

The Good Marriage in Jane Austen's Novels
Presented to the Vancouver Jane Austen Society
March 20, 2010
by
Dr. Ronald W. Richardson

Introduction

As a marriage and family therapist, I am sometimes asked, “What makes for a good marriage?” Of course, there are many answers to this question. There is no single formula that could be applied to all marriages. There are jokes about how the secret to a good marriage is just two little words...“Yes dear.” If only it were that simple. That was indeed the prescription followed by Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, and by John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. I do not think we could describe either of their marriages as good.

In fact, as we all know, Jane Austen describes very few good marriages in her novels. Most of her comments about and descriptions of marriage are negative. We could give one example after another. The majority of her married characters have made bad marriages, and she generally portrays them in a humorous way. However, I do not think this means she had a wholly negative view of marriage. She did believe in the possibility of good marriages.

If we could ask Jane Austen “What makes for a good marriage?” one of her answers might be something like this, “Why, of course, good people make good marriages.” That is the thesis I proposed in my book, and I want to explore some of that answer with you this morning. I am not going to address the most commonly spoken of elements like her approach to romance and love, or to what she called the more “prudent,” or financial aspects of marriage.

Her possible answer is much different from what most of my colleagues in the marriage and family therapy profession would suggest. They focus most often on certain communication skills and interactive processes that are indeed good building blocks for good relationships. Those skills are useful tools, but I am more interested in the nature or the character of the person using those tools.

It is normal for therapists, with valid reasons, to shy away from that word “good.” Anything that sounds “moral” could represent an empowerment of Freud’s dreaded superego that could oppress and torture people with their inadequacies, leading inevitably to various neurotic and psychotic tendencies, and other negative qualities.

Up until the time of Freud, the issue of character, in the sense of moral excellence and firmness, was a primary focus for self-development. Austen clearly celebrated this quality in her books. All of her heroes strove to achieve a stronger and better character. As Freudian thought began to dominate our thinking about personal development, there was a shift away from character to a focus on our inner drives, wish-fulfilling motivations, and feelings. Therapy became a process of going deeper into one’s psyche, often focusing on the emotional or physical damage that had been done to people while growing up, or on the associated guilt around the damage people had done, or feared they had done to others. The issue of a person’s character, as a positive goal to strive for, was mostly lost, at least within the world of psychotherapy.

Now, with that brief introduction as background, I will talk about how I see this issue of character in my own way of thinking about therapy and growth, integrating both the values celebrated by Jane Austen and a contemporary approach to the psychotherapy of couples experiencing marital conflict.

Bowen family systems theory

My understanding of relationships, and my approach to doing therapy, is based on Bowen family systems theory. Dr. Murray Bowen was a Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University. He was one of the first pioneers (starting in the early 1950s) in what became the field of marriage and family therapy. His theory is based on eight primary concepts dealing with human functioning. What I have to say about “the good marriage” in Austen’s books is strongly consistent with these eight concepts, although I will not be going into most of them this morning.

Central to Bowen theory is this idea: The challenge of any relationship, between any two people, is always a difficult balancing act between each person’s individuality and the equally powerful desire for togetherness or closeness with others. Each person’s own unique way of approaching life, and finding purpose and fulfillment in life, can clash with those of the others. The challenge is that we want to be close to others, especially a partner we can love and live with, but not at the expense of giving up our selves, and our own unique identity.

These two basic life forces, the desire for individuality and the desire for togetherness are what create the essential dilemma of most close relationships. Finding the kind of balance that satisfies both forces is one element in the secret to a happy and rewarding marriage. That balancing point was different for every couple I worked with. Each couple, just like each individual, is unique. Jane Austen portrays this challenge to relationships over, and over again in her novels.

If we had Murray Bowen and Jane Austen standing here today, each one would talk about our question of the good marriage in very different terms. Bowen would use more scientific language

(he regarded himself as a scientist), and Austen would use a more philosophical and somewhat moral language (I mean “moral” in the Aristotelian sense of virtue).

