ETHNOCULTURAL FACTORS IN MARITAL COMMUNICATION AMONG INTERMARRIED COUPLES

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Intermarriage can be seen as the victory of love over tradition. Yet, the persistence of each partner's attachments to his or her cultural and religious background and its meaning and symbols influence the marriage. It is the drawing out of these meanings and attachments through marital therapy that can help the couple achieve a deeper intimacy and harmony.

Dealing with differences is the key theme when approaching couples of mixed ethnocultural heritage. To be sure, dealing with differences is a central issue in the lives of all couples, but with the mixed couple the domain of difference expands to include cultural and religious differences. These provide the backdrop against which couples' issues of identity, commitment, intimacy, and separation from their family of origin are played out. Since the core of one's ethnic and religious experience originates in the family, often underlying the manifest differences is an intense web of emotions and invisible loyalties.

Partners' very differences may be the basis of their initial attraction to one another. Alternatively, couples may downplay their differences and emphasize their similarities. Where some couples see their differences as a contributing factor to the success of their relationship, others see them as being the cause of its downfall.

Often the question is: how can the persistence and impact of culture and religion be acknowledged, when intermarriage is seen as a victory of love over tradition, as an overcoming of cultural barriers?

This article describes some of the challenges of marital communication faced by intermarried couples and the role that marital therapy can play in enhancing the communications skills of such couples. The couples used as examples are composites drawn from the private practice of the author.

For couples who come for marital therapy, it is the drawing out of these differences—speaking the unspoken—that can help them come together as a couple and achieve a deeper intimacy. In this process, working out their sense of cultural identity is part of differentiating from their family of origin.

This article follows a progression fairly similar to the one that occurs in work with couples in general marital therapy. Many intermarried couples come to treatment presenting problems that are explicitly related to their cultural conflicts. Treatment with these couples involves (1) helping them understand the meaning of this conflict in the context of the relationship by uncovering the underlying emotional and interpersonal processes, (2) helping each partner clarify the meaning and importance of his or her ethnic and religious identity, and (3) facilitating their mutual exploration and negotiation of their differences.

PRESENTING PROBLEMS

The couples discussed here present problems specifically related to Jewish-Gentile interethnic conflict. However, many of the issues raised here are relevant to other ethnic configurations. Among the issues most often presented are those concerning

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life-cycle transitions, relations with their families of origin, religious practice, celebration of holidays, and child rearing.

Often, couples seek help when they have reached a transition point in their relationship and/or are faced with the need to make a major commitment.

> We've been going out for 5 years, but we never talked about marriage. Then we would have had to talk about the religion thing. For 4 years this has never been an issue, but now, when marriage comes up we suddenly become fierce representatives of our religions, which we thought we had long abandoned.

> I think the reason we haven't had children in our 7 years of marriage is that he wants his children to be Jewish and I want mine to be Catholic, so we just avoid the issue.

Other sources of discord are disagreements around religious practices, holiday celebrations, and child rearing. Typically, these concerns emerge periodically, corresponding to the religious calendar. They inevitably raise questions of how the partners in an intermarriage will negotiate their respective traditions within the family framework.

> I agreed to raise our children as Jews, but I really want to share Christmas with them and I want my wife to accept that. For me Christmas is a time for family reunion; for her it's the domination of the "cross" and the Christian world.

Parental opposition to or interference in the relationship is regularly cited as a cause of conflict.

> For 3 years my mother has refused to see my girlfriend because she's not Jewish, and every time I go to my parents' home to visit, my girlfriend and I get into a big fight.

What all the couples have in common is their difficulty communicating their ethnic and religious predicament, often because it has become the symptom around which other issues in the relationship have become crystallized.

CLARIFYING THE EMOTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT

In working with interfaith couples it is essential to distinguish between the content of the cultural material that is presented and the emotional dynamics surrounding it. Often, the process of therapy necessitates dealing with the latter before addressing the content itself. In other words, it is not initially the content of differences that is central but rather the emotional and interpersonal context in which they occur.

Asking these questions during the initial phase of treatment will serve as a guide for future work and provide a better understanding of the problem and the pattern of transactions around it.

