But, in the circumstances, anything save a happy ending would be impolite, just as it would be churlish in real life to mention to a bride and groom how marriages actually turn out.

—Bentley, 1967, p. 334

Marriage is when families exchange hostages.

—Carl Whitaker

CHAPTER 8

Marital Work

When two are talking, there are always many other people in the room. The two see only each other's faces. Only gradually do these others make themselves felt. As over the shoulder, at the elbow, finally getting in between the two with hands on hips.

The couple courting know little of this takeover to come, as sharing of self-delight dispels these Montagues and Capulets, who will make their claims later. Bright light knows only its own warmth. So long as pleasures are mutual, little is known of the trouble to come. And naturally, courting is about mutual pleasures becoming more widely and deeply known.

Trouble enters between the two when the pleasure of one is the distress of the other. As when the couple runs into an old intimate of hers she is delighted to catch up with, while he is passed over as if he no longer existed. As when they leave their moorings to take up in a new port, where he has many work pals and she is irrelevant. As when she likes gabbing with neighbors, which seems pointless to him. As he gets deep into philosophy, which

makes her feel stupid. As she confesses daily to her priest, while he gets none of her vulnerability. As he is thirty-six hours in a row at the hospital, while she is lonesome. As she is in love with her newborn, while he is ordinary. As he stays near his parents and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles, while hers are across the continent. As she worries continually about her family, while passing his day over with “uh-huh.”

Any pleasure, person, society, idea, religion, politics, line of work, child or relative becomes perverse (Haley, 1966) for the couple, when one delights in it while the other hurts from it. The partners are set against each other. The shear on the pair from so many perverse thirds is apt to tear them apart.

Now the husband could say: “You like seeing this old intimate, but I do not like listening to the two of you at all. What shall we do?” Such simple operative phrases! But they are decisive. This is the very center of the defense of marriages that stay in the sharing of self-delight.

But no. Do they do this? They do what their parents did. Soon a simple perverse third is compounded into a huge rift. He is hurt by her delight in her old intimate. But he is also helpless for an hour. As soon as they drive away together from this rival, he begins his merciless shouting about her insensitivity. This rends her to pieces.

You, reader, know by now this story of subservience which loses it later. You, reader, also know the other two stories of the field of power in which persons are lost in stupid parts. So, the husband could also have been so rude to his wife’s old intimate that he broke up their talk. So, the husband could have delayed notice of his hurt by politeness, correctness, and coldness.

If my wife and I are to last well, we had better find out how to set right what I tend to do that is awful in perverse situations and what she tends to do awful in perverse situations. I am apt to do what my mother or father would do. She is apt to do what her mother or father would do. Thus, the practices of each family for coping with perversity will be inflicted. She becomes a hostage to the practices of my family, I to hers (Carl Whitaker, personal communication). She will either tackle my doormat practice, or she will get it later. I will either tackle her worrying practice, or I will stop listening to her.

THE IMPASSES

Like any group formation (Yalom, 1975), the pair comes to dilemmas about the depth, width and range of their partnership, about their mutual territory. The first dilemma is whether to be in or out. The second is whether to be top or bottom. The third is whether to be near or far.

Many are caught oscillating over whether to be in or out. This week in, next week out. This week we are decent to each other, so it is bearable, while
next week we are mean, so it is unbearable. Then we return to our starting point.

There are many variations on this strange little loop of in or out. If one or both are continually cruel, by violence, by yelling or screaming, by drinking, and so forth, the marriage will teeter between the bearable and the unbearable. The teeter is apt to be stabilized (White, 1989) by refereeing relatives, children, friends, neighbors, clergy, doctors and family therapists. When it becomes unbearable, the referees halt it just enough for the pounded one to catch her breath and for the pounder to lay off just long enough for both to forget how it just was.

Many are past this dilemma, when they do not inflict unbearable hostilities or allow them to be inflicted. Yet they are caught oscillating about who is top and who is bottom. If you dominate me with your hurry to get to your work, I will dominate you back with my worry about the children. If you dominate me with your coldness in bed, I will dominate you with criticism of your mothering. If you dominate me by running down my housekeeping, I will dominate you by spending our money. And so forth. Again, this teeter is apt to be stabilized by refereeing relatives, children, friends, neighbors, clergy, doctors, and family therapists. When it becomes unbearable, the referees settle one of the scores. Then the other four hundred and forty-six scores start in again.

