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Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

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Saturday Night and Sunday Morning

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MAGGIE SCARF

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning**

I've been writing on psychological topics since around 1968, when I sent my first article to the *Times*. I must say I was shocked when they published it because they never changed a word. I thought they were wonderful editors, because they didn't change a thing. That never happened to me again, but it was a great beginning. So for years I had been doing articles on various kinds of topics: sex hormones and behavior, fetal experimentation, psychiatry and the law, what is normality, sleep clinics, just everything. I was used to talking about these things when we would go out socially and so on. When I began to research and write on the topic of marriage, I discovered that this topic was charged with emotion. The strangest things would happen. People would say, "What are you working on." I'm writing on marriage. "Well, what point of view are you taking?" No matter what I said, everybody would get very excited very rapidly, and there would be lots of differences of opinion, and I quickly got to the point where I would say "Oh don't make me work, this is my evening out." The topic was super-charged.

One of the most ludicrous experiences I had was at a dinner at Jonathan Edwards College at Yale, where I teach. Somebody on my right said "What are you working on?" I said "A book on marriage." And someone on my left said to me "Well if you're writing on marriage, there's one thing you definitely must write on." Now this was a guy I'd never seen before in my life. And I said, "Well, what is it?" and he said "Well, it's really important and you can't leave it out of your book. It's vital." He got more and more excited. I said, "What is it?" and he said, "Well, competition between the partners. It's just extraordinary, it's just awful. And it's the most terrible thing that goes on between people." So I said "I certainly will write about competition between partners, and power struggles" and so on, and we talked

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for a little while. And then I said “Are you married?” and he said “No, I’m gay.”

Well, nothing that I’ve written about actually would not apply to any long-term committed relationship. What I’ve really talked about is how people put their relationships together. When we come into a relationship, what do we bring and what kinds of things tend to happen? Of course my book *Intimate Partners* is about marriage, which Voltaire described as the only adventure open to the cowardly. However, if he looked at our current divorce statistics, which have it that one in every two marriages will fail, I would think it would only be the adventure of the foolhardy and the brave, because who would venture out on the highway if they knew that there was a one in two chance of mortality? I don’t mean an accident, I mean a mortality. So we’re living in a time when this is in fact a difficult relationship to get together and keep together. And of course the statistics are one in two for a first marriage: the failure rate is higher for a remarriage. Not much higher, but higher.

When I began to think about interviewing couples, I of course was faced with a problem: how do you walk into a couple’s home and start finding out what’s happening in the marriage? How do you find out how they put it together, who these people are, and how they’ve worked out their lives together? And of course there’s the issue of what they will actually say to you. I have done a book before on women and depression, but this was a one-on-one thing and this was very easy and I never felt apprehensive about it. But thinking about going and talking to couples — how do you do it?

I had sat on a committee that was working on a marital therapy questionnaire — this is something called the KDS-13, which they use at Yale — and I had looked through it at the time and was quite familiar with it. But at that time I myself had been married around twenty years, and when I looked at it, I thought, Gee, this is a moment that seems as if it’s marooned in time, and yet a couple’s relationship is really changing, and when I looked at some of the questions I thought, well, I would have answered some of these things very differently at different points in time.

Let me just read you a couple of the questions: “In general, how would you rate your marriage: very happy, happy, neither unhappy or happy, unhappy, or very unhappy?” There would be

different times when you would be at the happy or neither happy nor unhappy place on this, and hopefully not too long at the very unhappy. "How would you say your marriage compares with other marriages you know: better, or about the same or worse?" "If you had to live your life over again, would you marry the same person, different person, or not marry at all?" This questionnaire has about thirty-nine questions or so. I'll just read you one more: "On the whole has your marriage met your expectations in the following areas?" and there's a whole lot of things mentioned, but most importantly, closeness, communication, compatibility, independence, privacy, and romance. Now, this really raises a fundamental marital question, which is, how can closeness and good communication co-exist with independence and privacy? This is a central issue that every couple has to work out: how can I be an "I" and still be part of a "we"? And if I am I, am I acceptable in this "we" part of my world? This is a problem that, as I said, every couple has to work with, but as I went through with couples all of these questions which had to do with finances, sex, children, changing mores and everything, I found myself being flooded — not flooded, drowned — in a sea of information and getting nowhere. I just simply couldn't get to the heart of the marriage with this mass of information.

