



Reading Reflections

His Needs, Her Needs

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Reflections by Randy Willingham

H*is Needs, Her Needs* is a book I have used often. I use the material as one tool in assisting people with marital challenges. The book was helpful in one case involving a businessman who quickly developed his net worth to over 20 million dollars. A major and well known magazine had recently featured him for his business brilliance.

One of his trusted employees reached out to me for help. I saw, immediately, that he had no way of dealing with conflict that did not include money in some way. She left him after 40 years of marriage and my job was to find her and then convince her, a total stranger to me, to return home as I helped them reunite. Right away, I had him read Harley's chapter on affection while I made a surprise trip to visit a total stranger. When I found her and introduced myself, she said, "Is he paying you to get me to come back to him?!? How much are you getting out of our trouble?!?"

She was unwilling to work with me because I had been "bought." My unexpected visit actually strengthened her resolve *not* to return. Yet, he was highly receptive to coaching. He consumed Harley's materials and the two of them began their marriage anew. This case turned around because of Harley's book. I just coached him on application. I learned important lessons. I eliminated some of my mistakes in doing an actual intervention. I also learned the usefulness of this book and have used it many times to help couples restart their stalled marriage.

My Next Reflection is Critical

My next reflection is very critical. The book is based on the [social exchange theory](#) initially articulated by [George Homans](#) in the 1960's. However, Harley nowhere mentions the social exchange theory in the book even though that is clearly the basis of his model. Basically,

social exchange theory says 1) I scratch your back because you scratch mine, 2) I will make this trade as long as the rewards I get outweigh the cost of getting those rewards, and 3) I will trade you for someone or something else when the costs begin outweighing the benefits.

The reason Harley's model helped the couple just described is **precisely because** the material was based on the social exchange theory. The husband could "get it" **since every good businessman** understands the social exchange theory – whether they realize the underlying theory or not. And, this model provided a vehicle by which the husband could **see** what the wife needed that was beyond the theory. So, it was a needed spark of insight to restart their marriage. In their particular case, I never mentioned the terms "social exchange theory." They didn't care what engine was underneath the hood. They just wanted to know how to "jump start the car" so they could get where they were trying to go.

My second reflection may not yet sound critical. Certainly, it may not sound "very critical." I want to be very clear about my intense criticism. And, the criticism is an intense one.

***I am not critical of the book because it is based on the social exchange theory.
I am not even critical of the book.***

I am critical of the APPLICATION of the book and the claims of the book's author.

I am not critical of the book because it is based on the social exchange theory. I am not even critical of the book. I am critical of the application of the book and the claims of the book's author. Many practitioners of Harley's material (and Harley himself) package his material as **Christian** insight into marriage. Once that claim is made we have moved out of the realm of psychology, counseling, and social sciences into theology. The author, along with many counselors, confuse Harley's book with the Bible and the social exchange theory with the Gospel proclaimed in the Bible.

Many counselors, especially "Christian counselors," habitually make these kinds of mistakes. The now deceased Jewish Rabbi and therapist, Edwin Friedman, described this problem as he wrote,

There is however, a fundamental difference between benefiting from new approaches and buying wholesale into another conceptual system's paradigm. The first approach increases understanding; the second is simply conversion.

To blur the line between the Gospel and/or biblical theology and any model or theory is an **extremely dangerous mistake** - even though not uncommon. The social exchange theory provides useful and true insight about how humans often interact but it is not the Gospel, His

Needs, Her Needs is not the Bible, and Harley is not the Messiah. He is not the Messiah even in a limited sense of being the “Savior of Marriages.” My remarks sound harsh to some but my criticism has intensity for a reason: it is very important to understand the seriousness of this mistake. The only way we can see the seriousness is to understand the implications of the mistake.

As an interesting aside, even sharp people who do not spend their lives applying biblical theology to these models can see a problem. Bill O’Reilly of *Fox News* sees himself as an expert on everything but he is clearly sharp and is not totally naïve theologically. He luckily avoided embarrassment in one of his shows as he argued with an atheist. O’Reilly vigorously challenged the atheist to produce a reference for a moderately well-known Scripture passage cited by the atheist. Even though the atheist did not understand the passage he was quoting the passage did exist. O’Reilly began ranting about the passage not existing as he demanded the atheist reference the text. The atheist failed to locate the passage but I wrote O’Reilly an email afterward and cited the passage. I encouraged him to back off his arrogance and be more careful if he engaged a more informed atheist. Not surprisingly, he did not select my email as one of the emails he reads at the conclusion of some of his shows! However, in this case O’Reilly’s Christian senses something even though he doesn’t really get at the theological problem posed by Harley’s model. [Click here](#) for the interaction between O’Reilly and Harley.