Many are past this dilemma and refrain from blaming and punishing each other for differing in perverse situations. They respect one liking, the other disliking, and decide what they are going to do to be fair to each of them. Yet they are caught oscillating about whether to be near or far. They are very near on a Saturday night, but very far for the next month with children, house, work, not to mention the news, sporting and cocktail parties. When the distance gets so lonely, various referees will arrange some scheme to get the couple out for a night. When the closeness gets profound, the spouses will rediscover their obligations to everything and everybody but themselves.²

**EMBEDDED IN FIELDS OF POWER**

The practices of a marriage can be more vigorous than the practices of the surrounding worlds. This is a duet with orchestra as accompaniment. The practices of the surrounding worlds are more likely to overwhelm the couple. These are orchestral variations with drowned out soloists.

In my middle west, middle-class, provincial capital of a town, there are but three kinds of collective music that come into my office driving mar-

². See Michael White (1984) for a discussion of stabilizers of the status quo, as well as for the first discussion I have found lucid on the three common impasses of marriage.
ried couples before them: lower-middle-class; middle-middle-class; upper-middle-class. The lower are heavily supervised, the middle much, and the upper little.3

Willy and Mrs. Loman

Willy gets one hundred orders a day. That's one every five minutes. And he smiles at every single one. When he gets home and attempts to slide unnoticed into his newspaper, he gets order number hundred and one from his tired wife. After all, Mrs. Loman has also taken one hundred orders herself already. Why should she get supper together all by her lonesome?

At order number one hundred and ten, Willy contains himself no longer and starts shouting for her to shut up. In tears, Mrs. Loman retreats to the bathroom to cry out the evening. Willy has five beers watching the tube until he passes out on the couch. Tomorrow is another day.

Tomorrow Mrs. Loman will leave. But in the morning the house looks pleasant and she will put it off. After five hundred of these episodes, Mrs. Loman calls me for help on the advice of her family doctor. I talk with her, later with Willy, for about a quarter of an hour. I ask her, What is the problem? What is her part in its continuing? What is it she prefers? I ask him the same.

So, she begins eloquently in our hour together saying she has got an enemy in Willy when she wants a friend. I say that yelling is indeed hostile. She cries. Willy has now raised two fingers of accusation pointing straight into his right temple.4

So, he is guilty as charged. "So," I say to Willy, "you don't like acting like her enemy, do you?" He pleads his case. "How else do I get her to shut up? She never lays off."

"Oh, so you are desperate," I say. He nods. "Helpless?" He nods. "You never get her to lay off?" He nods. "Really? I bet you have once. You put your foot down." So it turns out he has told Mrs. Loman where the line is—when she ran his parents down, when she mocked his company to the neighbors, when she rearranged his drawers. Willy has been firm before.

Together we draw up anti-disrespect plans. She prefers to tackle the dinner preparations first, for they are disastrous. He prefers to get a half-hour elsewhere, before he will come down to the kitchen at six sharp. That will be their rule. And what if he feels helpless and pushed around by her anyway? And what if she feels left with it all by him? Each plans to tell the other of his or her helplessness. She decides to make a large sign and keep it nearby in the kitchen in case of emergencies. It says, "Willy, I am feeling helpless to

3. See Fussell (1983) for a fuller discussion of the social classes in terms of the available freedom to do as one pleases at work.
4. Gustafson's sign, of course! (Gustafson, 1986, p. 129)
get your help. Prepare to get nagged!” Willy decides to make a large sign and keep it nearby in the living room where he keeps his newspapers. It says, “Sally, I am feeling helpless to get you off my case. Prepare yourself to get yelled at.”

They are quite triumphant two weeks later. No more scenes over dinner preparations! He was tempted several times. What he did instead was quite beautiful. He tore this Yelling Demon out of his ear, threw him on the carpet, stomped him, spit on him, and then punted him out the front door! She was tempted several times. What she did was also quite beautiful. She wrote him a note about what she needed his help with and put it in an envelope. The envelope said: “Please, Willy, do not open this envelope which says what I need your help with, UNTIL YOU ARE READY.” They had become friends.

Two Hostages to Property

Mr. and Mrs. Property go very fast, do very much, and barely know each other. Yet they are mostly civil and hardly ever think of leaving each other. They love their children, their house and their comfort. But the strain is building up. She is lonely. He is fed up. For they can decide nothing together.

He gets side trips on business where he can fish with pals. She gets the kids all weekend. So she has taken to buying dresses. So he has taken some night work to get more money. She has been letting the kids stay up later to keep her company on those nights. So he has been very annoyed trying to get them up in the morning. So he needs a vacation. But she hates fishing. And so forth.

She demands that they talk this over. He hates these talks because they never take action. So they try to talk. She runs on and on, until he loses his temper. Mrs. Talk and Mr. Action. She calls me to talk.

They come in and she begins to talk about the summer vacation. She is fed up with going to a cabin at a lake, for he will take off in the boat and leave her with the kids. After a quarter of an hour of her complaints, he is about ready to lose it again. It is my turn to make a difference.