At that time I came across something that is used by a number of family therapists and marital therapists, though not all of them, and it's called the *genogram*. This is something like a family tree, but basically it's a history of each member of the couple's emotional relationships: it's an emotional family tree. So when I would go to interview a couple, I would very quickly ask "What is your mother's name? Is she alive or dead? What is she like? Give me a few adjectives that would describe her: is she warm and loving or giving or is she tyrannical or is she depressed or is she kind? What is she like?" And it would come very rapidly what she was like, and there would be a lot of interaction and vivacity as we just described the people in the family in this very schematic, almost simple-minded way. A picture would start coming into being and very rapidly I would get to the center of that couple's relationship, because very often in our present day marriages we are re-enacting some scenario that's very closely related to what we saw

happen in our original families. I don't mean to say that we're clones, and I don't mean to say that we are doing exactly the same things, but we are working out some elaboration, some version of what did happen, of what we were witness to very early in our lives. Sometimes it's so striking that it's the same thing; it's exactly the same thing, and it will never have entered someone's mind until this discussion begins.

If people in the audience have pencils and paper, I'm going to raise a few questions for you to think about for yourselves. I won't ask for answers. What became very clear very rapidly is that the family tree does cast a very long shadow upon the couple. I should say that the very first question that I asked every couple was "What first attracted you to each other? What were the things you liked?" And again I would get a blank look, but people knew very quickly. That's the first question that I want to ask you to write down for yourself: What first attracted you to your partner and what's been your view of that quality in your partner since the time of your courtship? In other words, was that person warm and expressive and what's your view of those particular qualities about your partner right now after a period of time?

What's interesting about the qualities that initially attract us to our partners is that they are often issues that we are working on from our family's origin and they are absolutely charged with ambivalence. These are the hot issues, the hot topics. I think of one couple that I interviewed for the book. When I asked them "What attracted you?" the husband said, "Well, we were young and we were at the beach and I met her and she wasn't going with anybody." But then he said "I liked her because she knew her own mind. She was very goal-oriented. She knew her own mind. She really had things under control." And she said "I liked him because whenever I broke up with any other guy, he was always there for me." Now as the two families became elaborated and we talked about what had happened in their families, it became clear that both had extremely strong mothers, and she was a strong woman. We called her the Marine sergeant because she ran the family and him in that way. That issue — her knowing her own mind — had become the thing that most annoyed him about her: "She knows how to make a chicken in wine sauce. She chooses the

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films we go to see. She's got all the answers, and I need to grow and I don't have space in this relationship." It happened that he was at a point in his life where his father had become sick and his strong mother had totally taken over, and this was the fear that he had: that I'll become sick and she will dominate me completely.

Now she actually came from a family where she had a strong mother who was also a sick mother: she had rheumatoid arthritis and it was serious. This quality of being there for her: this was what her father was for her mother and that man who would be there for you and was somewhat passive, as her father was, was the quality that attracted her to him — the fact that he was somebody who she could direct around. But then she got to the point where she wished he would take over and would ease some of the burdens for her, because she was overburdened and she did take responsibility for the decisions. So in a way they had brought something like a ledger: they had brought the story from the past over again and they were working on it, but they hadn't resolved it, they were really repeating it. I think in marriage you have a very healthy opportunity to change. Let's say you are attracted to somebody who's quite familiar and resonates in that way, but you do have the opportunity to try some other options. What I saw as an interviewer was that often people don't ever begin to understand that there is another option. They get into a relationship that is a familiar relationship from the past, though they may not be able to recognize it right away or do anything about it if they do recognize it. But it's difficult for them to imagine that there's another way in which they could be living.

