

How to Have an Awful Marriage

Everywhere there are articles, book and professional therapists offering advice on how to improve and save marriages. What is missing is a guide to how to make a marriage miserable. Granting that some people enjoy marriage, what of the vast numbers of marital couples who seek an unhappy marriage, as they must or they would not quarrel so much and give so little pleasure to each other. Determined to be miserable, these people have nowhere to turn for advice. Often they divorce and marry again and again. Each marriage is a search to find one more awful than the last, when if they had stayed with the first spouse and had a little instruction they could have found sufficient misery there.

Despite all the literature on how to have a happy marriage, only recently has anything been written on how to have one that is unhappy. Fortunately an anonymous author has just completed an in-depth study on how to produce marital misery, whether the marriage is heterosexual, homosexual or mysterious. Now the primary text in the field, this scientific work is of encyclopedic size and is called,

Achieving Misery in Two Group Dyads with Special Emphasis on Married Couples.

Unfortunately it is as tedious to read as it is to suffer the marriage failures it describes. For the interested public, a summary is offered here of the ways to achieve an awful marriage.

We can skip over the history of marriage in that opus and get right to the instructions on how to make marriage miserable. The history only emphasizes that marriage is of such a nature that an outside force has always been necessary to force married couples to stay together. First the church made harsh laws against separation and divorce, and later the state took over the job of making divorce difficult. Now, with the abdication of the church and the freedom given by the state, anyone can divorce at will. The expanding divorce rate is the inevitable result. If one sets out to have a miserable marriage now, there is a risk of separation which did not exist in the past. The ease of divorce has led to a change in the basic marital threat. The spouse who can threaten to leave the other has the most power in the marriage because the other will capitulate in fear of separation. However, now with separation so easily possible, that the threat to flee the marriage has become a risky one. Spouses must go after each other with the knowledge that a divorce is easily available. If they miscalculate and escalate quarrels, they risk the possibility that they could separate and the next marriage might be enjoyable.

It is said that anyone can have a happy marriage but people must make their own marital disharmony. That is not quite true. Many people lack the skills to make a marriage awful, and they don't understand the natural development of marriage well enough to take advantage of it. Opportunities for marital misery will be presented here in terms of developmental stages: how to begin a marriage badly, how to make a marriage worse in the early years, what to quarrel about when the children are no longer available, and how to increase marital distress in old age even when strength is failing.

Planning an Unhappy Marriage

One must work at marriage, as every authority agrees. Achieving misery requires conscientious effort. However, the task is surprisingly easy if one can begin badly. There are two general ways to start a marriage so that misery becomes inevitable: one is to marry for the wrong reasons, and the other is to marry the wrong person. Starting a marriage badly is like building a proper foundation for a house:

unhappiness is built into the structure from the beginning.

The most popular wrong reason to get married is to flee into matrimony as a way of avoiding something else. A mate for a lifetime is chosen impulsively to get out of a bad situation. There are many situations to escape from: one can marry to get out of poverty, to avoid going to school, to not have to work for a living, and so on. The most common wrong reason to marry is to escape from one's family. If parents are constantly nagging about keeping a room clean so that pestilence will not become a plague, or about coming home in time to get some sleep, or to give up excessive use of drink or dope, then obviously an escape from that repressive atmosphere is in order. If only one can find a young man, or a woman to marry and share expenses, then freedom comes with one's own apartment. Fleeing home is estimated to be the reason for 81% of the marriages which are awful when spouses are under 21 years of age. "Free at last, free at last," cry the young people as they rush off to their own domiciles. From that point on they hope never to clean house, to stay out all night, to drink and use drugs until they fall down, and generally enjoy liberation.