I say to her, “What would you prefer in place of going to a cabin?” “Oh, a fine hotel would be lovely!” Naturally, he comes in here to comment on the expense! She is guilty, for she points a finger at her temple. My turn again.

I say to her, “He has a point about expense, hasn’t he? What are you

5. See Epston (1989c) for the use of such signs to buy time against temper in his “Temper Tantrum Parties.”

6. Among the blaming couples, watch out for improvements that are temporary. Often, it is possible to get the loud one to stop disqualifying him or herself by screaming, drinking, or hitting. The irony is that the quiet one is quite likely to land a long delayed body blow and finish off the marriage. There will be little you can do about it, except to keep from blaming yourself!
willing to give up to get your weekend at this fine hotel?” Well, she will lay off buying clothes. He grins at this. Indeed! But he still prefers fishing! “So,” I say to both of them, “do you prefer to do the hotel first or the fishing first?”

Well, they work it out, and then the three of us work out anti-punishment plans. As it is far less than an ideal world, they have too little time, too little money, too little help with their children. So I pose the problems of better and worse. What would they prefer to be better next? What are they willing to give up to get it? After all, you simply cannot add anything to a busy family without subtracting something else! They have been practicing unilateral addition, which imposes unilateral subtraction on the spouse: to wit, less time, less money, less help.

So they differ just as much as ever. But they decide as partners. She still thinks fishing is foolish, while he still thinks hotels are for the birds. But they laugh and work it out. The struggle for your way versus my way has become good natured.

Sinfonia Concertante

He looks formidable running his fortunate business, but actually he is very sensitive about his birthday. She looks formidable running their huge household, but actually she is very sensitive about her blunders. Two powerful persons who are too proud to say what they need will pull away into their own powerful domains. This distance can be half obscured by dinner parties and late work and house repairs and family reunions.

But how can a pair be in love with each other if each is not in love with him or herself? Only from self-delight would either have delight to share. But how can there be self-delight without slow time to savor what he saw or felt or did? Without quiet time to write her a note about it?

And how can spouses be in love when they get hurt by each other and cannot say so? How can he make it up to her if he didn't know how hurt she was?

And how can a pair be in love if the Haffenbecks coming to dinner is more important than their play together? They may pretend they are not home!

MALE AND FEMALE

Finally notice that Mr. Loman, Mr. Property, and Mr. Fortunate have an advantage over Mrs. Loman, Mrs. Property, and Mrs. Fortunate. The husbands battle in the hierarchy, while the wives take care of everything else in

7. See Connell (1965) for the Haffenbecks' Problem.
the home fort. Thus, the husbands come to think mostly of themselves, while the wives think of their husbands and their children, and their household and, if there is time left over, themselves (Miller, 1976).

The husbands tend to feel themselves hostages to their own careers. Because they are ill used in the hierarchy, they are entitled to their desserts when they come home. The wives tend to feel themselves hostages to making this up to the husbands who are taking crap out there to bring home the bacon. Thus, the husband tend to have two votes, while the wives have one guilty vote. The marriage is a reparation to the husband for his economic privilege.

As women arrange their own independent careers, there is weakening of the male privilege in the marriage (Gilligan, 1990), but it tends to linger as a familiar premise. Also, women tend to have careers less illustrious and less well paid, so they remain second class citizens. Also, men have had little training in thinking of anyone but themselves, and women have had plenty of training in suppressing their own voices (Gilligan, 1990).

All of these constraints can create a new story which is as miserable as the three old stories. Namely, this: The wife learns to object; the husband seems to comply, but he actually withdraws. So what has she actually gained? Objecting gets him to drag his feet. Not objecting lets him run on with privileging himself. She loses either way, because he becomes the dropout. With the threat of leaving her. So they both just distance. A stalemate.

Both feel themselves losers. And here is the impetus for an actual new story. For it is miserable for her not to be able to object or ask for something or get interest in herself. For it is miserable for him to have her drop out on being interested in him. For it is miserable for both to be so little for each other as in the impersonal world where you play along as a member or object and become a singleton (Turquet, 1975). They are merely playing along with each other, while becoming lonely singletons.

The actual new story depends upon both being direct. Essentially, both must say, this is what I prize from you, and this is what I hate. This gives each a chance to please profoundly and to be matter of fact about what is hateful as it happens, so it can be a lesson about doing better next time.8 Naturally, this success will also depend on the wit to watch for slipping back into the old punishing, dominating and distancing we began our discussion with. Those old demons.