However, if we could make the proper language translations around that word “good,” and look at the specific behaviors they each describe, there would be a great deal of overlap in understanding between them and that is what I attempted to demonstrate in my book. Austen’s novels are almost a textbook example of how the Bowen family systems theory understands human functioning. Nearly every page of Austen’s books is directly related to one or more concepts in the theory.

The importance of observation

One very large area of agreement between them is a similar approach to how they gained their understanding of human beings and the way we actually relate to one another in our close relationships. Both of them were keen observers of human functioning. This is part of what we all admire in Austen’s writing. As with any good fiction author, her observational skills were superior. As Sir Walter Scott first pointed out, and many others have since, she was true to life. We can recognize ourselves, our family, and our friends in her novels.

In the early 1950s, Murray Bowen received a National Institute of Mental Health grant to hospitalize whole families that had a schizophrenic member, and not just the individual patient. They lived in cottages on the NIMH grounds going through their daily lives just as they would in their own homes, except there was a team of researchers for each family, who observed them on a round the clock basis.

The research teams dropped all psychoanalytic concepts or psychological language and simply attempted to describe what

they saw family members do with one another, especially around events that led up to a schizophrenic break for the patient and the outcome of that event in the family. They developed a way of thinking about family interactions that allowed them to begin to predict what would happen next in the family as each person made their particular functional moves in relation to others.

Bowen was able to generalize the concepts he developed in this original research to all the families he worked with, including those in his private practice who had less severe problems, and then to non-clinical families, as well as to himself and his own family life. This was part of my attraction to Bowen theory. It was about me and my experience of family and it showed me a way to better the relationships in my family.

Anxiety

One psychological concept Bowen did keep is that of anxiety. He defined anxiety very simply as “the emotional reaction to the experience of threat, real or imagined.” As the level of anxiety goes up within families or couples, their behavior becomes more problematic and, over time, symptoms like, for example, chronic marital conflict can develop. The most anxious families tend to develop the most difficult symptoms. These symptoms may show in only one family member (depression is a common symptom) or in one of more family relationships, like marital conflict, or problems with an adolescent child.

For our purposes this morning, at the non-clinical level, I suggest in my book that anxiety is the key factor that keeps us from being able to live up to the moral values we profess. It keeps us from living out the solid character traits we would like to have. What we profess to have as our own personal beliefs and values, and how we actually behave, especially in our close relationships, can be two different things.

Austen had no end of enjoyment in pointing out this reality. This is what much of her ironic humour depends on.

As a keen observer of human functioning, Austen, just like Murray Bowen, is excellent at describing what happens with individuals, couples, and families when the level of anxiety goes up. It is a central feature in all of her work. Her books typically begin with some sort of anxious circumstance that needs to be addressed. Her stories are full of people who, because of their anxiety, end up doing dumb, ridiculous, and sometimes immoral things.

Most often, the anxiety, or the sense of threat, is focused around financial issues, as in the incredible scene between Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* who, contrary to the promise he made to his dying father, hypocritically reason themselves out of doing anything to help his father's second wife and their three daughters.

Relationships can, in themselves be a source of anxiety. Each of the Dashwood women had their own anxious, emotional reactions to the selfish behavior of Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood. Elinor's maturity helped them to keep from acting out their reactions.

Another example would be in the hilarious opening scenes of *Pride and Prejudice* where the interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet demonstrate an increasing level of anxiety between them as he resists doing what she most eagerly wants him to do. She wants him to be "together" with her, in joining with her plan for getting their daughters married, and his individuality emerges in his resistance to participating in the plan. As he resists her pursuit for togetherness, we get this dialogue, starting with Mrs. Bennet:

Mr. Bennet, you take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.

You mistake me, my dear. I have high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.

Ah! You do not know what I suffer.

On it goes between them throughout the book. These two, with their individual approaches to life's challenges, like the critical task of getting their daughters married, have difficulty coming together on a common approach that they can both agree to. In seeking a balance of individuality and togetherness, each person experiences a certain amount of anxiety as they attempt to get the other to conform to their own wishes. Each one thinks, "we would have a good marriage if only you would think, or feel, or act in the way I want you to."

