

## **The State of Marriages: Are there Insights to Be Learned from Greeting Cards?**

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My wife Marilyn's birthday is later this month. A few days ago I went to buy her a birthday card. I walked over to the greeting cards section of the store. I searched under "Birthday Wishes—Wife" and immediately spotted a large array of cards from which to choose. However, even before selecting any card to read I already knew that what might at first glance appear to be a large choice was in fact very limited. I was aware, based on many years experience purchasing birthday, anniversary, and Valentine's Day cards for Marilyn, that the sentiment expressed in most of the cards did not—at least from my vantage point—reflect my relationship with my lovely wife.

I am not referring to the words in those cards that convey expressions of love and the meaningfulness of the marital relationship. I feel very fortunate that these emotions and thoughts are integral features of our marriage (of course, one should probably interview Marilyn to validate this view). What I am referring to are those cards permeated with words of apology, words that appear in many birthday, anniversary, and Valentine's Day cards designed to be given from a husband to a wife.

As I scanned these cards I was reminded of a conference at which I presented many years ago, one about men and family relationships. By coincidence, in the midst of preparing my talk for that conference I went to purchase an anniversary card for Marilyn. I was struck as never before (perhaps because I was preparing a presentation that focused on family and marital relationships) by the message expressed in the opening few lines of many cards. Most began with an apology to one's wife for not stating often enough "I love you" or for not displaying affection or for not spending enough time together. I quickly determined that the apologetic anniversary cards far outnumbered those that did not voice regrets.

I surmised that in creating these kinds of cards, the greeting card industry must have data to prove that many husbands fail to display an appropriate amount of appreciation towards their wives. I assumed that this marital situation was not unique to the town in which I lived but existed throughout the United States (and perhaps the world) and that similar greeting cards were available everywhere. I wondered if

researchers had conducted studies and decided that husbands were more likely to purchase cards that not only expressed love, but also asked for forgiveness. If that were not the case, why so many cards with apologetic messages? I assured myself that such cards were not intended for me. I also discovered that cards written for wives to give to their husbands were much freer of apology, suggesting that there was less need for wives to apologize to husbands than husbands to apologize to wives (or a more cynical person might argue that greeting cards were probably designed by women).

### **Evidence Provided for a Conference**

The story doesn't end there. For the sake of scientific evidence I splurged and bought five of the apologetic cards as resource material to read during my talk at the conference; I should note I also bought a card that did not hint of regrets, which was the one I actually gave to Marilyn since I thought it more accurately reflected the state of our relationship. When I went to pay for the cards, the woman ringing up the sales looked at me with a puzzled expression, almost as if to say, "Why so many cards? How many wives do you have?" I explained why I bought six cards and she smiled and replied, "My husband should probably send me one of these five," pointing to the apologetic cards. I didn't ask if she were joking or serious.

Fast forward to the conference. I read the cards at the beginning of my presentation as possible evidence that men had noticeable difficulty displaying affection and appreciation towards their wives. Many in the audience, the majority of whom were men, laughed when I jokingly said, "I think the greeting card industry is engaged in a plot to keep men from expressing affection to their spouses so that husbands will feel guilty and purchase apologetic cards." However, a more reflective atmosphere emerged when I asked the group, "Okay, so how many of us in this room need these cards?"

A refreshment break followed my talk. Several members of the audience immediately approached me to discuss my presentation. One man asked, "Can I buy one of the anniversary cards you read? I know that this might sound funny given what you just talked about, but I just realized that tomorrow is my anniversary. I plan to leave this conference a little early to buy my wife a present. One of your cards will certainly help."

I donated a card to this man in hopes of saving his marriage. To this day I am not certain whether he was kidding. However, I sensed that while a modicum of humor may

have been present, the man was being honest. I often wondered if he told his wife how he came upon the card. I hope she liked its message since I spent a fair bit of time selecting it.

### **Predictions of Divorce?**

Back to the present month. I left the store having finally found a card that did not hint of apology (it wasn't easy to do). Similar to the aftermath of previous excursions to purchase greeting cards for Marilyn I reflected on our marriage as well as other marriages about which I knew, including couples I had seen in marital therapy. Questions I have pondered in the past arose once again: "What makes for happy marriages?" "What makes for marriages in which the couple grows apart emotionally and physically and perhaps end up in divorce?" Certainly the questions do not invite simple answers.

When I came home I decided to "google" (how quickly "google" has become a verb) the words "Happy Marriage." Many citations came up, but I decided to look at those pertaining to Dr. John Gottman, a well-known psychologist who has conducted extensive research in the areas of marital stability and divorce. Among his many books he is the author of *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. He also developed a model that he claims predicts which newlywed couples will remain married and which will divorce within four to six years. Gottman asserts that his model has 90% accuracy! Even more surprising is that Gottman contends that he can make these predictions based on the ways in which couples argue, after listening to these couples for a relatively brief time.

In this month's article I want to describe the signs Gottman has identified as predicting divorce. I will offer some of my own commentary. Next month's article will be devoted to practices that Gottman identifies as nurturing happier marriages or partnerships.

### **Signs that Predict Divorce**

Given such a reportedly high accuracy rate about such a complex issue as relationships and divorce I decided to read papers critiquing Gottman's work, several of which questioned both his research methodology and his claims that his ideas were "revolutionary." However, even with these reservations about his work I was still curious to learn what observations Gottman relied on to make his prognostications of

divorce. In fact, he identified five signs that allow him to predict marital failure. Perhaps the word “revolutionary” to describe his intervention approach is stretching things a bit and perhaps the five signs are rather obvious, but I believe they have relevance as we consider obstacles to a happy marriage. Thus, I would like to outline them and I hope in doing so my readers will be prompted to reflect upon their own behaviors within a marriage or partnership.

