

# Nurturing the *other* intimacies

*Intimacy -- in all its many forms -- can transform your marriage, if you are willing to fully unleash it.*

By Charles Qualls

Billy Bob Thornton and Angelina Jolie wore vials of each other's blood as pendants dangling from necklaces. Their marriage didn't make it.

Teenagers get T-shirts printed with the name of this week's love. Tattoo parlors have never been more popular -- first for imprinting and later for removing those testimonies to undying love.

Although overt symbols of enduring love are common in society, real intimacy is in short supply today. It's a rarity to find a married couple who seem to have their act together -- the ones who seem to know what each other is thinking, who communicate in wordless sentences. They are also the ones whose closeness can annoy the rest of us who are less adjusted.

Intimacy is a concept our culture tends to short-change, reducing it to mere sexual expression. But intimacy -- in all its many forms -- has meaning that can transform your marriage if you are willing to fully unleash it. With a little attention to each other, and a desire to grow toward a mature relationship, couples can become more connected than they ever dreamed.

Michael was a husband who made a startling discovery. After several years of marriage, he sent his wife a greeting card that told how she had emerged as his best friend. For the first years of their dating and marriage, he had envisioned her as being many things -- wife and mother were primary. Having grown up without many friends, the role of friend for his wife had not occurred to him. The card described several ways in which he had found her to be the surprise friend he had always needed.

Otis Andrews is a family-life counselor in Macon, Ga. His wife, Deigie, is his partner in an avocation that has seen them travel far and wide. They spend several weekends a year leading marriage enrichment retreats. As early leaders in the Christian marriage movement, the Andrewses have seen their disciples come back year after year.

The Andrewses draw lessons from their own decades of marriage. One of the more colorful stories occurred early in their marriage. Otis confesses that he had fallen into a sloppy pattern of listening. More and more, Deigie fought to make eye contact when his attention was elsewhere. One day, she stood in the doorway between the kitchen and den, catching him up on a subject she found interesting. For at least ten minutes, they bantered back and forth. Mostly, Deigie led the chat. Finally, she said, "Otis, look at me!" As his head turned, he saw that Deigie had been standing there without a stitch of clothing on.

A healthy marriage features intimacy at its core. While some partners bring a great deal of relational ability to the table, most marriages find health only after a lot of work. Some couples never arrive, drifting off into self-need and individuality.

The concept of intimacy is broader than most of us have been trained to think. The Andrewses realize that we function in several areas of intimacy within marriage. An enriched relationship will find health in these areas. For some of this intimacy, we work hard. In other cases, we look back and celebrate what has developed along the way.

Here are six types of intimacy found in healthy marriages, as described by the

Andrewses. Consider the breadth represented by these areas, each vital to marriage. Celebrate those that are your strengths. Be honest where you are challenged.

### **Emotional intimacy**

When you feel close emotionally with your spouse, there is freedom to risk. You feel safety and permission to be yourself. Your partner meets your emotional needs in a healthy way and within acceptable boundaries. You sense that both of you are often experiencing the same thing, whether it be positive or negative. The risk/reward equation permits you to be vulnerable with your partner about feelings, thoughts and emotions.

### **Sexual intimacy**

Younger couples may have sex more frequently than do older couples. But couples who have been together longer often have more to express. This evolves from what they've learned about how to communicate physically. There is a sensitivity that can develop and a "language" forged that is uniquely theirs. The fun part is that occasionally a new dialect develops!

### **Intellectual intimacy**

You feel understood and respected whether you agree or disagree on a given issue. In a healthy relationship, the competition for intellectual "superiority" has been given over to an appreciation for each other's strengths. There is permission to muse, spar and process on a range of topics. There is less desire to "win" in discussions or decision-making and more of a desire to enjoy each other's minds and abilities. There is permission to branch off into individual areas of interest, but also a common place in the relationship where individual endeavors can be shared.

### **Work intimacy**

Work intimacy lets you draw enrichment from doing projects together. Work around the house, volunteering or serving at church together are just a few examples. Sometimes a couple may be able to make a living working together, although this arrangement can test a partnership. A healthy relationship does not require that work be done together, but working together can help a couple discover more about themselves. Values are expressed in work. Work accomplishes a shared goal, and that is satisfying in itself. And it provides an arena where the couple can exercise its "muscles" of cooperation and resourcefulness.

### **Crisis intimacy**

Every marriage encounters crisis at some point -- it's not if but when. Crisis will draw you closer together or pull you apart. It will magnify both relational strengths and weaknesses. Crises handled well will help a couple develop positive crisis intimacy. How a crisis is handled may shed light on how future situations will be handled, even if the circumstances differ. Take care to keep a big-picture perspective when under pressure.

### **Spiritual intimacy**

Spiritual intimacy can develop from individual or joint searches for God and sometimes can transcend words. Like intellectual intimacy, spiritual intimacy does not require agreement on all matters. But couples who find themselves differing greatly will find the negotiation of boundaries to be complicated. There must be some unity within this diversity in order for couples to find positive spiritual intimacy.

### **Bonus: Intimacy and “We-ness”**

The Andrewses have a term they use for a couple that achieves intimacy on several levels -- "we-ness." The term refers to a couple that sees themselves as unified and fulfilled. It is less a goal than it is an outcome.

"We-ness acknowledges and celebrates the distinction between what intimates share and others do not," say Otis and Deigie in their book, *Husbands and Wives: The Best of Friends*.

Signs of having arrived at we-ness will vary from couple to couple, the Andrewses say. It encompasses all of the areas of intimacy mentioned above.

Some couples try to develop we-ness by force. Perhaps they dress alike, spend most of their waking moments together, or use pet phrases in normal conversation to remind each other how much they are in love. They might giggle when they find themselves finishing each other's sentences. None of these practices are necessarily bad. But they aren't signs of we-ness either. We-ness

develops over time. It is more like finding yourself ready for a math test than memorizing for a history exam. It emerges from who you have become together. Don't strive for it. But celebrate when you have it.

Achieving the six types of intimacy won't place a force shield around your relationship. Even healthy couples experience challenges during marriage. And there is no checklist to ensure a perfect marriage. But intimacy at many levels can make the average days more enjoyable and the difficult days more manageable.

Some couples find these goals worth working toward. Others decide to follow a less labor-intensive course. One thing is sure: Inattention and hope alone won't get you where you want to be in your life together. What will see you through is investment in each other, grounded in the commitment to build a lasting partnership.

Go ahead. Speak freely the languages of intimacy in your marriage.

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