Emotional maturity

Over against the variable of anxiety, in the Bowen theory jargon, is the concept of differentiation of self. In my book, I refer to this concept as "emotional maturity." Individuals and their relationships vary in a continuum from more anxious, typically more problematic and more fused or undifferentiated states, to better differentiated, less anxious and more competent relational functioning. We all have a certain amount of problematic anxiety in our lives and a certain level of differentiation, or emotional maturity.

The greater the level of emotional maturity, the better their relationships will be. There are many factors involved in this concept of emotional maturity but one I would include for this morning's purpose, in terms of Austen's language, is the ability to be more virtuous, to be able to become a better person, a person of firmer character.

Better-differentiated people are more able to live the values they profess while experiencing the emotional pressure coming from those around them. A good example of this is in Elizabeth's wonderful encounter with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, when Lady Catherine anxiously attempts to get Elizabeth to promise not to marry Darcy. Elizabeth shows a much higher level of emotional maturity in this encounter. Lady Catherine could not tolerate Elizabeth's individuality.

A lengthier example is how Elizabeth and Darcy both have to struggle with their own pride and prejudices within the emotional intensity of their relationship. They have to overcome the anxiety that inspires their difficulties with these moral qualities. As they each do this work, over the course of the book, their relationship improves. Austen tells us more about Elizabeth's inner process for doing this but, by the end of the book, it is clear that Darcy also has been through a similar process of personal character development.

Emotional fusion and reactivity

Anxiety tends to heighten the togetherness force. This is what is going on with Lady Catherine. She fears her plans for her own daughter's marriage to Darcy are endangered by his interest in Elizabeth, and she attempts to get Elizabeth to agree with her and to promise not to marry Darcy and not to "pollute" Pemberley with the Bennet family strain.

As we become more anxious, we are less tolerant of individuality, or of people who differ from us, and we try to get others to think, feel, or behave as we wish they would. This is the essence of much marital conflict, or conflict between parents and children, or even between friends. This is a part of what the Bowen theory calls emotional fusion. My effort as a therapist was to get couples to

step out of the emotional fusion and to differentiate a self more effectively, less anxiously, so that ultimately they can do a better job of relating to one another. It is because of this strength that Elizabeth, at the end of the book, can encourage Darcy to end his cutoff and to reconnect with Lady Catherine. It took emotional maturity to do this. She would not do to Lady Catherine what Lady Catherine attempted to do to her.

One symptom of fusion within a person and in a relationship is emotional reactivity. For example, the more I try to get you to be the way I want you to be (like Mrs. Bennet trying to get her husband to join in with her plan, or Lady Catherine with Elizabeth), the more you are likely to react emotionally to this effort on my part.

This reaction occurs in a variety of ways but, for example, let's take the debate (in Chapter 18 of *Emma*) between Emma and Mr. Knightley as they discuss the moral character of Frank Churchill and how he manages himself within his own family relationships. This is actually one of my favorite scenes in Austen. I end my book with an extended discussion of this scene. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley have valid points to make about Frank's behavior in relation to his family circumstances. However, behind their rational arguments is an emotional reactivity in each one of them that is obvious to the reader, but about which they themselves are not so clear.

Emma is not so clear about a number of basic things, like even the nature of being in love. She is secretly wondering to herself if Frank might be the man for her. More importantly, apart from Frank, she is deeply fused emotionally with her own father. She could not consider the possibility of marriage for herself. More to the point, she could not take the kind of self-defining position with her own father that Mr. Knightley is advocating for Frank to take with his family. She reacts to Mr. Knightley's efforts to persuade

her as to what would be the mature thing for Frank (and, by implication, for her) to do.

Mr. Knightley, on the other hand, is arguing some valid points but emotionally he is very aware of the talk in their social circle that an ideal marriage for Emma would be with Frank Churchill. Because of his own love for Emma, this talk stirs up his anxiety. He is emotionally reactive to this idea, especially when he sees her arguing on Frank's behalf. He tries to convince Emma what an inadequate man Frank Churchill is. Here is just one of his critical comments about Frank:

Yes; [he has] all the advantages of sitting still when he ought to move, and of leading a life of mere idle pleasure, and fancying himself extremely expert in finding excuses for it. He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, full of professions and falsehoods, and persuade himself that he has hit upon the very best method in the world of preserving peace at home and preventing his father's having any right to complain. His letters disgust me.