- What function does the problem serve in this relationship?
- Have the differences in the partner's ethnic and religious background been a source of chronic tension and anxiety since the beginning of their relationship?
- Does the couple communicate about the conflict openly, or do they hold secrets from each other, which erode their communication?
- Have they avoided dealing with their differences in order to maintain harmony? And if so, does this avoidance prevent them from coming together?
- Do they experience their being together as trespassing a group or family taboo? To what extent does this prevent them from committing to each other?
- How disruptive is the choice of the partner to the family's organization, and who in the family has the strongest reaction to that choice?
- Does the couple feel overwhelmed and helpless in the face of the sudden and unexpected eruption of visceral reactions to dimly understood religious feelings?

The trigger that causes couples to face their ethnic and religious differences can go off from the very moment of the en-

counter with "the other." Being faced with the differentness leads them to look at themselves in a different light. The trigger may also be life-cycle transitions—marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one.

The stress of dealing with the developmental crisis is compounded by the fact that it is usually during these transition times that we seek the familiarity of our cultural and religious traditions as frames of reference to guide us through the changes. Partners in a state of transition run into difficulty as they suddenly come up against their different interpretations, symbols, and rituals for managing shared life events. Long-dormant ethnic and religious feelings may explode at these critical moments in the relationship when one or both partners experience a reawakening of their cultural identity.

New couples in particular need the confidence to talk openly about their differences. They may fear that their cultural and religious differences will threaten their relationship. Often, new couples feel caught between remaining silent to ensure togetherness, yet at the same time desiring greater self-revelation, which will inevitably lead to the uncovering of tribal affinities and spiritual feelings.

> When we first met, religion didn't enter into our relationship. I told her early on that I was Jewish but that was it. I didn't want to expand on the issue too soon. But it's a difficult situation. I didn't want to wait too long once I saw we were getting serious, but I also wanted to be more sure about us as a couple first. After a few months, the more happy I was with her, the more anxious I became. So I finally told her that being Jewish was something very important for me and that I wanted to have a Jewish family.

To assess the latent emotional material underlying the manifest problem, it is useful to listen to how couples define their predicament and the language they use. The more condensed the language, the more undifferentiated the material, i.e., "this religion thing" or "the religion issue." Such objective-sounding phrases about matters that touch on one's emotional life are usually an indication of unspecified, unresolved complex issues in the life of an individual or couple. It is then the task of the therapist to probe the meaning of these phrases and expand the client's definition of the problem.

Otherwise very articulate individuals often find themselves at a loss for words when trying to communicate their cultural attachments to each other. It is as if this is a part of themselves that has remained rooted in childhood and not matured. Perhaps, one reason for this inarticulateness is that for many individuals, religious education ended at age 12, a crucial age of identity development. Consequently, they may lack a cognitive framework and vocabulary to understand and describe their powerful emotions.

Interfaith couples generally focus on the religious aspects of their differences and overlook the cultural ones. Yet, the Jewish-Gentile intermarriage also brings to light the meeting of two cultures in which "each affects, transforms, as well as illuminates the other" (Crohn, 1986, p. 20). Each spouse is the bearer of a world view that imbues such notions as gender roles, food, affection, child rearing, money, and health with a particular system of beliefs, norms, and behaviors.

Particularly important are the value differences between the two cultures with respect to attitudes toward marriage, i.e., the place of marriage in the family system and the nature of the boundaries around the married couple (McGill, 1983), gender roles and power distribution, response to stress and conflict, patterns of emotional expressiveness and communication (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984), and the meaning of autonomy and dependency.

In their initial description of religion, couples tend to focus primarily on its formalistic, ritualistic, and institutional aspects. Religious difference quickly becomes a church-synagogue dichotomy, a Christmas-Chanukah split, a me-you battle. When

couples become thus polarized around their differences, the intensity and reactivity generated prevent them from dealing with any other issue in the relationship. They remain stuck around the all-consuming preoccupation of religious difference.

> We really get along very well—this is the only thing we can't deal with. It gets so emotional and explosive sometimes. It's as if we've gathered all our disagreements around this issue.

In polarized couples, there is an "all or nothing" quality to their transactions. Each thinks the solution to their problem as a couple lies in the other person changing. They exert enormous pressure on each other to give in. Religious beliefs and cultural attachments become the arsenal of each partner caught in a system of mutual repression. Yet, by defocusing the cultural issue and working on the emotional processes that produce the extreme reactions, one can affect the rigidity and intensity in the couple (Friedman, 1982).

The following are examples of a variety of typical configurations.