8. What limits this discourse which privileges the marital conversation? Any other discourse, such as career discourse which pervades some households, or gossip discourse, or sports discourse, or extended family discourse, or children discourse (Ruth Gustafson, personal communication). Either spouse being caught up in such discourses can be perverse for the marital discourse. Or it can be mutual. As Hesse (1943) shows in *Magister Ludi*, corporate discourse alienates a person from himself. A person alienated from himself will not be there for marital conversation.
THE SUBJECT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY NOVEL IS MARRIAGE

When I came back to this chapter months after its conclusion, I was dissatisfied with the appearance it left of the ease of marital work and of marriage itself. I had fallen in writing it into the facile convention of the field of marital therapy, as if achieving intimacy in marriage was as easy as overcoming bedwetting. George Eliot (1990) called this writing the prose of “mind-and-millinery”:

Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb contralto and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph and reads the Bible in the original tongues . . . etc.

How about calling this prose “mind-and-millenary”? Or “mind and the millenium”? There is no field as perverted as marital therapy by the hyperbolic, unless it is family therapy conducted by the same geniuses.

If I do stand by my argument that the great problem of marriage is perversity of interests, if I do believe that this perversity is driven by the old plots of the families of origin and the new forces of the hierarchical society and its anxious contests, if I do think that the consequent and great blaming maneuvers can often be controlled, if I do think that the consequent and great dominating maneuvers can often be given up for mutual justice, if I do think a couple then has at least a chance of becoming fast friends, then I do not say the delight of intimacy is often sustained.

Look at Rose’s (1984) appraisal of five famous Victorian couples for an adequate account of the subject of intimacy in marriage:

. . . what came to interest me more was the way in which every marriage was a narrative construct—or two narrative constructs. In unhappy marriages, for example, I see two versions of reality rather than two people in conflict. I see a struggle for imaginative dominance going on. . . . Marriages go bad . . . when this understanding about the balance of power breaks down, when the weaker member feels exploited or the stronger feels unrewarded for his or her strength. (p. 7)

Now, Rose would not disagree with my use of three crude plots for my three examples of marital impasse:

The plots we choose to impose on our own lives are limited and limiting. And in no area are they so banal and sterile as in this of love and marriage. . . . And because the callowness and conventionality of the plots we impose on ourselves are a betrayal of our inner richness and complexity, we feel
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anxious and unhappy. We may turn to therapy for help, but the plots it evokes, if done less than expertly, are also limiting. Easy stories drive out hard ones. (pp. 8–9)

And Rose sees the tradition of patriarchal power as selecting the few available crude plots:

... a man works hard to make himself worthy of a woman; they marry; he heads the family; she serves him, working to please and care for him, getting protection in return. This plot regularly generates its opposite, the plot of female power through weakness: the woman, somehow wounded by family life, needs to be cared for and requires an offering of guilt. ... The suffering female demanding care has often proved stronger than the conquering male deserving care ... but neither side of the patriarchal paradigm seems to bring out the best in humanity. In regard to marriage, we need more and more complex plots. (p. 9)

As John Stuart Mill (Rose, 1984) suggested, marriage is a little state. Insofar as the little state has an upper and lower class, there will be the crude stories of injustice which are my first two impasses or what I would now like to call “impasses of power.”

Most marriages, I think, do not open up for long or very often even to the possibility of getting through the third impasse, of intimacy. Like the Carlyles or the Ruskins or the Dickenses, the men become increasingly privileged and the women increasingly lacking in confidence until they become sick. Or the reverse happens, as with the Mills, where the wife reigns and the husband is servile.

Only equality in the little state of marriage gives even the chance of sustained intimacy. This is but a precondition. Both must also be capable of passion, neither lost in the grip of the usual stories of power I have discussed for individuals: subservience, delay, and overpowering. For you surely get in the marriage your partner’s reiterations.

Finally, you need more than the absence of the distortions. You need the bond of shared passion and the readiness of both to turn away all intruders dangerous (perverse) to the partnership. One such complicated plot (told by Rose) was that of George Eliot and George Lewes. Both had made all the blunders of power I have mentioned in their previous relationships, yet they learned from them. They became allies. It actually helped them that they were not respectable, for they were spared the divisive (perverse) routines of London society. Yet they were not placeless like Anna Karenina and Vronsky (Tolstoy, 1875–7) who had to leave their city altogether. They stayed on the margin, and enjoyed the duty of looking after his children. Perhaps most important, they were devoted to each other’s writing, and to reading, so there was no lack of shared intensity.
This is but one of many possible complicated plots of happiness in marriage. Once a couple can navigate the two impasses of power, and the third of intimacy, there is a great deal of ocean left! I would like to supply a great guide to departing for these deep waters, but this will take another book to encompass the entire nineteenth century of the novel whose subject is just this, from Eliot and Hardy and Tolstoy, to Woolf and Forster.