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“Paradise lost”

A case-study in marriage counselling from Germany

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In 1999 a couple, Mr. A. and Mrs. A., showed up at our counselling centre because of problems in their marriage relationship. They were facing the question of separating, while they were also wondering, whether it still could make sense to go on with their marriage. At that time Mrs. A. was 38 and Mr. A. 40 years of age and they had 3 children, aged 10, 8 and 5 years.

Mr. A had registered the couple for counselling and for the first session they both came together. Both came across as rather burdened. Mr. A. started by explaining why he would need help. His wife would be ‘swamped’ with the housework and the 3 children and she were very changed the last to years. She would lack almost any drive, were not able to manage the household and the older children had started to take the major share of the work. At some days Mrs. A. would not even get up from bed any more. When he were at home he would try to fight most of the untidiness, but he would not always succeed, since he were working abroad for longer periods. His wife were seeing their family doctor because of all this, but there had not been any improvement. The mood in the family had changed to lugubrious, with almost no noticeable friendliness among each other any more. This time soon after his coming back from abroad the quarrelling had started, with no amelioration in the meantime.

In the first session Mrs. A. was barely joining the talks, giving answers when asked only monosyllabically and scantily. Mr. A. stated that here would be only 2 possibilities left, as to his judgement: that either his wife would seek hospitalisation and that she would care for getting better again, in order to gain a ‘normal’ state again – or that he would separate. Mrs. A. came across as still and reserved, but her eyes were vividly interested. She was looking at me oftentimes and reacted with facial expressions, but not verbally. Mr. A. stated again that he would be convinced that his wife would suffer from depression worth calling for treatment. Since, at the end of the first session, not all anamnesis information was given, we scheduled another session for orientation. The next session Mr. A. was dominating the course of the talk, too, again sticking to his diagnosis of depression. I told him, that there might be a chance for a diagnosis like that, but that this would have to be inquired precisely and then diagnosed, since depressions would not show standardized symptoms, and besides, that each treatment would have to be defined according to the individual patient. When I explained further information about depression, Mrs. A. was looking at me every once in a while and smil-

ing. At the end of this session we agreed that we would schedule 6 sessions for the beginning, i.e. one more in the same setting, then two sessions for each single partner, and a final session with both partners again. They could also agree that for the time being they would not decide on the question of separating or not. In the following session with both partners we were looking at concrete situations, when conflicts used to arise. In every day life there were repeated difficulties in communicating with each other, always ending with mutual and personal degradations. Mr. A. was blaming his wife for being lazy, while she was blaming him for being irresponsible. These fightings used to escalate constantly, always ending up in frosty silence.

For a one-on-one session I first invited Mrs. A. Even now she was rather reserved, answering just shortly to my questions. I let her describe her present state. Mrs. A. was characterizing herself as being rather prone to access things, also being very sociable. Her condition had changed, after she had joined her husband on a trip to X-land 2 years ago. She said all had changed since then. A despair and sadness would be covering her up like a dark shade. On the one hand she would long for him once he were abroad. She always would be looking forward to seeing him return. But in the other hand, when he arrive, she would be paralysed. She would be blocked completely. She then would suffer from a kind of trepidation she could not describe. We agreed to take a closer look to what had happened during that journey.

When she came back to X-land again for the first time after the birth of their youngest child, she was appealed by the fact, that they had built a huge hotel complex at the very place where there had been pure and untouched nature before. Vast areas had been stubbed and cleared and oil pipelines had been built through the jungle. And her husband had become an associate partner of the company being in charge of all that.

It had been in X-land 15 years ago where they had first met each other. She had been a tour-guide there, he had been working as development aid volunteer. They both shared the enormous fascination by the beauty and the richness of nature in that country. They married 2 years after they got to know each other and kept on living in X-land at first. Later Mrs. A's mother fell seriously sick about the time, when the oldest child had to attend school. So for both of these reasons they decided to move back to Germany. Mr. A. got a job with an international company that was running projects in South America. Mrs. A. gave up her professional life in favour of taking care of the family. Shortly after she delivered her third baby, Mr. A. went back to X-land for working there about 3 to 5 months, coming home for one month after that. Financially the family was doing very fine. They were living in a family-house of their own, and Mrs. A. built up a larger circle of friends through the children. She was describing her family situation to be very satisfying up to that point. Since their vacation 2 years ago, however, she was experiencing an emotional change towards her husband. She said that from that time on she was sensing a gap between each other. Already when they were on that trip, they were quarrelling a lot. He was blaming her to be a romanticist of the nature, living a luxury life at the cost of others, whereas he would be adapting himself to realistic conditions of the economy as well as to requirements of the present times.