Unfortunately, when the only purpose of marriage is to get away from one's family, the marriage itself has no purpose. There is no basis for enjoying each other as a married couple when the selection was not made for that reason. Even someone limited in intelligence can achieve a miserable marriage in this way. Not having selected a mate for compatibility, in a matter of weeks the couple cannot stand each other. They begin to quarrel over who should keep the house clean, who did or did not come home at a reasonable hour, and the drink and dope bring forth meanness instead of joy. Once this situation is structured, very little effort is required by the young people to achieve marital misery. If particularly determined to enjoy distress, they can add pregnancy as a reason to marry and leave the family. Parents will even encourage marriage when they see a baby enlarging a daughter's figure. The addition of a baby to the young couple's sanctuary is like meringue on the pie: opportunities to be miserable increase. The baby can make a worse mess than the young couple alone, it can keep them up later than parties, and generally the child encourages a suppressed fury at being helplessly tied down by this creature they must care for. Endless quarrels are manufactured over whose turn it is to do what for the baby, who should deal with the community protective agencies when they are accused of neglect, and whose fault it was they had the baby in the first place. Loud arguments about how great life would be if they had not been trapped announce to the neighbors that here is a couple skillful at making each other miserable.

Choosing the Wrong Person

Almost equal to the opportunities which arise by marrying for the wrong reasons is choosing the wrong person to marry. How does one know how to choose a mate in order to have an awful marriage? The answer is simple; complex psychological tests for incompatibility are not required. It is also necessary to make a gross error in choice, such as choosing a person of the wrong race, or wrong religion, or wrong class, although such choices lay the groundwork for inevitable trouble and so have their merits. Basically the selection of a person to marry must be based upon two criteria: he or she must have attractive faults different from one's own, and their must be a determination to reform that person to get rid of those faults. Examples can be found just by glancing in your neighborhood in any direction. The classical pair, which is often used as a model in pre-marital misery counseling, consists of the overly responsible woman who is attracted to a man whose faults are that he is too irresponsible and carefree. She admires his self-confidence, his willingness to lead the good life, and his entertaining ways. Her faults have always been that she is too

shy and responsible and cannot let herself go. The man chooses her on the basis of the same criteria: and he hopes it will correct his tendency to be off the wall, since he wants to settle down. Once married, the couple should proceed at once to reform each other. She must insist he get a better job with longer hours, think about a less pleasant career, not drink so much, stop partying all the time, and save money. He can yell at her to stop counting every penny, enjoy an evening out occasionally, and not be so dreadfully dull. Although this arrangement seems simple, any couple—even one of limited imagination—can use it to make each other miserable for many, many years. Ingenuity is not required, only persistence.

The reverse gender arrangement is also classical in opportunities. The woman who is active and domineering in her career and social life is attracted to a mousy, quiet fellow whose faults are that he is too shy and lacks self confidence. He, in turn, is attracted to her because she has all the spirit he lacks, and he hopes it will rub off on him. Once married, the two people immediately try to reform each other. It is evident that marital misery is easily achieved with that contract. She needs only to call him a wimp at regular intervals, while he subtly lets her down to get even with her. By behaving like a wimp, he implies she is an impossibly domineering woman. It is estimated by the eminent Dr. Schiff that at any moment during the day there are 111,2000 couples in the offices of marriage counselors with a wife saying she wants the counselor to make her wimp of a husband into a romantic and interesting man to save their marriage.

Variations on this theme are as obvious as pigeons to birdwatchers, but one more common type can be specified. This type of pair is called the Engineer's Syndrome since it is commonly observed among couples where the husband is in the electronics industry. In this arrangement, a wife chooses a husband whose faults are opposite hers. He is logical, precise, rational, and quite unemotional (except in extreme circumstances when his computer breaks down. Then he might become so disconsolate he must be hospitalized.) She is affectionate, emotional, capable of immediate crying spells, and she has a tendency to scream and yell during any discussion of a controversial issue, like the way she keeps house. She, of course, is chosen by the man because he seeks someone who can express an emotion to stimulate that tendency in himself. The outcome is inevitable: as the marital disagreements occur, the wife goes wild and yells. He withdraws, saying, "Why can't a woman be rational and reasonable?" With very little effort on the part of either one of them she can spend her life weeping while he is out working on his sports car, constantly improving something that can be improved.

These ways of beginning a marriage—marrying for the wrong reason and choosing the wrong person—are the most simple ways to assure marital distress. If a couple has a better beginning, more ingenuity is required to make a marriage a misfortune.

