Relational Stages of Marriage

Singleness: Individual pre-occupied with needs of self. Little awareness of other’s needs. Self-gratification is the grid through which others are perceived.

Absolute Union: Each partner loses/merges self in the other. Relationship not necessarily of benefit to each other. Forfeiting or loss of identity, “if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

Infatuation: Partner can do no wrong. In love with persona rather than the person. Each presents best image. Sense of “we’re made for each other.”

Differentiation: Image-management diminishes. Couples discover each other’s differences. Trust level sufficient to be more authentic with spouse rather than putting up good front. Each recollects own identity.

Disillusionment: Misgivings about spouse selection, “Did I marry the wrong person?” Coupled with uncertainty about future, “Is this what our marriage is going to be like?”

Survival: Each falls back upon historically employed coping skills/defense mechanisms to bolster and protect ego. Time of distancing.

Adaptation: Polarization diminishes. Individually or jointly, couple adapts to some of existing stressors. However, stressors continue, and if no significant change, resignation can pervade relationship.

Practicing: Couple experiences weariness of status quo. Experiments with “doing the marriage differently.” Engaging each other while acknowledging respective difference.

Enrichment: Benefits of marital union outweigh liabilities. Couple experiences positive outcomes from relationship. Marriage becoming a safe place; relationship becoming a haven.

Intimacy: Couple experiences “oneness” together, while maintaining own identities. Mutual self-disclosure of feelings. Mutual vision-casting. Relationship based in choosing, not “needing,” to live and love together.

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1 Mark Laaser’s *Couple Development* provided the original concept which is expanded and elaborated here.