

Keeping love from being undone

Pulsebeat
Volume 15, Number 4
April, 1981



"In relationships between men and women, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference," Dr. Layne Longfellow told a capacity crowd at a recent Community Forum sponsored by the Good Samaritan League. That indifference, he said, stems from years of "not having the real argument"—relying on your partner or spouse to understand your unspoken expectations and never actually asking for what you need emotionally.

Dr. Longfellow, a psychologist and internationally known consultant in the behavioral sciences, was at the hospital for a follow-up lecture on Strategies for Survival in the '80s after a sell-out presentation last year on dealing with stress and mid-life crisis. He was invited back to offer insights on "How the Sexes Can Stay Healthy, Wealthy and Sane Together."

The strategy he proposed for healthy coexistence between the sexes is understanding the "rules" we accepted during childhood for proper male-female behavior, recognizing that those rules have changed, and finding a proper balance between the old and the new.

We all have notions of what men and women are, he said, notions that are formed early on and reinforced through society and the media. And there are definite periods during a child's psychological development when boys and girls go their separate ways and develop different competencies according to what society considers acceptable.

In early childhood the primary "tasks of life" are the same for boys and girls. In the first year an infant learns to trust (or not trust) the world, determining the degree to which he or she can be intimate with others. Around the age of two, toddlers begin working on autonomy, the ability to be independent and self-sufficient. It's a critical period, Dr. Longfellow said, because the encouragement or discouragement a child receives from his parents can make the difference between becoming an adult who is clinging and unable to be separate from his spouse, or one who can achieve the interdependence necessary to a healthy marriage: the ability to function self-sufficiently while still being comfortable with the need we all have for emotional dependency.

By the time children are school-age, they have entered a period of "industry," when boys and girls go their separate ways and attempt to master the tasks society has assigned them—for boys, developing the skills to compete in the world of work, for girls, developing an ability to be intimate and nurturing. During adolescence boys and girls are drawn back together and cement the identities they will live with until mid-life transition around the age of 40. In fact, Dr. Longfellow said, mid-life crisis is in large part a letting go of the identity one forms while a teenager.

Many people, he said, spend their entire lives living up to or living down the image they had in high school—and that creates problems, since generally what lends status to an adolescent is not what lends status to an adult, particularly in these days of changing sexual roles.

We need to understand the rules society sets for men and women—and change them to protect our emotional well-being

Men who devote their early adult lives to "making it" (achieving status and success) at the expense of their personal lives may enter "middlescence" regretting the lack of intimacy in their personal relationships. Conversely, women who have concentrated on home and family may find they have satisfying personal lives and have developed many competencies, but not the ones that are granted status and respect. They both discover that they've spent their lives following different paths, and when priorities are reordered, those paths cross as they "meet each other going in the opposite direction."