Problems of Intimacy and Outimacy

There are two basic areas which can be exploited to the fullest in any marriage: how to make love and how to fight. The best beginning for sexual problems is in the early years of marriage; if well nurtured the problems can continue for many years to come (or years of not coming). The variations on this theme are many, and most couples are capable of all of them. Everyone has heard poor, uneducated people protesting, "Oh, if I only had the education that man has, I could make my wife as miserable as he makes his." This is naïve. In the task of creating marital misery, everyone has a fair chance. There is no discrimination on the basis of race, class, or intelligence, as anyone can see simply by strolling about the city and overhearing the

action in the houses in different kinds of neighborhoods. The only difference is that one can overhear the misery better in the poor neighborhoods because there are more people and the houses are more flimsy.

The sexual arena offers such opportunity for marital distress that often the marriage hardly begins before the partners decide it is better not to have sexual relations at all, at least with the spouse. The crucial factor for bringing about sexual problems is timing. Sexual arousal and release is a complex physiological and psychological process requiring such timing that interfering with it is not difficult. Generally the rule is to initiate sex at the wrong time, in the wrong place, with the wrong frequency, in the wrong way. The novice chooses one of these wrongs. The expert insures success by managing to use all of them over the course of a marriage. A husband who is the model for us all will always want sex when his wife is not interested or is occupied with something else, he will want it on the living room rug at noon when the kids are coming home for lunch, he will want it in a position where they can both watch television at the same time. Protests by the wife meet angry accusations that she is frigid. The wife who is an equal match for such a husband will offer equally powerful techniques. She can be totally indifferent, and she can also arouse him and immediately lose interest. At another time she can yell at him and demand more sex at once, protesting angrily if he has difficulty with immediate compliance. If accused of inconsistency, she can say it is before, after or during her period.

A basic rule for sexual problems used by many couples over the years is to not tell the spouse what one likes or does not like in sex, and then to blame the spouse for not being pleasing. A wife who can only achieve orgasm in a certain way should avoid telling her husband that, and throughout the marriage she can be frustrated and pretend orgasms. The husband who prefers to see his wife nude should politely turn out all the lights so as not to embarrass her. Variations on this simple theme of avoidance are obvious and range from avoiding discussions to avoiding each other. If one mate watches TV late and the other goes to bed early, which is the habitual pattern of most couples, each evening announces sexual avoidance.

Spouses are so vulnerable in relation to sex that bad feelings and quarrels can easily be generated. A combination of sexual frustration and righteous indignation is a winning duo. The righteous indignation is best produced by the couple protecting each other. If the husband is uncertain about his potency, the wife can insist she is unable to enjoy sex and so take the blame for sexual avoidance. Instead of appreciating her sacrifice, the husband will be angry at her for sexual indifference and feel righteously indignant because he is a deprived husband. The reverse is equally powerful; the husband can protect the wife by approaching her sexually in ways she can rightfully protest. He can also wimpishly emphasize his own inadequacies so the fact that she is cool enough to refrigerate food does not have to be faced. One might think that protecting each other would risk the possibility of kindness and appreciation in return, but that is not the case, as every spouse knows. Like a cancer flourishing in a peach, the protection has a patronizing edge that ripens into successful mutual dissatisfaction.

Every survey shows that most couples achieve the most displeasure in the sexual area, and so techniques for achieving sexual dissatisfactions need not be dwelt on here. Every couple has its own favorite variations and innovations.

Quarrels

Besides problems of intimacy, the opposite problem of difficulties with outimacy is essential if a couple is to have an awful marriage. Fortunately couples have been helped to be experts at quarrels and fights because they were able to observe their parents over the years. However, each new generation likes to make its own contributions, and so much marital time is devoted to developing new innovations in that enterprise. A few standard procedures can be described to help the novice.

Quarrels are nature's way of keeping a marriage alive. Marital misery requires quarreling in such a way that nothing is changed and the quarreling must be repeated again and again. Should an issue be solved, a new issue must be found to quarrel about next time, and most couples do not have the energy or imagination to continually develop new issues. It is better to have a few unresolved problems and belabor those throughout the tedium of the marriage. The two ways to end quarrels so they will occur again and again are at opposite extremes: to withdraw and sulk, or to escalate to violence so the quarrel ends with shock and embarrassment but nothing is resolved.