So, what is my criticism? My criticism is that Harley and people who lean on his model have claimed too much for the model when they claim it is a Christian approach to marriage. It is **not** a Christian approach to marriage. And, the danger of dismissing my criticism is to misunderstand both Harley’s material and, more importantly, Christian faith applied to marriage. Even Harley himself cannot understand his own material if this criticism is not understood because he will continually overstate his theory and will mis-associate his book with biblical theology.

Why is it dangerous to miss my point? First, we may think that Harley’s material is Christian because it saves marriages. And, then we end up defining Christianity as “that which works.” Our redefined Christianity then is a rationalization for us to avoid the cross. And, our redefined Christianity ends up implying that people with marital failures because they are not Christian. Ironically, the very passage O’Reilly failed to realize existed in his conversation with the atheist is relevant to Harley’s material. The passage is Matthew 10:34-36:

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

(NIV) (New International Version)

What do you do with a passage like this in Harley's model? Or, how does this passage fit into Scripture if the social exchange theory is Christian theology?

A more important danger is that blurring this line between various theories and Christian teaching prevents us from the challenge of biblical teaching and the Gospel in particular. Biblical teaching and the Gospel **directly challenge** the social exchange theory. Jesus, according to Scripture, said,

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

(Matthew 5:42-48, NIV)

Notice that the Good News of God's love in our lives is that God loves us not because of what he gets out of us **but because God is a loving God** regardless of the cost. How much more can God demonstrate the cost of his love to us than to give his life for his enemies, critics, and unfaithful followers while he knows the only some of them will repent! Christ gave his life for people who repent as well as for those who did not repent. That is the nature and the power of the love of God. God's love is not determined by his enemy or critic or the person who does not "meet his needs."

Jesus' words not only tell us about the nature of God but they also indicate the relevance of God's nature to us. He calls his followers to emulate the nature of God. *The basis for followers knowing how to treat others is the way God treats people.* The principle of emulating God's ways is *fundamental* to applying biblical theology to our lives (which also shows, by the way, that our lives cannot be separated from our relationships).

Not only does the Matthew 5 passage tell us what we should do or how we should live but it also informs why we should do what we do. At one level, the why is because that is what God does. God is right and followers of God follow God in his behavior. At another level, Jesus gives the rationale of the rationale. The rationale for loving this way is because this is the way God loves. The second rationale of why God loves this way is the nature of God and the perfection of his love. In other words, to love as God loves is not just to love who God loves but to love the way God loves and for the reason God loves. God loves people because of who he is not because of who they are, who they are not, or anything about them. Not only is this so, but God is already as he needs to be but we are becoming. And, loving God's way is one of the mechanisms by which God transforms us into his very image.

All of the insight from this passage is missed to the extent that we confuse Christian teaching and Harley’s model. We can trap ourselves by our own self-centeredness when we use others to get “our needs met” no matter how legitimate we perceive our own needs to be. In this model, our deepest needs may never even be discovered.

Theories that social scientists use to describe, understand, or prescribe human behavior do not describe what *ought to be* but only *what is* or *how things work*. In speaking of relationships researchers can say if you want to get x you can increase the probability of getting x if you do y and z and if you eliminate d, e, and f. Social science can never, however, do what theological revelation does and show us a Divine way better than humans can figure out and then lift us up to actually live that vision out in our relationships. An interesting contrast to this book would be [Gary Thomas’ Sacred Marriage](#) and my reflections on his book.

The Value & Use of the Dr. Harley’s Model

As stated before, I use Harley’s material as one my tools working with marriages. I also have certification to facilitate groups of people using Harley’s materials to improve their marriage. But, why do I use Harley’s model if it is not “Christian?” I don’t expect it to be Christian. I just expect it to give me insight that is useful for helping marriages. One of the strengths of the book is the consistent implementation of the social exchange theory. Perhaps it seems strange to read that I describe the underlying model as a strength after my criticism. Remember, however, that my criticism is not of the book of the model but is with the claim, often made, that it is a Christian model. It is not that the social exchange theory is wrong in the sense that it is untrue. The theory describes a very true tendency of human behavior. Therefore, it is often very accurate at describing and predicting behavior. Additionally, it can help us know where, how, and why some people get stuck in their relationships.

I will show, here, how Harley’s material can be used well by highlighting its strengths but correcting where needed.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Shows differing needs	Can stereotype
Jump starts relationships	Jump start relationships
Legitimizes needs	Can “legitimize” neurotic “needs”
“Fall out of love” fallacies faced	Manipulative disrespect
Research base reveals good insight	Research base does not focus health
Social Exchange Theory	Model Seen as Christian

(+) Shows Differing Needs (-) Can Stereotype

Harley's material shows differing needs and can make people conscious that they may not have the same needs as their spouses. Harley identifies ten needs. They are affection, sex, conversation, recreational companionship, honesty & openness, physical attractiveness, financial stability, domestic support, family commitment, and admiration. Additionally, he breaks them down into the top five needs for women and the top five needs for men.