What I'm saying of course is that the family is the basic training camp in terms of where we learn to love, what we think loving is like, what we think an adult man is supposed to be like, what we think an adult woman is supposed to be like, how the two sexes will relate to each another. We come into our adult lives with all of this information in our heads and we don't think it's just our personal information, we think it's the way of the world, because it *is* the way of our world: it's what we saw in that little civilization that existed in our own household, and we don't know those other civilizations well enough to know that they may have some very different kinds of ideas.

Let's take an example. Let's say that I was the daughter of a remote, inaccessible, somewhat explosive dad and I come to adulthood. I've come with this internalized image of this remote inaccessible male and that image is of course charged for me, charged with my childish passion for my father, because not only do we want to be loved by our parents, we want to love them very actively. It's a human need. So I come to my adulthood charged with the need to love this person and haven't been able to set up a good relationship. So there I am, wanting to love. I have this frustration about this person who hasn't quite been able to relate to me, and so it might happen that I would link up with a remote and inaccessible man, or a remote and preoccupied man. And if I did that, when that man was busy, I might see him as potentially explosive and angry even if he wasn't explosive and angry. I've got encoded in my head this idea that that's the way a man will be. I think we do — I know we do — come to our adulthood with a whole lot of self-fulfilling prophecies in our minds and ways to get them fulfilled.

There is in the literature a way of dealing with these figures from the past that's called *projective identification*, a very heavy-duty term, but I hope to explain it to you because it's a central term and it has to do with everything from empathy to putting your feelings into another person and disclaiming all ownership of them. Let's say that I was somebody who grew to adulthood with the idea that a good woman is never angry. To be angry would be totally unacceptable, so that if anything that would potentially make me angry happens, I could never recognize that anger as being inside myself. Well then, I wouldn't be surprised if I linked up with a guy with a short fuse, because there would be this person who was wonderfully able to do what I couldn't do. Again, this is a part of the healthy active striving: the warm expressive woman finds the logical controlled man; the woman who always wants to get closer finds the man who always wants to make more space; the woman who has no anger finds the man who is on a short fuse.

Now let's say that something potentially angering happens to me. Let's say I am out for lunch with my friend Millie, who says something very insulting to me and I don't respond in any way and I quickly forget it. And I come home but that anger is inside of me,

it's not discharged, and my inner spotlight always sweeps over that anger, and I never deal with it: I don't take inner ownership, I never think of myself as an angry person. And my spouse comes in and he may come down the walk whistling, but he won't be whistling for long. I'm in the kitchen and let's say he's in the living room, and I go in there and I say to him "So, did you talk to your boss about taking that vacation or the change in hours or did you tell him off?" — something that I know will potentially infuriate him. Or I can directly say "Did you do such and such?" Of course we all know how to push our partner's button. So let's say in ten minutes he's a raving maniac. What have I done? I've projected the anger into him — this man is totally raving — and I look at him and I think, "If I didn't have to deal with this person I would never have to deal with any anger at all. I don't know what's wrong with this man — he just blows his stack."

In some ways that's what projective identification is: I am shooting the anger into him and he's expressing it for me. We are like Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. He is speaking for me. He's speaking my anger, and I am looking at him and thinking "What a horrible person" because at a conscious level I am totally dissociated from it: I don't know I'm angry. I can only experience the anger as coming from him. That's the identification part. I can get my anger expressed, I can identify with it, get a vicarious thrill out of it. It's like a Rube Goldberg mechanism: I'm getting discharged what I never knew was inside of me. That's projective identification.

As I was saying, in the father-daughter scenario, I could get him to be withdrawn and rejecting, I could assign him a role in my family play. We are very wonderful about shaping our partners and they are often very helpful in letting us do it, to play out this old drama, and it happens very frequently in marriage. Now you might say that at some level he's being empathic when that happens and we're doing something that's very close. After all, he's holding a piece of me: he's holding my anger. But in that situation, we have a real blurring of personal boundaries. I don't know where I end and he begins, and he doesn't know where he ends and I begin. It's as if I breathe in, he breathes out. It's as if we are one person: most people are not angry lots of the time and angry some of the time,

