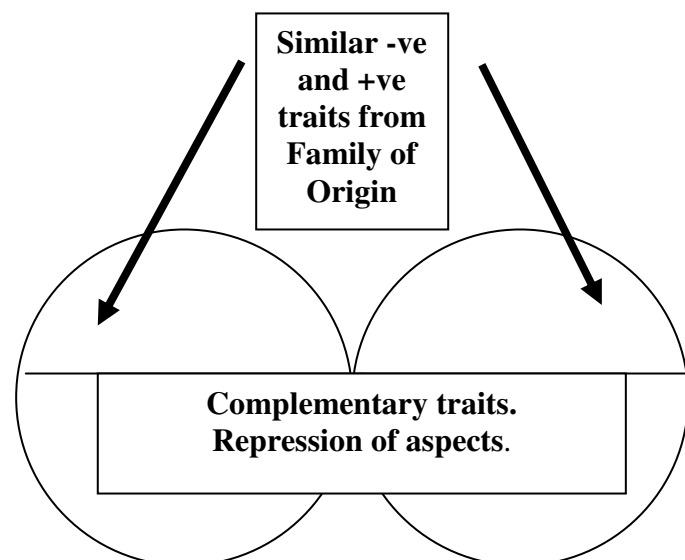
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<sup>6</sup> In two senses: first, without wounds; and second, complete.

<sup>7</sup> In the beginning, humankind is originally blessed. We can therefore speak of original blessing. Sin severely disrupted our ability to receive God's blessing but sin does not alter the fact that we remain originally blessed.

One's imago is internal and guides us in making our choice of a mate. The imago consists of various aspects of significant caregivers, both positive and negative, 'etched onto a template' (p. 31). The degree to which you are/were attracted to someone corresponds to the match between your imago and that person. High degree of correlation = high degree of attraction. You will find it difficult to glimpse this unconscious imago but experiences of it can be had during dreams. Others can take the part of parents, spouses, friends, because the OB does not discriminate among them in terms of relationship but rather in terms of similarities.

When boy meets girl, attraction occurs when their imagos are highly correlated. Each person may be quite different in personality but his or her imagos may still correspond. Most importantly for marital conflict, the negative traits of each are going to 'reinjure some very sensitive wounds' (p. 38) because these same traits injured these partners in their original families. A more sophisticated way of presenting this theory is to say that, "people either pick imago matches, project them, or provoke them" (p. 62).



#### 4. Romantic love

When we fall in love, everything is transformed. Biggest transformation is how we feel about ourselves (p. 39). It may also change us so that we give up, for a time, some

additive practices (TV, sex, food, sweets, drugs, alcohol). The love feeling will tend to radiate from the lovers to others. Hendrix even believes that some experience a 'heightened spiritual awareness' (p. 40) and relates this to one's original nature (=original wholeness).

The psychological explanation for all this change (as opposed to the chemistry of it) is that 'romantic love is the creation of the unconscious mind' (p. 41). We experience the wonderful good feelings because part of the brain (the OB) believes we have been given a chance to get healed/nurtured and to 'regain our original wholeness' (p. 41).

However, all this wonder and enchantment can only be maintained through illusion, ('I will nurture and look after you'); deception, ('I do not have any wounded areas that need healing'); and denial, ('Our wonderful love affair is not becoming fragmented').

## **5. The power struggle**

Often power struggles begin when a definite commitment is made to each other. Conscious expectations are not always met because of different family mores and customs. However, more importantly, unconscious expectations are not met by the other in the area of healing and the complementing of lost parts. The latter failure occurs because each is trying to get these things from the other person and, with commitment, less incentive appears to operate for partners to give to their respective partners.

Even the partner's strengths that appealed to us because they represented repressed sides of our lost wholeness are now a threat because these repressed aspects have strong taboos attached to them.

***Part II. The Conscious Marriage: How a marriage can be fixed up (7 chapters)***

**1. Becoming conscious**

There is no birth of consciousness without pain.

Carl Jung

Although the OB can be said to play somewhat of a negative part in marriage problems, it also plays a positive part because the instinctual drives are for the well-being of the person. The problem with the OB is that it is blind and needs to collude with the NB in getting the needs of the person met. In marriage interactions, when a spouse's OB's talk is critical, a safer environment is promoted when the other person's NB is engaged. This engagement allows for fault to be acknowledged if appropriate rather than defensive attacking or withdrawing for protection. In such situation, the spouse becomes an ally rather than an antagonist.

**2. Ten characteristics of a conscious marriage (p. 76)**

1. Recognition that the healing of childhood wounds is the hidden purpose of your love relationship
2. Creating a more accurate picture of your partner: not your saviour but as a fellow wounded person
3. Taking responsibility to communicating your needs to partner.
4. Become more intentional in your interactions with your spouse
5. Prizing your partner's needs as highly as your own
6. Embracing the dark side of your personality, the negative traits that you have
7. Learning new techniques to meet your own needs and desires rather than depending solely on your partner
8. Identifying strengths you lack and seeking to develop them. This process frees you from the OB's urge to see the marriage as the place where oneness is to be achieved
9. Becoming aware of your drive to be loving, whole and united with the universe. Conscious marriage partners seek to rediscover their original nature.
10. Accepting the difficulty of creating a good marriage. Conscious marriage partners realise that they have to *be* the right partner for the other as opposed



to believing that they have to be married to *the right person* in order to have a good marriage. Hendrix spends the rest of the chapter emphasising the point that marriage making is hard work. Marriages don't just happen; they require effort.

In order to be loved, we need to love first. In order to have friends, we have to make friends. To imagine that good marriage partners are waiting for us out there in the world is to live in a child's world of illusion and naivety.