> Mike and Susan have decided to get married. They have chosen to have a Jewish home and to raise their children in the Jewish faith. They have spoken about the possibility of Susan converting to Judaism. Mike insists on Susan converting before the wedding so that "they can be defined as a Jewish family from the start." Susan maintains that she has agreed to raise her children as Jews and that, if she were to consider conversion, she would want to do it when she felt ready. Mike does not trust Susan to follow through on her commitment. Susan feels that he is pressuring her and that he does not trust her. At this point they have called off the wedding and have come to seek help. When asked about how things would be if Susan were to make the same request of Mike to convert, the couple acknowledges that the relationship would end. The secret knowledge that they both have is the fact that Mike has the power to break off the relationship. Issues of power and trust on both sides are being played out around a religious conflict. Susan feels coerced and Mike fears her betrayal. The couple was able to work out its religious dilemma by first addressing the interpersonal dynamics that activated the conflict and threatened the relationship.

> John and Debbie have been dating for 3 years. John comes from a white, Anglo-Saxon family, which has been in the United States for seven generations. His family is very proud of their uninterrupted legacy. His father has even written a book about the topic. John was raised in the Episcopalian faith, and religion played an important role in his family until his parents divorced. Today John feels very disconnected from his family and his past.
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> Debbie comes from a second-generation Jewish family that immigrated to the United States after World War II. Debbie carries the name of her maternal grandmother who perished in the Holocaust. Although they are talking about marriage in the coming year, Debbie finds herself incapable of introducing John to her parents.
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> The couple initially sought help in dealing with their families and having both sets of relatives attend their wedding. They are caught up in a battle and are experiencing increasing tension in the relationship.
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> In trying to sort out what is important to her with respect to her background and what she would like to maintain, Debbie finds herself unable to distinguish between her feelings and those of her parents. Debbie is an only child, and for her, marrying out is a betrayal of her survivor parents. Feelings of guilt abound. John feels that she continuously puts her parents ahead of him. Cultural issues and separation difficulties in the family of origin blend here, and loyalty for the group is intertwined with loyalty to the family. Implicit in her references to intermarriage as a threat to the survival of the Jewish people is the fear that intermarriage is a threat to the survival of Debbie's family structure.
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> The initial focus of treatment is on expanding the couple's definition of the problem: enabling them to move beyond those condensed statements of their problem that obscure personal meaning. Next, working through the family of origin issues and helping Debbie separate from her family are pre-

liminary steps that must be taken before she can clarify her feelings about her Jewish identity. This clarification requires dealing with the loyalties that undermine the couple and create a clear boundary around them. John can help Debbie in separating from her family. Debbie can help John reconnect with his. As the couple solidifies, they can begin to negotiate and make cultural choices for their marriage.

In the interfaith couple, culture and religion provide a ground on which the issues of autonomy and togetherness are being negotiated.

> My religion is part of who I am. I can't separate one from the other. It's important for me not to lose that part.

> We want to have one marriage and one religion in the home. Otherwise it's confusing for the children, and since mine isn't as important to me as hers, I don't feel I would be losing something important.

> We wanted our kids to be exposed to both traditions. We didn't want to choose one over the other. But now if he takes the kids to church, I feel I have to take them to synagogue.

Religious conversion is a central issue in a significant minority of Jewish-Gentile intermarriages. It can happen that one partner (usually the Gentile partner) experiences a gradual shift of allegiance and a change in religious beliefs, thereby incorporating a new world view. This process is similar to a resident alien who, after years of residing in a foreign country, sharing its customs, and identifying with its cultural heroes and institutions, decides to adopt the nationality of that country. So it is that cultural content impresses itself in one's life.

This type of conversion is quite different from a conversion that takes place in an atmosphere of pressure, coercion, and anxiety. The latter conversion is more related to certain unstated needs for emotional togetherness than to religious beliefs or acculturation (Friedman, 1973).

> He wants me to convert first and then he'll introduce me to his parents. It feels like this conversion has little to do with Judaism, and more with his expecting me to smooth things over between him and his father.

In this example, conversion is related to loyalty and subversion and not to philosophical orientation. In such situations, conversion is not an existential process but rather an interpersonal transaction intended to help the Jewish partner maintain his emotional position in his family of origin.