*First Sign: A Harsh Startup.* Gottman asserts that 96% of the time the way a discussion begins can predict the way it ends (it’s interesting how exact his figures are). When one partner’s initial words are negative or accusatory, the discussion is likely to go rapidly down hill. Few would argue with that observation. In considering Gottman’s words I quickly thought about the ways in which I caution couples in my clinical practice to refrain from using certain words such as “always” or “never” in a negative way (“you are always stubborn”; “you never help out”; “you always criticize me”; “you never compliment me”). Such absolute words typically close off any constructive dialogue that might lead to a resolution of problems.

*Second Sign: The Four Horsemen.* A harsh startup can reinforce negative interactions. Gottman has labeled four kinds of these negative interactions under the ominous heading the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, asserting that “usually these four horsemen clip-clop into the heart of a marriage in the following order: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.”

Gottman distinguishes criticism from complaints, noting that all spouses have complaints about their partners. The problem arises when complaints turn into criticisms, which are seen as attacks on the character of the partner. Criticism is transformed into contempt when it is expressed as “sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor.” I have encountered many illustrations of these behaviors as a clinician. I recall one couple I saw in therapy, Jeremy and Alicia. Jeremy countered almost any remark offered by Alicia by noting with a sarcastic tone, “Alicia has a depressive personality. She interprets everything in a negative way.” Rather than responding in a more constructive way to Alicia’s concerns, Jeremy assumed the role of a psychologist, offering a diagnosis. As one might guess, Jeremy’s response was not very well received by Alicia.

Gottman states that when contempt appears, so too does the third horseman, defensiveness. He observes that it is very natural for people to become defensive when they are being criticized in what they perceive to be a hostile manner. In such a situation each partner tends to blame the other with little chance that the situation will be corrected. This dynamic was very evident in Alicia when she heard the words “depressive personality” uttered by her husband. She replied, “If I have a depressive personality, you have a narcissistic personality.” It appeared as if Jeremy and Alicia had both taken one or two psychology courses.

Upon hearing the diagnosis conferred on him by Alicia, Jeremy inquired with undisguised anger, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

Alicia snapped back, “Simply put, you are self-centered and only think of yourself.”

Jeremy was not going to permit this assessment to pass without a comment. He looked at me as if pleading his case and then turned back to Alicia and said, “The problem is that you see anyone who cares about himself as self-centered; that’s because you are often depressed and have very low self-esteem.”

I finally had to interrupt this dialogue to attempt to move things on a more constructive path.

Gottman’s fourth horseman is what he calls stonewalling in which one partner tunes out the other and refuses to say anything. I have heard this complaint expressed many times while conducting couples therapy. One spouse will say that the other becomes mute and problems cannot be solved when that happens. The so-called “mute” partner will reply, “Why should I say anything since you attack anything I say? I feel it’s better not to say anything at all.” These beliefs and their accompanying interaction patterns are major obstacles to happy marriages. Dialogues become monologues filled with frustration and anger when one member of the couple refuses to talk.

*Third Sign: Flooding.* Gottman notes, “Flooding means that your spouse’s negativity—whether in the guise of criticism or contempt or even defensiveness is so overwhelming and so sudden that it leaves you shell-shocked.” Gottman contends that many people reply to stonewalling by distancing themselves from the relationship or stonewalling.

*Fourth Sign: Body Language.* Gottman states that the physiological changes that accompany flooding such as an increased heart rate and an elevation in adrenalin and blood pressure are predictors of divorce since they render further discussion impossible. A problem-solving attitude is destroyed and problems continue to fester without any opportunity for resolution. I recall a man who seemed to have trouble catching his breath in my office as his wife recounted a litany of his failings as a husband. Before I could say anything, the husband got up and left the office, stating he would return in a little while, that he needed some fresh air. He returned several minutes later after “catching his breath,” something he said he often had to do when “my wife starts one of her barrages.” If you are literally gasping for air, you have little energy to engage in solutions to marital issues.

*Fifth Sign: Failed Repair Attempts.* Gottman identifies that the fifth sign that a marriage is likely to end in divorce is when one partner’s struggle to repair the conflict fails. In happy marriages repair efforts, whether expressed through a smile or humor or an apology (or perhaps even an apologetic greeting card), are successful in easing the tension and promoting a resolution of the conflict. This is not the case with rocky marriages when one of the partners becomes flooded with emotion and disengages from the discussion or is unable to perceive the repair efforts as genuine.

I must acknowledge that I have reservations about Gottman’s assertion that he can make his predictions of marital failure with such a high rate of accuracy after observing couples for just a few minutes. I also believe the dynamics of marriage are more complex than can be neatly captured in these five signs, but certainly the presence of these five behaviors are indicative of problems in the marriage and do not bode well for the future stability of the partnership.

As you can surmise from the clinical examples I offered, when I have conducted marital therapy I have witnessed these dysfunctional communication patterns. However, it is important to emphasize that on many occasions I have also witnessed couples grapple with and improve their usual style of interacting with each other. One might argue that these couples were at least willing to enter marital therapy (often one partner with greater motivation initially than the other). Obviously, if one or both members of

the couple refuse to seek help, the negative scripts of the marriage will continue, with divorce being a likely outcome.

**Principles for Successful Marriages: To Be Continued**

As noted earlier, Gottman in his book *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* advocates certain practices that contribute to more successful marriages and partnerships. I will review these in next month's article, providing some of my own insights. But lest I forget, it is time for me to fill out the non-apologetic birthday card I bought for Marilyn.

And until next month, let me wish Marilyn a very happy birthday from a very grateful husband.

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