This is anxiety-based, emotional reactivity disguised as a rational moral argument. It stimulates the togetherness force in him. He wants Emma to think and feel about Frank the way he does. In the process, Mr. Knightley is behaving in a less than moral or honourable way. Apart from the issue of how correct he is with regard to Frank's behaviour (and actually, I tend to agree with his points), this is the argumentation of a jealous man.

Emotional Distancing

As the story develops, his reactive feelings so overpower him when he fears that Emma has decided on Frank as her future husband, that eventually he has to distance from her and their whole social scene and go visit his brother in London in order to

distract himself from his emotional upset. Emotional and physical distancing is one of several emotionally reactive patterns we use to deal with anxiety and fusion in our relationships.

In Mr. Knightley's case however, as a credit to his emotional maturity, he used the distance to cool down and to think things through with the goal that he could remain a caring friend to Emma, whatever she decided about Frank. He also decided, upon his return, to declare his love of her, and to propose to her, which, after some confusion, she gratefully and happily accepts. Because of his feeling secure in her love, his attitude toward Frank Churchill shifts to a significant degree. As his sense of threat and anxiety decreases, Austen tells us that Frank Churchill does not look so bad to him.

Mr. Knightley's reactivity around the experience of jealousy can be contrasted with the more emotionally mature way that Elinor Dashwood (in *Sense and Sensibility*) handles her feelings when she learns the man she loves (Edward Ferrars) is secretly engaged to another woman (Lucy Steele). Elinor experienced extreme emotional upset when she learned of this engagement, but she handles it in a much more mature way. Austen gives us a detailed account of how Elinor sorts through her feelings and reactions and arrives at a mature stance that allows her to remain connected with each of the others rather than to distance from them with reactive criticism and attack, or physical withdrawal.

Unlike her sister Marianne, who has also lost the love of her life (Willoughby), she struggles against the feelings of misery to which she could also succumb. She maintains a civil relationship with Lucy as well as with Edward. The wonderful scene in London, when Edward visits Elinor unaware that Lucy is also present, along with the humor of it all, is proof (to her as well as to us) of her ability to be neutral within that powerful triangle. She has a great

deal to teach us about managing our anxiety-based emotional reactivity.

Other focus vs. Goal focus

Reactivity most often occurs when we focus on the thinking, feeling, and behaviour of others and how we want them to be different, to be more the way we want them to be. Lucy, for example, focused on Elinor, and attempted to demonstrate to Elinor her triumph in love and to warn her away from any moves toward Edward. Lucy probably believed Edward loved Elinor more than her; but her anxious, unvirtuous reactivity will ultimately guarantee that she will not be happy in love.

When we are working on our own emotional maturity, we have a personal goal focus. We focus on self-development rather than on the attitudes or behaviour of others, or their inadequacy or foibles, or trying to change them with critical advice or get them to do as we want. Emotional maturity leads us to focus on how we want to be with others, rather than how we want them to be with us. We work on becoming our best selves. It is a matter of building character. One of my goals in marital counseling was to elicit this sort of self-focus rather than the anxious, fused, other-focus that was a source of much couple conflict.

This goal focus requires us to think through our own beliefs, values, and principles for behaviour. Austen's heroes do exactly this. Marianne Dashwood's change from her other-focused idea, that only Willoughby could make her happy, is the most dramatic shift in the Austen novels, as she learns that her misery is of her own making, that her happiness is her responsibility, and that she needs to become a better person in order to be happy in life and in her relationships.

The way out of emotional reactivity is the development of emotional maturity. Elinor is a perfect example of this and this is what will lead her to a happier life regardless of what happens between Edward and Lucy and herself. Of course, she is sad, but she will not let this potential loss of Edward destroy her life, as Marianne's loss nearly does to her. Even if Lucy had actually married Edward, which happily she does not, I am convinced that Elinor would have gone on to live a happy life.