In the one-to-one sessions with Mr. A. he told me that he, too, had stated a change in their relationship during that journey with his woman. He had been very annoyed at how little she could share his happiness about his successes. He had been

putting in a lot of working efforts to provide financial security for his family, what was meant to be a compensation for the fact, that he could not be with his family for so often. He had intended to surprise his wife by presenting the completed and well functioning hotel-complex to her, with some plans even to enlarge it. He had had a lot of toil to become an associate in the company. In the course of the one-to-one-session further details of Mr. A.'s life's history came up: he had grown up as the only child in the family, he had had to show lots of achievements in order to gain appreciation. And now he was expecting to get this appreciation from his wife, too. He had an inner picture depicting his share to family life: if he were not able to be at home so often, then at least he wanted to work for the financial security of the family. Usually after a while of staying in X-land he would be longing for his family. When flying home he would be looking forward to experiencing his family again and to seeing how much they would be glad to see him return.

But at his last visits home he rather experienced rejection. He had been sensing a lot of disappointment, anger and rage. Even after some one or two days he and his wife just would have been quarrelling or sitting in hostile silence to each other. So sometimes he would have been glad, when he could leave again. This would make him helpless and desperate.

In the next session with both partners we agreed on at first looking out for themes and fields being vital to each one of them. In order to do so I asked them to write down five such topics. Both agreed on the desire, that the family should be doing fine. This included pointing out that it would be important to them that the children should be well cared for as well as that the emotional well-being of the partner should be reassured. Both of them mutually were wishing that the partner might be well. Besides this both were wishing to show responsibility for and to contribute to the preservation and integrity of nature. They also stated the importance of taking care well of their circle of friends. When comparing their 'five points' and detecting the high rate of agreement among them it became obvious how their outer attitude towards each other changed. They seemed to me not to be so much rejecting in their body scheme and their sound of voices any more.

Our contract for the next two sessions was to focus on these common wishes, and not to centre on the disturbances. In order to do so they agreed on initially delaying the decision about separating or not for another eight weeks. The couple learned about constructive techniques of communication, which they applied during the next weeks.

When we were working on the issue "what is each one doing so that the family is doing well?" we stated very clearly what each one should contribute to this and what expectations towards the partner each one would have. Also when we were working at the issue "what is each one doing in order to make the partner feel fine in the relationship?" it became obvious how much motivation both had to save and refresh the relationship. In these sessions it emerged that Mrs. A. did not expect her husband to earn much money for her. Instead, she wanted to take her share of a common financial responsibility, and she wanted both of them to take a common responsibility for the protection of life and nature.

At this point again it became clear that Mrs. A. reacted to the destruction of the nature with heavy mourning and anger, that she directed towards her husband. Mr. A. stated that this point did not attract his attention any more when planning the projects, because he had concentrated much more on the financial and technical realisation. When his wife were naming this point, he would have been realising the extend of the destruction for the first time. He on his side did not perceive

it so far. He started to realize the conflict and to watch out more carefully for his emotional responses. At his point we stopped and we started to discuss strategies of conflict management.

In the next sessions we were gathering ideas for conflict solution. Mr. A. became very active in that, since he had a great interest in change. He said that he had a great concern not to enlarge the damages any more (which would happen if the next steps of the projects would follow). He was very decided to get out of this work.

They started asking for legal advice that could help him find a way to get out of the project. They both were clearly envisioning that all this would come along with definitely changed financial conditions. And both could well agree with that. Finally both got a chance to work in an environmental program where they could built up a camp in the jungle providing tourists with a soft way for experiencing the nature, and providing a wildlife resort for endangered species at the same time. Both partners were very engaged working at the construction of this solution. During these sessions Mr. A. did not dominate the course any more. Mrs. A. contributed a lot of plans and ideas where her experience and information about the country could come into its own. Again and again she let us know, that she was concerned about the preservation of the resources of nature, and not its destruction, and how much she was suffering from experiencing this destruction when happening. Over and over again she offered her support to her husband at his various attempts, toeing the line together with him to share the financial risks, too.

In these sessions Mr. A. gave the impression to be obviously relaxed. He accepted to be inspired by some ideas of his wife for the concretion of his ideas.

The counselling ended after eight weeks when Mr. A. had to fly to X-land again. Meanwhile both partners had developed some good ways of communicating again. My last information (dating from summer 2000): the whole family is spending the summer vacations in X-land. Both partners are much engaged in a research project, dealing with the collection of treasures of wisdom of the indigenous people.

Translated by Klaus Temme