

START IN CLOSE...

This is a year of challenges that might well turn into a decade of challenges. How can I as a person, a wife and a Couples Therapist turn my face towards the courageous conversations that are needed?

Recently David Whyte opening the Psychotherapy Networker Conference in Washington, said “We all have three marriages – one to yourself, one to your partner and one to your work or career...” and something inside me leapt in response. For so long I have wrestled with ‘the work – life balance’, believing as I was told, that somewhere ahead lay this highly desirable but very elusive place of Balance where my work would flourish (hopefully lucratively!) and my life would feel grounded, in control and deeply rewarding. Many have been the books read, plans made and new ways of being instituted. Yet looking back on all that worthy effort, there is a nagging sense of having missed something crucial, some dynamic....and so I find myself once again in the place of humiliation, or as David Whyte explains, “Humiliation in the proper etymological sense of the word, is a return to the ground of your being.” And it is that ground of my being that leaps at the naming of three marriages to self, partner and work. A ‘marriage’ answers the deep memory of what I’ve been promised to and it feels profoundly meaningful to hold my own conversations with life from that place...

So, what have I promised myself to?

Well, I promised myself to my husband – twice in fact, as this is my second marriage. My first marriage ended when the self I was seemed profoundly different eighteen years later, to the self who did the promising that sunny day back in 1976. My husband said he no longer recognised or even liked the new me. No one had ever told us, you see, that on that radiant day of our wedding all those years ago, that by the way, both of you are going to change and that the change may be so great that you, let alone them, may not even recognise each other!

The second time I promised myself in marriage to another, I thought it was with more wisdom and space for change. Yet upon reflection, I can truthfully say that the man of a decade ago is very different to the man of this year – as am I a very different woman.

The marriage to myself has been a conversation of varying intimacies and indeed I could say has gone through some divorces of its own! That might sound strange coming from a counsellor, but it seems to me that too often the busyness and speed of my life is a poor answer to its complexity. The challenge, as I keep re-learning, is to be as present to myself as I am to my clients. Maybe, the thought occurs, if I paid myself for the privilege of having these conversations, as do my clients, I might have more success!

There is such a clamour in our world to join every conversation but our own. And then there is my marriage to my work.

For many years I have worked as both an individual and couples Therapist and I love the work I do. These last many years I have been profoundly influenced by my clinical training as an Imago Relationship Therapist – an integrated way of working with couples and individuals using a dialogue tool of sublime simplicity.

In working this way I have come to realise that my sole aim is to guide people to stay present to their partners in an empathetic, non-judgmental way and to allow their partners to stay present to themselves. In coaching this, deep shifts take place in quite remarkable ways.

More recently I have once again noticed the irony of this – what we teach is what we need to master! As a couple turns their faces to their own conversations a remarkable thing starts to happen. They begin to become real to one another again as their diaphanous projections start to melt away. In those moments, the three of us step ‘into eternal time’ in the profoundness of that space.

So what does this say of my own marriage to my work?

Well, as I have begun to stay more present with myself in my work, the greater context behind this vocation of mine begins to permeate my work and my life with a deep, energising wholeness – a fierce flow that feels authentic and real and eternal.

This place feels grounded, more in control and deeply rewarding...but wait!

Could I have finally arrived at that elusive work/life balance?!

I imagine it will depend on how long I hold these courageous conversations with myself – on how often I can keep the fierce focus on all three marriages.

Or as David Whyte put it in his poem ‘Start close in...’

‘Start close in...

Start close in...

Start with the step you don’t want to take...’