Outimacy includes quarrels which range from violence through verbal abuse to sulks and silences and withdrawals. The withdrawal is the best way to end an argument so that nothing is changed. If the couple backs off into silence with each quarrel, awful issues can be nurtured and maintained for many years. Ending the withdrawal so that the couple can quarrel again is sometimes a problem. With extreme couples the sulking only ends when they are required to speak because a child breaks a leg, or an earthquake occurs. Many issues can remain unresolved for as long as 42% of the marriage. The record is held by the wife who objected to the way her husband said, "I do," at the wedding ceremony and did not speak to him again throughout the marriage.

Violence is the only extreme way that a couple can keep quarrels going without resolving anything. Sometimes it is thought that only some people can be violent, but that does not seem to be the fact. Even couples who are political pacifists and are kind to animals will hit each other. Of course hitting where it shows can attract attention from the community, so one should use restraint and calculation with violence. It is best to start small, as with a punch in the arm, and steadily increase the blows so that in a matter of months noses are being broken. As with any brutality, proceeding a step at a time is important: each level is explored until the couple is used to it. Then the next level of assault does not seem so large. The couple who has escalated in this way can be surprised when neighbors are shocked by blood and broken bones.

A case may help. Once upon a time there was a Ph.D. Biologist and his M.A. in Mathematics wife who got drunk and fought every Saturday night. Those who think education might make people less violent should realize that it does not and in fact offers new ways that the proletariat does not have available. For example, such people are experienced as teachers, and this husband would teach boxing to his wife. "Here is a left hook." He would say, and hit her. "Here is a right cross." They could also use their knowledge of anatomy to hit each other where it would hurt the most and show the least. The wife once hit him in the kidneys with a toaster. Of course in the situation each blames the other for what happens. The wife said her husband was a wimp who turned into a monster with drink. He said she provoked him and was the "out of the blue" type because she claimed he always hit her "out of the blue." Once the husband reported that he decided to give up the addiction to hitting his wife. He vowed he would not be provoked to violence. That Saturday she said

something insulting, and he told her that he wanted to avoid a quarrel. He went into the other room. She followed him and continued to yell at him. According to his report. He withdrew into the hallway. She pursued him. He went into the bedroom and locked the door. She pounced on the door and yelled. Finally she broke the door down and cursed him. He hit her "out of the blue."

This couple was in therapy, and the therapist insisted that the man should not physically abuse his wife no matter what the provocation. Therefore, if it happened again the wife was to call the police. She did this and it ended the violence, but for an unexpected reason. The wife called the police to complain that her husband was beating her, and a young policeman came to the house. He said casually, "Well, would you like to file a complaint, lady?" The couple had expected the policeman to be shocked by the violence occurring in their expensive neighborhood of educated people. The policeman was so casual, obviously having made a number of visits of this kind in their neighborhood, that the couple was embarrassed because their fighting was not unusual. The snobbish husband was shocked enough to stop hitting his wife, not wanting to be common.

Addiction to drugs, alcohol and other substances make marriage misery easy, if not inevitable. However, these potions should be used only if the spouses are limited in their range of skills. To get drunk habitually will make a marriage unhappy, but rather than lean on that crutch, greater skill should be expected of the average man or woman. Every spouse is capable of sober psychological abuse if he, or she really tries.

