

Could This Apply To You?

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I was reading Harold Kushner's book titled *The Lord is My Shepherd* recently and was reminded by him of something I've know for a while. Let me share this excerpt with you and then comment on it.

"[There is a theory] that we seek to marry someone who makes us feel special the way our parents did...But what about those of us who were never made to feel that way by our parents...Who are we attracted to?...Some of those people end up marrying spouses who will mistreat them just as their parents did, whether because it is the only kind of relationship they have known or because they have grown up believing that they deserve it. Others will look for what they could not get from parents in the person they marry..."

Could this theory be true? I can tell you it is widely held and it's a theory I subscribe to in my work. In working with troubled couples, it is common to find that some of their most important disappointments are related to ways in which their partner is not their parent. Recently a husband complained that his wife never prepared dinner for the family. She balked at this, reminding him that there was always something on the table at dinner time. "Yeah," he said, "something from the burger joint or pizza place, or stuff to make sandwiches. You almost never cook a real meal." Well, it seems, his mother always did and the long and short of it was that he equated a prepared dinner with being loved. Since his wife didn't really "prepare" anything, he had begun to feel unloved. There was more going on than this, but this is a good example of the theory mentioned above.

What does this have to do with you? Could it be the theory applies to you and that

some or all of your unhappiness springs from those kinds of unmet expectations? To find out you need to try to look realistically at your home life when you were a child. I'd suggest looking at around 3rd to 8th grades. Try to list the kinds of things your parents did that made you feel loved and safe and in a separate list, the things that didn't make you feel loved and safe. List what both did, but in separate columns. Quickly list those things, then revisit the list over the next few days.

Now, take a look at your present situation. How are they similar? Different? Are your complaints related to the past like the husband's story above? Maybe your partner spends a lot of free time with his/her hobby, such as a husband who plays golf. Do you resent the long absences? Could it be that your dad traveled for a living and he often missed things that were important to you? You could be equating the two things?

Certainly this is a complex matter and won't account for all the unhappiness or conflict in a marriage. But as a quick exploratory tool, you may find it useful and worth a little time. It may help you understand that your unhappiness is more about you and your past unmet needs than about your partner's current behavior.

The complaining husband mentioned earlier hadn't taken into account that his wife worked outside the home and they had three kids, whereas in the home in which he grew up, his mom didn't work outside the home and he was an only child. The realization helped ease the tension between the two and he came to appreciate her method of "preparing" dinner. As I pointed out to him, "At least you're not having to do it. Isn't that a gift from her?"