Top 5 Needs for Women (in order)	Top 5 Needs for Men (in order)
1. Affection	1. Sex
2. Conversation	2. Recreational Companionship
3. Honesty & Openness	3. Attractive Spouse
4. Financial Support	4. Domestic Support
5. Family Commitment	5. Admiration

Listing these items this way can help someone recognize that the needs of the one may not be the needs of the other.

I caution, however, to make sure not to stereotype or to project when you use this model to help others. Assuming that women always have affection as their number one need or that men always have sex as their number one need can lead to misunderstanding people due to stereotyping. This is similar to assuming women are always more emotional than men. In that case, why would I try to reason with women? Or, why would I try to get men to feel?

Many times people get in trouble because they confuse generalizations with essence. In other words, a man who has been betrayed by all the significant women in his life may conclude that a part of the essence of what it means to be female is to betray. In that case, conclusions about several people are understood as the essence of a particular trait of those persons. That is, it is thought that it is in the nature of women in general to be whatever my experience of them in particular has been. What if I am just to women who tend to be untrustworthy because of something in my belief system or my anxieties around healthy women? In spite of this caution, Dr. Harley's list is very often the case (especially with couples in trouble). So, it is a very good place to start.

(+) Jump Starts Relationships (-) Jump Starts Relationships

Dr. Harley that he has to have 15 hours of undivided attention a husband and wife git to each other or he cannot get the job done of saving their marriage. He wants to take them "back to dating." A couple can be greatly helped by going back to what initially attracted them to each other in the first place and revisiting those flames. Keeping the appreciation fresh for one another can be enormously invigorating to old relationships. Just the idea of being at your best for the other when you don't have to be can be a gift to the other.

This jump start can revitalize most marriages and many find that the re-spark is better than the first spark. I would caution people against thinking that puppy love is better than mature love and that the early experiences of each other is better than the later ones. Ministry has allowed me to walk in deep friendships with a number of older couples loved their earlier relationship but would not trade it for the richness of what they experienced with each other later in life. In the natural course of things, dating is where you were *before* you got married, not afterward. If couples begin to feel they always have to capture that first phase of their marriage they can fail to develop forward rather than always looking backward. Jump starting your car is ok but that is not the way most want to continually start the car. And, revitalization works for more superficial problems but not for deeper issues. Therefore, a caution also needs to be expressed for those who are focused on revitalizing and renewing at the expense of deeper work with deeper problems that need more attention than going on a date to get to know someone – even if it is to get to know them all over again.

(+) Legitimizes Needs (-) “Legitimizes” Neurotic “Needs”

Some couples are benefited by seeing Dr. Harley’s list because it helps them recognize that they are not alone in having certain frustrations with their partners and feeling that needs are not being met. So, a person may be empowered as they realize that other men or other women (or just other people) are struggling in the same area. They may be emboldened, in some cases, to admit certain needs that they experience.

Additionally, people can be challenged to meet the needs of spouses they care about once those needs are surfaced and made known. Sometimes just articulating the need is enough to spark a motivation to meet that need. As one’s partner acknowledges those needs they are legitimized and begin to be experienced differently by both parties.

The caution is to make sure that, in the process of endorsing these needs, you don’t “legitimize” a need that is really an inappropriate expectation. Any of the needs on Harley’s list could be expressions of unrealistic expectations as well as expressed as legitimate needs. Some who have grown up in dysfunctional families have been the victims of inappropriate expectations. Escaping these kinds of expectations can sometimes demand the ability of Houdini himself. The failure to recognize distinctions between legitimate needs and neurotic expectations even with Harley’s list is to risk damaging both people you are seeking to help. Legitimizing real needs calls people to accountability and to care. However, legitimizing unrealistic expectations that we label needs encourages blaming, sets people up for disillusionment, and prevents real healing.

(+) Fall Out of Love Fallacies Faced (-) Manipulative Disrespect

Harley and practitioners of his model are often faced with the objection, “We do not love each other anymore. We have fallen out of love.” They appropriately push back on this

assumption. They may ask, “Is love like tripping?” “Do you *fall* into it?” Or, “Is love more than an *accident*?” One practitioner raised the very good question, “Did you love each other before you knew each other?” “No,” is the obvious reply from the couple. The practitioner says, “If you did not love each other before you started loving each other the first time then what makes you think you can’t love each other in the future just because you don’t love each other now?” “We help people fall in love with each other. That is what we do. Give us a chance. In fact, if you do what we tell you she will not be able to not fall in love with you,” he continues. Dr. Harley goes so far as to say that he can tell someone what to do and it will **make** a person love them.

