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The Joy of Abstinence?

Louis P. and Sue Ann LaBarber

IN OUR capacity as workshop leaders with various groups of NFP users, we have spoken at length on such topics as "Coping With Abstinence." Invariably, this workshop draws considerable numbers of participants who, if attendance is in any way a reliable indicator, are experiencing some degree of difficulty coping with periodic abstinence. To begin with, we generally pose the following question: "How many of you would have been attracted to this workshop had we titled it 'The Joy of Abstinence'?" We are usually greeted with a few hands, several snickers, and nervous laughter among the couples. The message is loud and clear. From their current frame of reference, there are few things pleasant about abstinence. Publicly, couples can joke about it. Privately, their interactions around the issue of abstinence are ostensibly more serious, accounting for their attendance at a workshop of this nature.

What's in a Word?

In their efforts to portray the positive effects of abstinence on marriage, NFP educators have relied heavily on euphemisms

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(for example, "abstinence makes the heart grow fonder," etc.) and on what family therapists refer to as the "reframe."¹⁻³ The reframe is a therapeutic technique designed to alter one's perception of a given reality; it is predicated upon a simple notion that the way one thinks influences the way one feels. Consider the following illustration:

Two thirsty travelers stumble upon two containers that are half-filled with water. One individual, with a tone of disappointment in his voice, exclaims "This glass is half empty." The other, breathing a sigh of relief, states "This glass is half full." Assuming both drink their respective containers of water, whose thirst is not likely to be quenched?

In the above example, two individuals perceive the same reality quite differently. One is fraught with despair and longing—the other with joy and relief.

Psychotherapists, appreciating the power and diversity of perceptions, have recognized that the way to change feelings and behaviors is to alter the way one thinks. What a client may label as passivity, for example, may be reframed by the therapist as "persistence" or "endurance in the face of adversity." Hence, a client's negative self-perception is challenged by an alternate set of explanations with healthier consequences for that individual. When "passivity" is converted to "strength and endurance," an entirely different feeling accompanies this shift in thinking.

To further illustrate, consider the distinction between genital and sexual forms of expression as articulated by Hilgers et al. (1982) and Joyce (1981).^{4,5} The definitions put forth by these authors are clearly intended to change the reader's attitudes and perceptions. This practice constitutes a reframe, since the authors' definitions are not typically ascribed to these terms as they are colloquially employed and understood. Most people view sexual and genital forms of expression synonymously. In view of this reality, the authors cited above are attempting to change the way one traditionally thinks about "sexuality" by enlarging its scope and focus.

Before proceeding any further with this discussion, a critical

question should be raised regarding the efficacy of reframing as it affects the attitudes and behaviors of NFP teachers and users. More specifically, can reframing alter user perceptions of periodic abstinence? If so, how does one go about this process?

In many ways, reframing is effectively utilized by NFP teachers when they employ a selective vocabulary to convey attitudes with healthier consequences for the couple. In lieu of abstinence, for example, couples are instructed to "avoid genital contact on days of fertility if it is your intention to avoid pregnancy" (see Hilgers et al., p. 7, for further illustration). This choice of words metaphorically conveys behavior prescriptions on several different levels. First of all, without stating it explicitly, the act of intercourse is reconnected with the possibility of pregnancy. This connection can exert a powerful influence on our behavior if foremost in our minds. Secondly, couples are challenged to clarify their intentions on any given day and are summoned to act in accordance with them. If stated overtly, these messages might be greeted negatively and rebelliously. Covertly, they are potentially operating at all times, forcing the couple to be accountable for the choices they make. In and of itself, this form of metaphoric communication will not prevent all couples from engaging in genital activity on days of fertility. Some couples will abandon their methods of NFP and will employ barrier methods to prevent pregnancy. We maintain, however, that the cumulative impact of these messages can exert a profound impact on both attitude and behavior.

Since user attitudes regarding periodic abstinence constitute a "formidable opponent," they simply cannot be countered by means of metaphoric communication or euphemisms alone, as well intentioned as these techniques may be. According to La-Barber (1985),⁶ user perceptions of periodic abstinence "are a function of culturally ingrained, sex role stereotypes and sexual scripts that men and women have acquired via socialization." (p. 199) It is highly likely, therefore, that couples will resist attempts to alter their sexual scripts.

With any technique that one employs to change attitudes or

perceptions, the timing of this intervention becomes a critical variable in determining its relative success or failure. The introduction of a reframe, therefore, must be carefully planned and strategically offered at the right moment in time. In a way, family therapists liken this process to a therapeutic form of *ju jit su*. Martial arts enthusiasts will undoubtedly appreciate this analogy. *Ju jit su* enables a considerably smaller and weaker individual to manipulate a larger and more powerful foe by applying one basic principle: never greet resistance with resistance. By placing your hip in a strategic location at the proper time, you allow your opponent's own momentum to carry him forward.