An example of how a couple almost solved a drinking problem that made their marriage miserable illustrates the risk of going to therapists. A young psychologist was visited by a middle aged couple, and the wife devoted the interview to saying that her husband's drinking problem had ruined their marriage. She spoke of herself as a living martyr to his alcoholism. At one point in the interview the husband said that it was difficult to stop drinking, and his wife should know because she could not stop smoking. She replied that it was not the same thing at all, and his illness was the ruination of their marriage. He said, "I'll stop drinking if you stop smoking." "Don't be silly," she replied. The alert young therapist pointed out that this was her opportunity. Drink had ruined their lives, and now she had only to stop smoking and he would have to stop drinking. The wife provided a 30 minute lecture on how her husband could not stop drinking, and besides she had given up everything in life for him and now she shouldn't be expected to give up her own pleasure, smoking. The skillful therapist, after prolonged negotiations, persuaded the wife to agree that she would stop smoking if her husband would stop drinking. They left the office, and when they came back the following week he was sober and she was not smoking. There was considerable tension between them. They faced the possibility of a more harmonious marriage. The following week the couple came in and the husband collapsed drunkenly into the chair. The wife lit a cigarette. "What happened?" asked the shocked young psychologist. "I'll tell you," said the husband, slurring his words. "Last week I was driving down the street with my wife and she said, go buy me a pack of cigarettes, and she pointed to a liquor store." They had saved their unhappy marriage by good team work, and the therapist gave them up in despair. Problems of sex, quarrels, violence, and addictions are devices to be used throughout marital life from the teen age marriage to the abuse from wheel chairs in old age. However, different stages of marriage offer different opportunities to magnify bad feelings.

The Early Stages

As authorities have often said, a married couple must work on their marriage. When a marriage does not begin badly, both partners must put in more effort. Generally the early stage of marriage is the time to quarrel about relatives. Children are not yet available and romantic affairs are yet to come. Letting the in-laws intrude into the marriage and then quarreling about them is the primary way to encourage trouble at this time. Whether to go for holidays to the home of her family or his family can be an effective quarrel. Of course if the parents buy them a house or contribute money, the young couple are obligated to stay nearby and maintain the tensions of extended family relationships inside the marriage. A productive quarrel involves in-law employment. The wife, for example, should insist that her husband should take that job in father's business. After that, many of the quarrels between them can be about the ways her father intrudes into their marriage. Any complaint of the husband about his job she can take as a criticism of her family and argue that they could not survive financially if it wasn't for her father saving her incompetent husband.

The triangle with the mother-in-law can be used in its classic variations and the wise husband will encourage his mother to guide his wife in how to take care of him, because she knows best. An award was recently given at the Awful Marriage Banquet to an elderly couple who were able to quarrel about a mother-in-law for 42 years.

Over 60 years old with their children grown and gone from home, this couple could not live together because the wife's 92 year old mother had thrown the husband out of the house in an argument 12 years previously. Some couples who fear that the mother-in-law problem might not last and they will have to develop something else to quarrel about should welcome this new longevity of parents and be reassured by this example that a lifetime can be devoted to this quarrel.

Children

It is possible to see the progress of a marriage as a series of tests to see if sufficient misery can be gained from this spouse, or is another choice better and so a divorce in order. With the arrival of a child, new opportunities arise for couples who are about to separate because there is not sufficient discontent. One can think of it this way; when a couple meet, they feel they can always stop seeing each other. When engaged, they can think that if it doesn't work out they don't need to get married. On the wedding day, they can think, "Divorce is easy, and if this doesn't go the way I like it I'll split, even if all those people came to the wedding." However, with a child arriving, the couple has new responsibilities which force them to stay together and suffer, and it offers wonderful new ways of quarreling. There is a risk, of course, that a child might improve a marriage. However, the odds that the birth of a child provides a symphony of new opportunities for the couple to make difficulty with each other. Even the question whether to conceive a child, or to keep it when conceived, is an opportunity for intense quarreling.

There are two standard ways to achieve marital distress at birthing time:

a.) The wife can ignore her husband and become totally preoccupied with the offspring within her. When the husband comes home from work, saying, "The most important thing in my life happened today," the wife can say, "That's nice dear. Wouldn't you like to feel my baby kick?" Conversely, the husband can behave as if there isn't a child on the way. When the wife comes home from work exhausted in her 9th month of pregnancy, the husband can complain that she is simply not

keeping up the house like she used to and neglecting her duties.

b.) While the wife is encouraging the husband to resent the baby, the husband can increase marital misery in a way so common it has been given an anthropological name. At this time the wife is vulnerable because she feels ungainly and awkward and unattractive. The husband should choose that moment to take off and pursue life's pleasures. He can disappear with other women, drink to excess, run out of the house at times when she most needs him, and generally share the birth experience by not being there. As she delivers in Philadelphia, he can be on a bat in Schenectady. This way of sharing labor establishes the groundwork for marital bitterness for many years to come. It shows how a baby can be used to promote marital distress before it can itself speak or cause trouble.

