

Intimate Relationships and Intercultural Marriages

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“People think marriage is about happiness,
but it is not... it’s about transformation.”

Joseph Campbell

Nowhere is the challenge of relating more practically confronting than in the every day lives of people attempting to live as couples. The intimate relationships become very often a mirror in which we see ourselves. It reveals our hidden places, our fears, it shakes and shapes our identities and many times it demands nothing less than the letting go of something we thought we wanted or the very idea of who we were.

There is nowhere a training for the complex art of relating. People go on trainings to become teachers, doctors, business men and women, telephone operators, hairdressers, but there is nowhere to go to learn about the fascinating, confusing and complicated art of living together. We were rarely told our relationships need work! And if we focus on the wedding, rather than the marriage, we may end up disappointed, frustrated, blameful or even deserted.

The interesting thing is that we all seem to have this capacity to attract people who mirror exactly what is going on inside us, our life stories, our conflicts, our unfinished business and so on. Therefore I believe that relationships have the potential to become a guide for self discovery and growth. Take intercultural marriage, for instance. When someone marries someone from another country, that not the one he/she comes from, who maybe speaks another language, who comes from a different culture and so forth, what does that mean in people’s lives? Whose language is the “couple’s language”? In whose country do they choose to settle down? What does that say about each partner’s inner needs? What are they truly looking for in themselves?

When people fall in love they initially are totally attracted to the other person. More often than not the other represents and brings experiences/aspects that one doesn’t have. So they “need” each other to feel whole, complete. Lovers enjoy that. The other person is a teacher, a guru even! But then, with the difficult situations, when the honeymoon is over and both people go back to their “familiar ways of being”, then they start to get frustrated with the differences. The very same things which attracted them in the beginning become the target of criticisms. The other does it different and it is not any longer the “wise way” but the “wrong way” of doing things. And partners start trying to change each other rather than trying to learn about what their relationship is mirroring. Who hasn’t gone through that sort of experience? Another typical situation happens on the sexual scenario. One usually needs emotional closeness to feel good with sexual contact whilst the other seems to need good sexual contact in order to feel close emotionally. At the end of the day they both might be wanting the same thing: to be in a loving and intimate relationship as they are. However, because that is not always possible they might end up not having sex at all. At this point couples feel as if they got lost in the dark. The relationship seems to have taken its own independent life. It becomes a creature with a will of its own. But a creature which if listened to, and carefully nurtured, has the potential to become a guide in the darkness.

People in intercultural marriages have a lot to contend with. They not only deal with individual differences but with archetypical cultural differences which go far beyond one person's capacity to handle. I wonder if these people, in their struggle to make their relationships work, are not only halting the war between individuals but contributing to the world peace! The famous "all you need is love" at times is not enough, work needs to be done. And if we have the courage and compassion for the task we can find ourselves renewed!