

Marriage & Divorce

THE NEW

COMMUNIST THREAT

Helping the one you love vs. Enabling their dysfunction

BY GLENN CAMPBELL

There are two universal concepts expressed in nearly all wedding ceremonies: “Til Death Do You Part,” and “In Sickness And In Health.”

The theory sounds good. You're going to support each other through thick and thin, with no escape route. When one of you faces a misfortune, like illness or job loss, the other is going to support them selflessly. You're going to pool your resources and divide up your labor, without any strict accounting of who contributes what. By doing so, you will both lead better lives

This is similar to another once-popular concept: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”—i.e. the Communist Manifesto.

Great theory; it just doesn't happen to work in real life.

The fact is, when people are unconditionally protected, they tend to get lazy. When the rewards and consequences of one's behavior are distributed across a group, the individual feels less responsible and has less incentive for change. This is as true for two-person communistic systems as it was for the Soviet Union.

It's always nice to have an insurance policy, which is what marriage seems to be. When you get sick, you want someone to be there to protect you. The trouble is, when such a policy is in place and the rules of its application are weak, it is going to be taken advantage of. People will use the policy to avoid dealing with their own problems.

What happens, for example, when the illness is alcoholism? When you are married to an alcoholic, it is virtually impossible to avoid enabling him. Because your fate is entwined with his, you're going to pick him up before he falls too far, so he never has to deal with the full consequences of his actions.

It's an unpleasant fact of life: Financially entwined spouses cannot cure the addictions of their partners, simply because they don't have the realistic power to withdraw. That, in fact, is the only effective way to treat addiction: “When you drink, I will leave.”

The bad news is, we all have our addictions. There's the obvious ones like drugs and alcohol, but most addictions are much more subtle and don't become obvious until you are living with someone.

Given unlimited protection, virtually everyone—including you and I—is bound to lapse into dysfunctional modes of behavior that, if nothing else, waste huge amounts of time and money. There's the typical male with his sports affliction and the typical female with her unhealthy obsession with interior decorating. Such “hobbies” (i.e. addictions) can easily absorb whatever resources are available.

More importantly, each of us has our own personality defects. We have our deluded and self-serving theories about who we are and how the world works, and these dysfunctional patterns can't be changed by words, only by unprotected interaction with the real world.

If we are single and facing the world alone, we learn very quickly which theories don't work, because reality slams us hard. When we are part of a communistic system, we are protected from these consequences, so our dysfunction is allowed to continue.

That's not to say you shouldn't be close to someone or help them in time of need, but the protection has to be discretionary, not mandatory. You, the protector, have to make a conscious and informed choice about whether your protection will be truly supportive vs. destructively enabling.

I'm not arguing against love, mind you, or even lifelong bonding, if that's the way things turn out. What's wrong is an indiscriminate financial merger and a prior contract saying: “I will always love you regardless of what happens.”

That's an invitation to dysfunction.

—G.C.