

ROUNDWRAPAROUND

A Pressure Cooker Built for Two

I keep index cards with the addresses of friends. When a couple we know splits up, a regular little ritual becomes necessary—tearing up one card and writing out two in its place. I seem to be doing that a lot lately. Sometimes it feels as though Muriel and I are the last ducks in the shooting gallery.

It's common to assume that our marriage and family system has grown so fragile because we put too little into it. My feeling is just the opposite: that our mating customs are being mangled not by too little attention, but by too much.

For most of us in city and suburb, spouse and children are our only intimate companions. Without kin, neighbors, or friends to call community, we try to find community in our marriage alone. The institution wasn't meant for this and can't take the strain.

In their original form, marriage and family were part of a multiple network. Parents and children belonged not only to each other, but also to relatives, tribe members, and friends.

As extended families shriveled and friends got transferred, the nuclear or two-parent family became the only community to which most of us belong.

The family wasn't meant to be our only source of warmth, and it suffers when it is. A sociologist, Karen Renne, once studied dissatisfaction in marriage and found that couples with few outside friends were much more likely to be frustrated with each other. On the other hand, those who reported several close friends and/or relatives reported being more happily married.

And the process is self-feeding, reports Ms. Renne: a bad marriage increases social isolation; more social isolation makes a bad marriage worse.

Some of us, especially those who move around a lot, have little alternative to seeking a sense of community only at home. The certainty of parting makes close friendship outside marriage too tenuous, too painful when it inevitably ends.

But whatever practical reasons there may be for avoiding community outside the home, I think more of us are held back by simple fear, and jealousy. If

"For there is only misfortune in not being loved; there is misery in not loving." —Albert Camus (1913-1960)

my mate can find intimacy outside our home, what will he/she need me for?

I'm not talking about an affair but simply of close friendship. One member of a couple having an intimate friend not shared by the other, even a friend of the same sex, can make the marital bond tremble.

Having been separated myself and having lived through so many ruptured marriages with others, I'm always struck by how many friends a newly separated person finds.

When Muriel is here to keep me company, to share my pleasure and pain, I have little need to expose myself to others, to let them in on who I am, to make them my intimate friends. It's only when Muriel's not around that I'm forced onto others, forced to let them know I need them. Then I have a larger community.

But so long as our marriage stays on an even keel, my friendships stay more superficial, because I'm lazy about seeking intimacy away from home, and scared of it.

And I wonder: does my very closeness with Muriel, the fact that our main community is with each other, mean eventually we'll blow apart from the pressure?

—Ralph Keyes
Ralph Keyes is the author of We, the Lonely People: Searching for Community.

SOURCES

We Can Have Better Marriages, by David and Vera Mace (Abingdon Press, \$5.95).

David and Vera Mace, who have been married for forty years, are professionals in the field of marriage counseling and founders of a new organization called Association of Couples for Marriage Enrichment, Inc. (Information on how to join ACME and why you may want to is available in the book, or you can write to the Maces at the Behavioral Sciences Center, Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27103.) This, the latest of their books, makes an intelligent and appealing guide to modern marriage at its best.