so he's doing the angry some of the time and I'm doing the not angry part. I'm breathing in, he's breathing out. He's taking care of something for me, but we're mixed up: we don't know where he ends and I begin. Is that empathy? I don't think you could ever say that's empathy, because instead of understanding him as the human being he is — let's say the person who walked up the front path whistling — I've put something into him and I've said "That's what *you* are. *You* are what I am not. *You* are the angry person." If we are trying to negotiate an issue, we are deeply confused and conflicted from the word go because he can't even sympathize with me about what happened with Millie because that's lost to both of us. The initial thing that started this whole thing going was that I was insulted by Millie. My conflict about anger and how will I express it and what will I do with it and do I have a right to it is really inside my head. It's *intrapersonal*, but I've made it *interpersonal*, and we've lost what it was about. What's more, we'll never find out because it's gotten too confused.

In any case, what I'm talking about is the fact that from our families of origin we each bring an emotional dowry into the relationship: we saw the way in which our parents related, and that is the very model that we are going to start working with. We may start working with it as something that was awfully good and that we'd like to recreate or something that we want to have the absolute opposite of, but it is our baseline and that's where we are working from. This whole issue, for instance, with the couple I was talking about, the very strong woman and the passive guy, is what they have each brought forward into their relationship. It's what they're struggling about at the time of our interviews, and they are in a terrific struggle about this because this man is saying "I'm going to be suffocated," as he felt his father was suffocated, and she's just doing what she's always done and being strong, which is what he asked her to be from the word go in the relationship. But it has to be renegotiated and nobody has any idea of another way to be in a relationship where somebody can be strong some of the time and weak some of the time, and the other person can be strong some of the time and weak some of the time, because that's how people come. But they've split: they haven't split between angry and non-angry, they've split between strength and weakness.

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You can split between depressed and optimistic, you can split between "wants to be close" and "wants to be distant," you can split between the martyr and the tyrant, the disempowered person and the super-powerful person. But where you get those kinds of splits, you actually have a collusion in the couple: they've made a deal, and there are rules of that relationship which say that you, the husband in that relationship, can never be strong because she will quickly make counter-moves. And he is saying to her "You can never be weak," because if she starts getting weaker, incompetent, he'll be twice as incompetent to get her back into her role as the Marine sergeant. These relationships are very carefully calibrated: the caretaker and the wounded bird, the mommy and the little boy. There are a number of these very polarized relationships where again you could think of it as "You breathe in, I'll breathe out. You carry the depression, I'll carry the optimism. You carry the need for closeness, I'll carry the need for space."

Let's take the woman who always wants to be close and the husband who always wants to make space. You know, the couple who when they come home, she says "Let's get close and let's talk" and he says "I have nothing to say. I'm going to go down and work in my workshop." She comes after him and says "I think we should talk" and he says, "Say what you want to say and then I'll get back to grinding these boards down" or whatever. Actually, what is the couple doing? Well, she, like all people, wants to have some space of her own, but that's not something that her inner searchlight is ever going to focus on. She wants to focus on closeness: a good woman wants to be close, she wants wall-to-wall intimacy. But she doesn't want space. What he wants is "Leave me alone. I want to keep myself to myself. I have no needs. I'm never vulnerable. I'm never needy. I'm never weak. I'm perfectly autonomous. Just get off my back." Well, there's nobody that comes that way. Everybody has intimate needs and wants some closeness, but that couple has split. So she carries all the closeness needs and he carries all the distance needs, and you can see them: as she moves this way, he moves that way. If she starts to move off, he'll move close. He doesn't want to get so far that nobody's going to be after him and that he's going to be isolated. No, he'll look over his shoulder to make sure she's still chasing. There are

some marital therapists who say once that pursuer stops pursuing, the relationship is over. I don't think that's necessarily true, but you can be sure it's going to change.