Modifying Sexual Scripts

In our efforts to alter the negative connotations associated with abstinence, we employ metaphoric communication and attempt to avoid direct confrontation with couples whose sexual scripts may differ from our own. We proceed by engaging couples in a series of reflections on the extent to which they have been influenced by predominant themes and precepts of our culture. These points are summarized below for the reader's consideration and future use:

1. Most of us (meaning users of NFP) have been quite fortunate, in that we have accumulated relatively little experience "waiting" for the things we need. Police and fire protection, for example, are only moments away. Food is readily accessible. Gas and electric appliances render meals that are easy to prepare. Frozen foods and fast food restaurants are a short distance from our homes. The problem of distance has been ameliorated by transportation developments. The availability of "plastic money" has minimized sacrifice and shortened waiting periods considerably. How have we been affected by the characteristics of western culture cited above? (Participants are engaged in a brief discussion about the ever-diminishing virtues of patience, delayed gratification, and sacrifice. No direct associations are paired with periodic abstinence at this point in time, since we prefer that couples be allowed to arrive at this conclusion on their own. Our experi-

ence dictates that people offer less resistance to new ideas that are generated from within versus superimposed by persons in authority.)

2. We live in an era of immediate gratification and have accumulated relatively little experience having to do without the things we desire. We have evolved into an impatient society, grumbling over the amount of time our personal computer may take to process information which would have taken us ten times longer to complete by hand just a few short years ago. Even our tolerance for pain has declined over the years as our ability to relieve pain has improved. (At this point in time, we carefully survey the room, looking for guilt-ridden faces, affirmative nods of the head, and personal computer enthusiasts who may be mirrored in the statements cited above.)
3. We live in a society which has devoted extensive technological resources to the development of replacements or substitutes. Consequently, our coping strategies have taken the path of least resistance—shortcuts, if you will. Consider, for example, the artificial sweeteners and flavorings, diet sodas, low-cal desserts, salt substitutes, and non-dairy creamers we consume during the course of our daily lives. We demand loaner cars, hair pieces, and some of us even patronize suntanning salons during the winter months. What do the above examples say about our behavior and our values? (Participants are engaged in a small group discussion centered around the issue of “replacements and substitutes,” followed by further examples listed below.)

Although divorce rates in this nation are among the highest in the world (50%), the rate of remarriage is placed at 79%, blending some 18.5 million children into step-families.⁷ Further evidence of “replacements” include such modern inventions as surrogate mothers, surrogate sexual partners, artificial insemination, and in vitro fertilization. How many of us have been seduced by this need to replenish or substitute? What does this say about our value system? (Here, without direct reference, we are implicating NFP couples who employ barrier methods of contraception or engage in mutual masturbation

on days of fertility. In so doing, the couples are subtly challenged to examine their behavior.)

4. We are the products of a culture which often fails to distinguish between "wants" and "needs." How many times do we find ourselves prefacing our desires with the words "I need. . ."? I need a new purse . . . a vacation . . . a new car . . . etc. This word has pervaded our vocabulary and contaminated our thought processes to such an extent that we have truly come to believe such nonsense. How many times do we find ourselves rationalizing unnecessary purchases or decisions? (We generally ask participants to draw from their own experience and share personal examples of this "I need" mentality. Needless to say, we rarely suffer from any lack of examples. We are also informing NFP couples that there is a difference between desire and need with respect to sexual intercourse.)
5. As human beings, most of us fall prey to what we call the "paradox of desire." We tend to long for the things that we cannot have or that we have chosen to forego, be it certain food items, material possessions, social status, or sexual intercourse. On the other hand, our appetites become satiated rather quickly when the things we want are readily accessible, be it favorite food or sexual partner. (This paradox is further illustrated by talking about modern workshops for the sexually bored, or the onslaught of self-help literature devoted to adding spice and variety to an otherwise bland sex life. Is it not sad, we comment, that some of us resort to such resources in an effort to enhance our sexual relationship? At this point, we cite the noted columnist Erma Bombeck who is quoted as saying: "Sex was a lot more exciting when it was still in the gutter!" Indirectly, we are speaking to those couples whose sexual relationship is suffering from the pangs of boredom and ritual, suggesting that solutions to such problems do not lie solely in "creative acrobatics." We are implicating the lack of mystique and mutual enjoyment that results from overindulgence. We are also speaking to the futility of the solutions adopted by some couples who abandon NFP for the birth control pill,

hoping that increased availability and frequency will restore quality. Ironically, many of these couples did not observe periodic abstinence in the first place. They employed barrier methods or masturbated one another to orgasm on days of fertility. They now invest the birth control pill with magical powers to instill vitality in their sexual relationship.)

