

Unwillingness To Move On Can Be Roadblock To Intimacy

“Yesterday . . . Love was such an easy game to play. Now I need a place to hide away. Oh, I believe in yesterday.” — The Beatles



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Do you long for yesterday? Do you find yourself looking in the rearview mirror of life too often? Are you afraid of change? If so, you're not alone.

Change is our constant companion. From the moment we say goodbye to our imaginary childhood playmates or sadly discover there's no

tooth fairy, we learn that we can never go back.

I've always been interested in the nature of change. When I was about 9 years old, my first science fair project was a clay model of the metamorphosis of a butterfly in all of its phases — egg, larva, pupa and adult. I guess it was a pretty boring project because not too many people (except my family) stopped by to view it. The kids with more exciting experiments — like erupting volcanoes or gadgets that lit up and spouted smoke — got the larger audiences.

But I was fascinated nonetheless by the inexplicable magic that could

transform a creepy little worm-like creature into a majestic butterfly. I marveled at how the larva knew when to spin its cocoon and that some larva actually delayed moving to the chrysalis stage — as if it was hesitant to make its near-terminal transition.

Even though we know that change is inevitable, it isn't easy. I look at the autumn leaves that refuse to fall. Similarly, we often hold on to the way things used to be, reluctant to look at how things are. Ignoring an occasional inner voice inquiring, “Is this all there is?” we forge ahead on our predictable paths.

Jason is someone struggling with change and has come to an important realization. At 54, he has all the money he'll ever need. As a successful entrepreneur of a major IT company, he earned a seven-figure income before he was 35. But Jason isn't happy — far from it. Divorced three times and alone again, he wonders why he can't get the intimate part of his life right.

“The worst thing of all,” he tells me, “is to be lonely when you're not alone.”

What Jason doesn't know is how he contributes to his loneliness. He's a wonderful giver — of things — but has difficulty giving of himself. “If I don't learn to change something about myself,” he says with determination, “I'm afraid I'll never find intimacy.”

Otis and Gail are also afraid they have

lost their intimacy. It was literally love at first sight from their first random meeting at the university library more than 20 years ago. They were second-year medical students. Otis spied Gail, asked her for a cup of coffee, and it was pretty much a done deal. They knew they were meant for one another. They had everything in common, and there was never a dull moment.

After they completed their residencies, they were married and got busy with their careers, babies, houses, etc. Like so many couples, they didn't notice the distance that gradually crept between them.

Now they tell me that they're partners in parallel lives — sitting in the same room, sharing sexless silence. When they do have perfunctory sex, they're just going through the motions. They know that they're at a critical crossroad. Nearly 43, they both want something more.

As a sex therapist, I see couples with a wide range of sexual symptoms that stem from intimacy deficiencies. Because improving intimacy involves more than following a lock-step formula, they try new positions, toys and other things in vain — only to find that they're not filling the critical space — their heart connection.

For some, being physically naked is easier than being emotionally naked. For others, baring body and soul are

equally challenging.

I think one of the more destructive myths we promulgate about marital bliss is that the intense “oneness” of our wedding day will continue to flourish forever — naturally. Maybe it is all the times we hear “and they lived happily ever after” as we're growing up. I'm not sure. But I do know that most couples are unprepared to face the work of maintaining a long-term intimate commitment because they have no idea what this work entails.

When their fantasized marital “promise” doesn't automatically materialize, they may assume the problem is with their partner, only to discover that they take the problem with them into their next relationship.

The unfolding of intimacy isn't unlike the metamorphosis of a butterfly. As we progress from one stage to the next, the emergence of something magnificent is partly due to sharing one's life experiences and partly due to a “readiness” to move on, a decision to leave the safety and protection of our career-driven cocoons, risk vulnerability and rejection and courageously reach out to the one we love.

Many couples claim they are desperate to be closer, as they unintentionally collude in avoiding intimacy. They wish to be known but fear being hurt. This “need-fear dilemma” plays itself out consciously and

unconsciously. Instead of risking spontaneity and emotional exposure, couples often choose familiarity and routine — sacrificing intimacy in the process.

So, if you're in a relationship where you feel lonely and long for the good old days, think back to when you first fell in love. Remember the way you felt about one other during the best of times. Think back to those endless talks into the night or when you thanked your lucky stars for finding your special someone. Recall these times not to mourn them or blame one another for their absence but to nurture your intimacy with renewed enthusiasm.

“Everything must change . . . No one stays the same . . . the young become the old, and mysteries unfold, cause that's the way of time . . .” — Bernard Ighner

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