The same is true of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. She must endure the spectacle of watching the man she loves, Captain Wentworth, pay attention to a much younger woman and possibly propose to her. Anne struggles with her anxious and sad feelings, retains her emotional equanimity, and continues in life by staying focused on how she wants to be with others.

On the other hand, Captain Wentworth has a significant level of emotional reactivity that he has to work through. His pride was damaged nine years earlier when Anne had turned down his proposal for marriage. He has spent much of the time since nurturing his anger and reacting not only to Anne's refusal but also especially to Anne's compliance with the wishes of her mentor in the affairs of marriage, Lady Russell.

However, he could not shake off his continued attraction to Anne and he slowly, cautiously, works his way back into her life. He overcomes his pride-based, anxious fear of being rejected again and, like Darcy with Elizabeth, proposes a second time, but now with a more emotionally mature attitude. By the end of the book, he realizes with a certain amount of horror, how many years he has wasted in his emotional reactivity.

Contrary to common belief, Anne is not a perfect piece of finished emotional maturity. While she can differentiate herself pretty well with her own family members, she has much greater difficulty in

being a self with Lady Russell. She is anxious as to what this emotionally important, substitute mother figure will think of her continued attraction to Captain Wentworth and her wish to marry him if he were to propose again. She has to learn to be an individual self over against Lady Russell's wishes.

Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park*, is another hero who struggles to become a better person. Again, contrary to common belief, she is not a perfect, finished product morally. I suspect that Austen meant to imply that she was physically (as well as emotionally) abused in her birth family, and when she is brought into the Bertram family, she is a bag of anxiety. This greatly inhibits her ability to be a self in relation to others. Privately, sitting in her cold space in the East room, she can think through her own beliefs and attitudes pretty clearly, but she cannot adequately represent them in her relationships with others, especially with Sir Thomas Bertram.

However, by the end of the book her joy consists not only in winning Edmund's love, but also by being able to be herself in a much less anxious way, even with the powerful authority figure who will become her future father-in-law. In addition, like Elinor, Emma, and Anne, Fanny has to struggle with and overcome her feelings of jealousy around Edmund's attraction to Mary Crawford.

I regard Fanny's personal development, in relation to her anxiety, as one of the most underrated and greatest emotional triumphs in Austen's novels. It has been my privilege to watch clients, with backgrounds similar to hers, grow into becoming their own person, their best selves, not, as Austen says at the beginning of Chapter 48, by dwelling on the misery of their past, but by focusing on who they want to become in relation to others.

Slowly, over the years of her life in the Bertram family, she changes from being the wimpy little char girl figure who always

discounts herself, to become the primary emotional leader within an anxious and problematic family and helps to keep that family more or less together. Austen traces Fanny's growth towards lowered levels of anxiety as she gradually better defines herself around issues like acting in the play, by refusing Henry Crawford's offer of marriage, and most especially enduring the anger and punishing blind reactivity of Sir Thomas around this refusal.

I regard this growth as a greater triumph than her winning of Edmund's love. He finally realizes what a fine person she has become and how much more attractive she is than the outwardly attractive but morally shallow person that is Mary Crawford.

Conclusion

There is much, much more we could say about Austen's approach to marriage (and I have said a lot more in my book), but I have tried to share with you this morning some of what I appreciate in her work and why I read Jane Austen. She shows us real people who seek to overcome both the outward circumstances and the inner personal challenges they face in life. While she always gives us happy endings (and she clearly knows that life is not really like that), the importance of her work is not in the Hollywood style romances that we get in the movie versions of her stories. It is in the heroic work her protagonists pursue in order to become better people, and thus to become better lovers and to have good marriages.

[This talk is based on Ron Richardson's book *Becoming Your Best: A Self-Help Guide for the Thinking Person*, published by Augsburg Press, 2008. In that book, Ron draws on many examples from Austen's novels, as well as from his own clinical practice, to demonstrate the relevance of Bowen family systems theory.]