What other names can you think of for projective identification that wouldn't be such tongue-twisters? I thought of some: unconscious division of labor, dividing up certain thoughts, emotions, and feelings; "You take this I'll take that," and "You be the depressed one, I'll be the cheerful, optimistic one"; "I'll do the breathing in, you do the breathing out." Again, these deals are never made on a conscious level, they do involve rules about how every one will behave, and these rules are rigorously observed, no matter how uncomfortable the couple may be getting. And often they are getting quite uncomfortable in this kind of split but very collusive relationship. You know, up here it's like Punch and Judy: they are very different. But down here, underneath the stage, their wires are crossed, so that he's experiencing, in that example, her anger for her, and she may be experiencing his vulnerability for him, his depression.

When I was writing a book on women and depression — this is just an aside — a woman came into a hospital where I was doing research. She was depressed, alcoholic, and had made a serious suicide attempt. I interviewed her for the book, wrote about her, and called her up two years later and said "So, what's happening in your life?" She said "Everything's fine, it's wonderful." She told me all of what had happened to them after she left the hospital, and said "You know, it's really strange. We went into couples therapy and we found out that Jim was the one who was depressed. He was depressed about the move we'd made and the job that he was in." Now this woman was almost dead from her husband's depression. This is a very powerful kind of interpersonal mechanism where somebody picks up for the partner aspects of that person's self that they feel the partner can't bear. She felt he wouldn't be able to bear his depression and at some level they made a deal. This was never discovered or talked about in the hospital, though I have to say that when I wrote about them, I focused on a family therapy session which had many of the clues, although I certainly didn't have the answer. But I really did see it without even knowing what I was seeing at the time.

What would have been better for that couple? Obviously the better thing would have been for the husband to begin to deal with his own issues and for them both to understand what was going on and to deal with it as a job issue on top instead of via this subterranean method, a Rube Goldberg method for dealing with it in a way where nobody could even figure out, just as they couldn't figure out that my friend Millie had got me insulted, what was going on as it became more and more serious. There is a way in which the paradox of marriage has to do with the fact that the more each person can truly be themselves — let's say that I can take ownership of my anger and my spouse could take ownership of his vulnerability — then the more you can really be who you really are, the closer you can be as a couple. The idea that we have from the marriage sacrament is that two become one: it's this kind of merger that I'm talking about where two people are one person. But then when that happens, you have to think, "Which one?" For example, if I like Brussels sprouts, will my husband, if he loves me, like Brussels sprouts? If I like to go to bed at 10 and he likes to go to bed at 1, will he go to bed at 10 if he loves me? If I like a particular person and he doesn't like the particular person, am I obliged to dislike the person if we are one? If he wants to make love and I don't want to make love, am I obliged to make love because he wants to make love? Or are we different people with different moods and biologies and different times of wanting to go to sleep? What constitutes a betrayal of this perfect oneness?

I think that a good model of a marriage is rather like if you think of Minneapolis and St. Paul, two cities divided, which are independent entities with a bridge between them with a lot of emotional traffic crossing over. But they are not glommed together as one city, which happens when, in these situations, he's experiencing my anger, I'm experiencing his depression or his vulnerability or all of the things I think he can't bear, or that, for example, this woman who I wrote about thought her husband couldn't bear, so she bore it to the edge of her own death, which is extraordinary. She, by the way, was teaching French, and I said: "Diana, I never knew you knew French," and she said "Oh yes, I'm fluent in French." Well you wouldn't have known anything about Diana: she was a basket-case when I knew her. And there she

was, cured of her husband's depression. These confusions between what's me and what's you can get very tricky in a close relationship like a marriage...

One of the things that I wrote about in *Intimate Partners* was "What do you do?" Suppose somebody here in this audience says "Oh oh, that's us. That's just what we're up to. We get into these kinds of wacky mixups. We have a lot of conflict about who's feeling what, why, and when." One of the things that I wrote about as a suggestion for dealing with that and kind of unscrambling those wires is a talking and listening task which is very nice to do whether or not you have an issue with your partner or spouse or whatever. Basically, you take an hour and you divide it up between you. You'll each have a half-hour. Then you flip a coin. I do know a couple who got into a tremendous argument over who got heads and who got tails. But anyway, if you get heads let's say you go first. Then, that's your half-hour — or you can make it fifteen minutes if you want to. It's also a good argument stopper. But let's say I get the first half-hour. What I do is I talk about me: not about him, not about the relationship, not about anything to do with him at all. I talk about what's on my mind: my hopes, my dreams, my fears, what I'm thinking about, my kids, my work, anything that doesn't relate to him.