I appreciate this emphasis on challenging misconceptions about love. Once hope is lost does not mean it is always lost. A broken relationship certainly does not mean the relationship has to stay broken! Not surprisingly, they do not tie their perspective into a biblical theology but it is certainly true that the Christian faith is very much about love and the nature of love. The Greatest Command in the law is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul wrote that the powerful trio of faith, hope, and love would all three remain but love is greater than faith or hope (1 Corinthians 13:13). Jesus indicated that the fact that we are his disciples would be revealed to the world by our love for each other (John 13:35). And, the most often repeated verse from Scripture speaks of God loving the world so much that he gave his Son so that whoever believes on him would not perish but would have everlasting life (John 3:16). Clearly we are, biblically speaking, called to love each other. Love is cheapened incredibly when we take it out of the realm of sacrificial choices we make. So, I appreciate their challenge to current views on love (though for different reasons than they offer). Love is not accidental, unthoughtful, or something untouched by the will. Love, in fact, is very much an act of the will but I certainly don’t have the space in this writing to unpack the nature of Christian love (the most powerful and the most beautiful force in the world).

The caution I would offer here is that we need to be careful of correcting a cheap and self-centered view of love with a view of love that is manipulative and disrespectful. Much popular level literature assumes that if a man does certain things relative to his wife then she cannot help but to be highly sexual to him. That is, ultimately, a demeaning and degrading view of women and fails to understand the power women actually have with their husbands and others. It is simply not true that she cannot say no as long as she is responded to a certain way. She is not Pavlov’s dog! And, this view simultaneously removes women from responsibility. Harley comes very close to this in his chapter on affection when he suggests that women who do not receive affection from their husbands are almost driven by the husband’s lack of affection into an affair. Harley’s inadequate view of love is also seen in his view that he can **make** someone love someone else. He fails, here, to understand human nature as well as love. Could this be said of God? Can God make people love him? If not, why doesn’t he do it? If so, why do some not love him? No matter what we ultimately say about Harley’s material, it is not more effective than is God who ends his story with an eternal heaven and an eternal hell.

(+) Research Base Reveals Good Insight

(-) Research Base Does not Focus Health

Harley was not having success in his practice as he attempted to help couples. He began struggling with how he might be more effective. As he began experimenting he decided to take only couples who were willing to have sex every night. A couple of things happened. First, he began having more couples in counseling. Husbands are often more resistant than women and this tended to involve more men in counseling. Second, he noticed that his success rate began climbing. He conducted surveys among the couples where things improved and the results are where he got his list of 10 needs.

He found that when women were sexual with their husbands their husbands were affectionate toward them. He found that women most often reported a need for affection as their top need whereas men most often reported sex as their top need. A positive cycle occurred that got them meeting each other's needs. He has vetted and confirmed his conclusions with hundreds and some say thousands of couples. As a result, his findings are pretty solid. When we work with couples in trouble we very often find Harley's list of needs that are being neglected. I have myself experienced the usefulness of his list and many times.

The caution is that we must remember that his database of people for developing his list came from people who were in counseling and were willing to have sex every night in order to stay in counseling. If that your population is made up of couples in marital trouble with males who are willing to go to and stay in counseling if sex is used as a carrot then his results will hold up well. However, think about what his results might have been if his database only included people who had been married happily for over 20 years and were continuing to grow in their marriage? Getting a list of needs from couples in marital trouble could look very different than a list gathered from healthy marriages.

(+) Social Exchange Theory

(-) Model Seen as Christian

I have already written on this dimension of Harley's model. I will not repeat all of that here other than to note that the social exchange theory base is no problem unless it is packaged and sold as though it is a Christian approach to marriage. At that point he could and should have ministers step forward to provide correction. So this is not an anti-theory or anti-social exchange theory reflection. The theory is useful for understanding some human behavior and it gives predictable insight. We can anticipate that as people are in relationship they will tend to stay in that relationship as long as the rewards outweigh the costs of exiting. We can anticipate something about stress levels in relationships. And, yet the Christian call is to relate to others on another model, the model of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The social exchange theory is a good theory. And, Harley's material is a very good example of the theory, but it doesn't even get close to the Gospel. Servants of the Gospel would be crazy not to use this tool. They would be even crazier to think this tool does not need Christian correct as it is used by people who offer care in the name of Christ.

Notes

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1. My comments about “Christian counselors” is not intended to apply to all Christian counselors. I am deeply grateful for Christian counselors. As professionals who give care to others it is imperative, however, that various disciplines provide peer review feedback on claims for practice. I do not mean to say that a Christian cannot counsel or be a therapist. A Christian, however, should note that Jesus was not advocating cognitive behavioral therapy, systems theory, Patrick Carnes’ addiction cycle, Rogerian empathy, or any other kind of approach other than the Gospel. All these models are useful in some form. But, the Gospel ultimately provides our *θεραπεία* (*therapeia* which means healing or household servant).
2. Edwin Friedman, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 6.