The appearance of a baby's head as it comes out to enjoy the parent's company is a sign of opportunity to come. Obviously the infant who cries constantly and has the croup makes its contribution to marital distress, but is it possible to achieve marital misery even with a healthy baby? Thousands of couples can attest to that achievement. Not only does the happy baby give the parents a chance to enjoy it and ignore each other, as well as quarrel over possession, but the in-laws descend like wolves on the flock and offer a resurgence of opportunity for conflict. The child has miraculously given birth to 4 grandparents, and the early in-law struggles reactivate. Grandparents can be specially helpful if they raise questions not only about the ways to raise a child but also about its paternity.

There are so many ways of quarreling over children that a special type of therapy, child therapy, has been created for it and it would take a 200 page index here just to list the types of fights. Generally they can be grouped into two kinds of quarrels: those where marital fights are expressed in terms of the children, and those where the children are blamed for marital fights.

Using the children to express marital conflicts is learned easily by most couples. If a wife is in a conflict with her husband over the ways he patronizes her as a woman, she can quarrel with him about the rights of their daughter to be equal to boys. Should the husband despair over the ways the wife messes up the house, he can yell how the daughter never cleans her room. The wife who wishes to call her husband dumb can emphasize that the son, who is just like him, should be tested because he might be retarded.

Obviously the possibility of separation will decrease with more children available to blame for marital difficulties. The childless couple must exercise far more restraint. No matter how awful a marriage, a couple can say it is only because they have this difficult child who makes them nervous. Or they can offer the most common excuse for suffering in marriage: "we must survive these quarrels and stay together miserably for these awful creatures."

Affairs

As the children grow and become preoccupied with school or involved in their own search for difficult mates, a couple must find other resources. At this stage an affair becomes one of the best possibilities for encouraging marital distress. Just as a pyramid is solid because it is constructed as a triangle, so can unhappiness be produced in marriage by triangulating with someone in a romantic affair. First of all, let us set aside the affairs which do not disturb a marriage, because many couples stabilize their marriage by outside involvements. The spouse does not object but is

merely relieved to have his, or her, partner diverted elsewhere. The existence of the routine mistress or the quiet affair makes quarreling inappropriate.

The goal of succeeding in arousing bitterness in marriage must involve an affair that really upsets the spouse. The affairs are on a continuum from those that cause the least bad feeling to those that cause the most. Generally, affairs can be classified as mean, puzzling, or mythical.

a.) *Mean*. The mean affair is with a best friend (or, at an extreme, with a spouse's parent). A valuable employee is also a good candidate if it risks the loss of the business and shakes the family financially. It is the mean affair that sends the indignation highest in the marriage. The Affair Award was recently granted to a wife who managed to have affairs with every single one of her husband's best friends, without exception. This left her husband in splendid isolation from friends and growing bitter about life.

A variation of the mean affair is to choose a person who is as the spouse was. A husband chooses the moment when his wife is feeling older and despairing over her age and has an affair with a pretty 20 year old who looks just like she did 20 years previously. Generally, the rule with mean affairs is to think, "Who can I choose that would infuriate my spouse but not to the point of divorce or separation, only to a determination to get even?" When that goal is achieved, the couple is on their way to an awful marriage.

b.) *The Puzzling Affair* is one that is most appropriate if one has an overconfident spouse. The plan is to choose to be romantic with something that is so inappropriate it is a mystery choice. For example, a man with a wife who emphasizes fashion and sophistication can have an affair with a fat, tacky, uneducated woman and flaunt her to his wife's friends. A dignified, intellectual wife can choose an affair with an 80 year old man, or a 16 year old motorcyclist boy friend of her daughter. In the extreme case the man can choose a young man to have an affair with. This leaves his wife puzzled over what is wrong with her, or him, that was never noticed in 23 years of marriage.