But, this pathway of change may be beset by the fear of change because change is necessarily involved when we love others intimately. Change tends to be resisted because it is painfully humbling! Change is also feared. He cites the Israelites on their first trip to the Promised Land, who listen to the 10 spies, and decide that they cannot take the land away from these 'giants'. These people are judged for their lack of faith and never enter Canaan.

In the further chapters in this section, Hendrix 'explores . . . commitment and explains why it is a necessary precondition for emotional growth'; he shows how to make marriage a safety area that will promote 'the intimacy of romantic love'; demonstrates how partners can gather information about their spouses; discusses the 'paradoxical idea' that the more we pursue the satisfaction of our spouse's needs the more healing *we* will experience; and illustrates how we can contain our anger safely.

### ***Part III. The Exercises: 13 steps towards a 'conscious marriage'***

#### **1. Closing exits**

Therapists need to get clients to commit themselves to working together with her for at least 12 sessions, define a relationship vision, stay together for a specified period, and gradually close the exits that have been developed over time to cope with the difficulties of the marriage.

Two major emotions/feelings that arise in marriages are anger and fear. Anger relates to not getting our needs met. Fear relates to getting hurt (because the chosen spouse will be similar to original family, which wounded the person in the first place.

## **2. Increasing your knowledge of yourself and your partner**

We are often blind about ourselves and blind to the nature of reality. Reality is always greater than we can express. In marriage, part of our learning is to be taught that our spouse has a viewpoint, which may be different from ours and yet express some of the richness of reality that we have missed. Marriage is somewhat like a school.

Hendrix lists four principles (p. 116-118) that apply in this marital schooling process:

**1. ‘Most of your partner’s criticisms of you have some basis in reality.’**

Often we do not learn from criticisms if they are delivered in an ‘accusatory manner’ (p. 116). Nevertheless, most spouses are adept at spotting their spouses’ weakness. If I am told, ‘You never do anything out in the garden!’ then, ignoring the provocative ‘never do anything’ can I run with the fact that there is some truth in what she is saying?

**2. ‘Many of your repetitious, emotional criticisms of your partner are disguised statements of your own unmet needs.’**

Not only can the complained-against gain knowledge but the complainer can also determine if the spouse’s behaviour brought back strong childhood memories and associated feelings/desires. Perhaps my wife finds out that she was always left alone and felt isolated and unappreciated doing jobs around the house in her original family.

**3. ‘Some of your repetitious, emotional criticisms of your partner may be an accurate picture of a disowned part of yourself.’**

Another way a complaint about a spouse can relate to the complainer is that the complaint may also apply to something about the complainer even though this application may be in a different context. For example, if I accuse my spouse of being bossy in the car then in what ways am I also bossy? Sobering and humbling stuff!

**4. ‘Some of your criticisms of your partner may help you to identify your own lost self.’**

Often a chronic criticism is not related to a disowned part but to the unconscious lost self. In the example above, if I examined my bossiness profile and found that I was not bossy in any parts of my life, it could be that I

have an unconscious wish to be bossy or assertive somewhere. Hence, I criticise my wife for being bossy but I secretly admire her ability to be this way.

### 3. Defining your curriculum

We marry those who are most like our caregivers. Our spouses do the same. These choices, affected by unconscious factors, lead readily to strained relationships because neither spouse feels the other understands his/her needs. One cries for intimacy; the other cries for solitude!

We can not just give up these deep longings for healing and for wholeness. They are too much a part of who we are.

Nor can we try the self-love approach by willing to love ourselves (a NB tactic) because the OB sabotages such actions. The latter still operates on principle that other people will meet my needs, which we developed during earliest infancy.

Friends can only be of limited help because the OB is looking for someone similar to our parents.

However, if spouses are willing to **CHANGE** and begin to minister to their spouses in the area of their spouse's hurt that change would also enable the minister to recover '*an essential part of himself*' (p. 131). And, if counsellors can promote this process in both partners then both would be receiving healing for their wounding **AND** recovering a repressed part of themselves at the same time.

Hendrix's general counselling method is to take a criticism voiced by a spouse, get him/her to convert it into a desire, and then describe a specific behaviour<sup>8</sup> that the wife/husband could do to meet that desire. His method is appealing in that counselling does not have to remain with criticisms but can move onto something that the partner can do (particularly appealing to men!).

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<sup>8</sup> This approach could be described as 'behavioural' but it is not classically so, as you will see in semester 2.

For example, suppose one partner complains that the other partner is always interrupting his stories (a negative trait that his parents also have). His desire is for her to be silent while he is telling his story even if she has heard it a dozen times before. His specific behavioural requirement may be for her to be silent for one of his stories when they have guests or when they go out. Lists of these chronic complaints, desires and behaviours can be drawn up. The partner can be invited to rank them in order of difficulty and to select which one she is prepared to do. Choosing is very important for this type of activity.

Hendrix believes that marriage relationships can heal, that *agape* love, which directs eros towards another person, leads to greater wholeness.

## Reference

Hendrix, H. (1988). *Getting the love you want*. Melbourne, Victoria: Schwartz & Wilkinson.

## A Summary

We tend to choose partners who are much like members of our family of origin (FoO). This choice, a first glance, is a recipe for disaster because it was with such persons we received our original wounds. Though such people are experienced as familiar, they are also the type of people who will find it very hard to live in some areas given the particular sensitivities we have developed from our FoO.

### IMAGO THERAPY

Each partner is a therapist to the other. But, in order to do this therapy, each 'therapist' has to grow(!) because neither 'therapist' will be 'naturally' equipped to cater to the needs of the partner. This lack results from the similarities between the two families of origin in unconscious ways.

One of the hardest disciplines of this therapy is for partners to learn to listen to the criticisms of other partner because within those criticisms will be things to learn.