Now let's say that I'm the pursuer in the relationship and he's the distancer, and every time I want to talk, he runs. The rules of this game say he has to sit there and not respond to me verbally, not make faces, not do anything, but just give me his respectful attention. So what's happening there is that I, as the pursuer, will be somebody who's not very good at focusing on my own case — I'm great at getting on his case, or the relationship or something, but I'm not really that good about focusing on my own case. So, I am focusing on myself; everything that has to do with me, and what he's doing is he's *not* distancing: the rules say he stays there and listens. At the end of the half-hour, we don't talk about anything that I said immediately. I have to say that my husband and I do this and we break that rule consistently: we always talk. But the rule as stated is that you don't do that. And then, let's say, he's the distancer and he talks about himself. He's usually somebody who's very good, as the distancer, in focusing on his own case. However,

he's not somebody who does it in someone else's company. The rules of the game say he focuses on himself, but he does it in the company of the partner, and he sees that that's not dangerous: he won't get swallowed up by her, he will be able to have his own space and yet be close. This is a wonderful task. It shows you a way to be very separate people, because when you do this you see what very different things are on your minds but you are doing it together. It enhances this notion that to be together, the best thing is to be separate persons being together, not to confuse the "I" and the "we."

I guess you are wondering what happened to the title of my talk, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning." I've actually been talking about it all along, because Saturday night is the romance; the merger, the blurring, that wonderful part of falling in love where you don't know where he ends and you begin, where it's just romance, where it's just the bond getting cemented. It is the magic that brings you together and it's the vision of Eden. Again, in the literature it's called "the golden fantasy." They think it's pathological, but it's really this wonderful feeling of being with this all-knowing, all-caring, intuitively understanding other person, and it is the falling in love experience, the vision of "We'll be close, we'll be intimate," nothing will ever interfere with it. That's champagne. And Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, that's the bread and butter of the relationship, where you not only have to recognize that one and one don't make one, they make two, but you have to negotiate that two-ness.

For example, let's say that my husband proposes a walk in the woods to me and I have an article to write, and I'd really like to write that article. I have a choice to make. I can sacrifice my "I-ness" to our "We-ness" and I may be a person who would do that every time and I go out on the walk. I have never said to him, "I have this other idea in mind." I may not have even said to myself: "Well gee, I was hoping that he wouldn't make this offer, that he'd be busy, but I guess I'll go" and then get out on the walk and be in a really foul mood and start knitting and so on because I never faced the fact that I didn't want to go in the first place. There's another way to deal with this kind of situation, which would be to say, "You know, I was thinking of writing this article." And he

would say "Oh, well maybe I'll do such and such" or he'd say "Look, it's beautiful out today. Maybe you could work on it later." But at any rate, we'd be negotiating the real issue for me, which is "Do I want to put my 'I-ness' first or do I want to put my 'We-ness' first." But it's on the top of the table, it's not happening underneath.

I want to end by raising some questions for you to think about. Here's the easy part of this question: What parts of your self do you think you've had to sacrifice to stay in the relationship that you're in? The harder part is: What sacrifices has your partner had to make? And finally, a question that I think is not too easy to answer, and yet it's a good question to ask yourself: If your parents had to describe the relationship that you're in, what do you think they'd say about it? And what is there about your relationship that you believe they don't know? So those are questions to ponder yourself. Sometimes when I've done workshops, we've dealt with those questions and some of the answers are quite amazing and it's fascinating to share them.

I'll close here. I hope you've been able to understand the difficult part of this, which is the concept of projective identification, something that exists all the way from empathy, the ability to stand in someone else's shoes, to projective identification of a pathological sort, where you kick them out of their shoes and you stand in their shoes for them.