The merit of the puzzling affair is that it creates bad feeling but also uncertainty so the spouse hesitates, not knowing whether to recommend a mental hospital or offer savage retribution.

c.) *The Mythical Affair* is one which makes a marriage miserable without actually having to go through the trouble of bedding another person. The spouse only needs to believe that an affair is happening to achieve the goal. Such an affair is easy to set up once one grasps the principle: it is merely necessary to use subtle behavior—or gross behavior if one has a dumb spouse—to arouse suspicions. An odd response to a phone call, or a phone number left on the kitchen sink, or an unexplained absence after work, or not being where one is supposed to be—all these ways of attempting to conceal a real affair are done but without the actual affair. When confronted, the denials should be too extreme, of course. Mythical affairs of this kind have been known to carry on for years, eroding a marriage like a rust over time.

One of the awards given in this area was a man who returned from a war, and his wife was delighted to see him. She embraced him as they sat down on the couch together. About to make love after not having seen each other for two years, the man said, "Wait I have a confession to make. When I was away, I had lunch with a

woman." The wife said, "That doesn't matter, " and she reached out for him again. Then she paused and said, "If it was only a lunch, why would you confess it to me at a time like this?" A quarrel began which was still continuing 24 years later. He had arranged that she could never give up trying to find out what had happened at that lunch. Of course it was necessary to regularly reinforce her suspicions, which he did through years of marriage and the raising of four children. When her attention flagged, he would leave a woman's name on a piece of paper in his desk at his office, knowing that his wife would check his drawers. In the argument that followed each time, the lunch of many years ago would come up to be quarreled about again. Not everyone can make this marriage miserable and push a spouses buttons with so little effort. The man sets a standard we can all admire. There are, of course, debates in the field whether a mythical affair is as good as an actual affair. Specially skilled spouses can have both: a real affair is concealed by a mythical affair involving wrong suspicions which lead the partner in a wrong direction. An actual affair has the merit that it can be miserable and so the person can have both a miserable marriage and a miserable romantic affair, achieving two misfortunes at once. A classical case was a man who had a wife and children and also a mistress with whom he had a child and who functioned essentially as a second wife. He had two dinners every night, suffering an argument each evening with both women.

Marital Struggles in Old Age

When the children are grown and one is too old for an affair, how is it possible to continue misery in marriage? Just as young people do not believe that old people have sex, they also don't believe they will be able to continue marital misery in old age. They need to look only as far as the nearest leisure community to get up their hopes. Any couple married for many years has developed such a range of weapons and has quarreled so habitually that they need only minimum cues to arouse the most bitter feelings. For example, one can observe a young couple shopping in the early days of marriage. The husband chooses something on the shelf and says, "This would be nice. I read in Consumer Reports that it is the best." The wife replies, "I don't think it is a good product, let's not get it and waste our time on something you read about in a silly magazine." The husband says, "It is not a silly magazine, and I will have this, and you won't prevent it, and I'm the one who brings the most money into our house." The wife replies, "I'm sure you think you know best, but I break out in hives if I even have that product in the house, so give it to me and I'll put it back on the shelf." That complex interchange has become rather different by the 42nd year of marriage. The husband says, "This?" and holds up the product. The wife replies "No!" The man says "Yes!" The wife takes it from his hand and puts it back on the shelf. Like a telegram with bad news, these few words arouse all the hours of bad feeling that long arguments used to achieve in their youth. When a couple has had the same quarrel 1400 million times, they can follow it without effort like a train follows a railroad track. Many elderly couples sit side by side in wheel chairs, and if they don't have the strength to hit each other they need only say one code word to be able to reminisce and have all the previous bad feelings without having to carry out the quarrel. They still have their memories and imagination, even if they hardly have the strength to argue. Therefore, one should not consider old age a desert but look forward to it as a time when one can have an awful marriage even if one only has the strength for minimal moves. People in old age still have something to look forward to. Many of them believe they will be with their relatives in the afterlife to come. They can glow with the anticipation of continuing unfinished quarrels, and having new ones, in the place beyond time.