6. In addition to the "paradox of desire," we are also enticed by the "temptation of forbidden fruit." Many of us derive pleasure by doing something which has been prohibited, such as departing from a Lenten fast, adding salt to our food, cheating on a diet, or engaging in intercourse on a day of fertility. True, where there is disobedience, there is apt to be guilt—but as human experience dictates, "forbidden fruit" is surrounded by an aura of excitement and magnetism. For some of us, "KEEP OFF THE GRASS" is an invitation to trod all over the lawn. The "paradox of desire" and the "temptation of forbidden fruit" are illustrative of the many polarities we confront throughout the course of our lives. We cannot know pleasure without pain—nor joy without sadness—and perhaps most pertinent to this discussion of periodic abstinence, we cannot know sexual fulfillment without sexual longing. (At this point, couples are encouraged to reflect on the polarities cited above in terms of Robert Joyce's concept of a "master plan" for our sexuality.⁵ Joyce's depiction of a "sexual energy crisis" is a provocative and stimulating analogy which, in our experience, constitutes a powerful reframe of "sexuality" for the participants.)
7. We live in a culture where "gender differences" regarding sexuality can be learned. Some researchers believe that the differences we observe between men and women are culturally determined, not biologically rooted. We submit that gender differences regarding periodic abstinence are also learned. Consider the following statement by Gross (1978) as quoted by Rosen and Hall (1984):

For over a century, sex has generally been seen as more impor-

tant and enjoyable for men than for women. The belief that men have a stronger biological sex drive persists despite the lack of evidence to support it. (p. 24)

(We proceed by raising the following questions: Who does one expect to exhibit the greatest difficulty coping with periodic abstinence? Men or women? How might we look upon a man who appears to be experiencing little or no difficulty coping with abstinence? On the other hand, would we be surprised to learn that the female partner is having the greatest difficulty? If we examine ourselves in relation to the stereotypes depicted above, how much of our behavior in relation to periodic abstinence could be explained in terms of sexual roles and games that are culturally prescribed?)

8. Although we live in a society in which remarkable substitutes and replacements have been devised to ease our pain and suffering—to assure the uninterrupted pursuit of pleasure—the authors submit that there are no substitutes for marital intercourse on days of fertility within the confines of *Humanae Vitae*. Conjugal love, by design, was intended to be pleasurable and rewarding. In the wake of its absence, for whatever period of time they may be facing, couples will undoubtedly experience intense sexual longing for one another. To disrupt the relationship between sexual longing and sexual fulfillment would, in our opinion, constitute an endless search that is fraught with illusion and inevitable disappointment.

Conclusions

In reflecting on this problem, several things come to mind that we would like to share with our readers. Teachers of NFP, subject to the same cultural conditioning and sexual scripts as their clients, must first resolve their own ambivalence regarding periodic abstinence before attempting to assist others with this process. This ambivalence may manifest itself in many subtle forms, such as avoiding discussion about a couple's adjustment to NFP, or employing an apologetic tone when prescribing a temporary period of abstinence to facilitate learning and enhance user confidence in

the initial phase of instruction. Why do we feel this need to apologize? The reasons, although varied, are probably shaped by past experiences with couples who resist and complain. We can reflect on our own personal experience and empathize with a couple's negative reactions. There's a considerable difference, however, between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy involves a projective identification with the client's feeling and produces similar reactions in the teacher. Hence, complaints beget apologies. By the same token, many teachers feel and behave as though they are responsible for imposing new sanctions on the couple's sexual relationship and often feel compelled to prescribe "substitutes" or "replacements." In keeping with this need, they propose alternate forms of intimate exchanges (such as embracing, aesthetic outings, intense dialogue, prayer, etc. . . .) out of context as substitutes for genital forms of expression on days of fertility. Without question, alternate forms of intimacy such as those outlined by Hilgers et al. (1982) in their discussion of "S-P-I-C-E" (pp. 156-159), are vitally important to the sustenance of marriage. In our opinion, however, these ideas were not intended as "replacements." They reflect an attempt to place genital forms of communication in their proper context.

As though he were speaking directly to the issues at hand, Kahlil Gibran (1923)⁸ put it so eloquently when he said:

Your soul is oftentimes a battlefield, upon which your reason and your judgement wage war against your passion and your appetite. Would that I could be the peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and the rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody. But how shall I, unless you yourselves be also the peacemakers, nay the lovers of all your elements?

Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul. If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas. For reason, ruling alone, is a force confining; and passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction. Therefore let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection, and like the phoenix rise above its own ashes. (pp. 50-51).

As teachers and role models, we must not be seduced by this need to compensate. Rather, we must help foster a greater appreciation for the complex relationship between sexual fulfillment and sexual longing.

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