There is also a kind of cultural complementarity around autonomy and togetherness that takes place in Jewish-Gentile marriages. The Jewish partner, who often comes from a family that emphasizes cohesion and togetherness, is attracted to the Gentile partner, particularly one from an Anglo-Saxon background, whose family style encourages autonomy and independence. Reciprocally, the Gentile partner is attracted to what he or she perceives as the warmth and togetherness of the Jewish family. Seen in this light, the cross-cultural marriage is one in which partners are often attracted to the very cultural and familial traits that the other is trying to escape (Crohn, 1986). Ironically the other's family style often remains alien, and the very traits that initially attract become the source of tension later, especially in times of stress. Closeness then can feel intrusive and independence perceived as distance.

To uncover the ethnic and religious dynamics in the couple is to continuously sort out the content of the cultural material from the emotional processes that surround it. Only when the partners become more differentiated from their families can they also achieve "ethnic individuation," thereby enabling them to clarify the meaning and importance of their ethnic and religious identity.

MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Just as it is important to sort out the cultural material from the emotional processes that affect it, it is also important to

identify and work with the identity issues raised in an intermarriage.

Ethnic identity is based on a continuous process of self-definition in relation to one's group. The major feature of the relationship between the individual and the group is the sense of belonging and historical continuity, which relies on the assumption of similarity and interdependence (Herman, 1974). How important the sense of belonging to an ethnic group is for one's overall self-identity varies from person to person. The core of one's ethnic and religious experience is located in the family. Thus, one's earliest associations and memories of one's culture concern images of the family and identification with one's parents. It is apparent then that primary family issues are often expressed in conflicts over ethnic identity.

Culture is an important determinant of family life, but conversely, families choose from their culture those customs and beliefs that support the family's relational style (Friedman, 1982). In families in which the emotional intensity is particularly high, there is a tendency to confuse feelings about one's ethnicity with feelings about one's family. A kind of blending follows in which undesired traits in the family are attributed to the culture.

Intermarriage presents a whole range of transactions around one's ethnicity. These vary, depending on how central or peripheral ethnicity is to the individual's life and personality. For some, marrying outside their faith or ethnic group can represent an escape from their ethnic background. For others it is a vehicle for separation from their families of origin; they can compensate or change what is disliked in the family and perceived as culturally bound. For others, intermarriage holds out an opportunity to readjust the undesired characteristics that they attribute to their ethnic background by associating with another cultural group (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). In this way intermarriage may be seen as an attempt to establish complementarity via culture. Paradoxically, it sometimes offers the individual an opportunity to reaffirm his or her ethnic identity and to make creative personal changes. Intermarriage highlights the discontinuity with one's past and cultural roots. It can disrupt family patterns and connections, yet its very diversity also opens the system to new patterns, connections, and creative changes (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984).

Intermarriage challenges one's ethnic and religious identity. It forces both partners to clarify the meaning and importance of their respective backgrounds. It compels an understanding of their feelings about their ethnic identity and its relation to their overall sense of self, as well as confrontation with their internalized negative stereotypes and ethnic ambivalences. It calls forth an examination of their prejudices and bigoted thinking, as well as the attractions and pulls toward the partner's background. It requires that the partners differentiate from their parents with respect to their ethnic and religious identities and achieve a kind of ethnic individuation that allows them to make a broader range of independent and mature choices.

It is in the meeting with the "other" that one is brought to examine one's self.

> To meet Don was a real eye-opener for me. I grew up in an Orthodox home and community and went to an Orthodox school. Until I went to college I never knew anyone but Jews. I knew there was a whole world out there and I thought that in order to enter it I had to shed my Jewishness. Being with Don has opened the door of America for me. I learned about his religion and realized that Christians are not all out there to hunt after the Jews. In a strange way the world has become a safer place for me. I can be a Jew in a world with non-Jews. I want to maintain my Jewishness and have a Jewish family, but not the way it was when I grew up and I also want there to be room for Don's heritage. I don't know how we will do that.

Members of any ethnic group experience cultural conflict when they attempt to mediate between the values of their traditional culture and those of the dominant

culture. Thus, ambivalence is a natural emotional condition for most members of any minority. In the mixed couple, one partner can bring the other to confront his or her ethnic ambivalence.

> I grew up in a Catholic family and went to Catholic school for 12 years. I never liked it. It was dogmatic and no questions allowed. I knew I wanted a spiritual place, but I didn't feel I belonged in church. When I met Dan he was fairly disconnected from his Jewishness. On the other hand, I became very interested in Judaism. I kept wanting him to take me to synagogue and to show me the rituals. I started to take classes and learn about Judaism, and Dan seemed bothered by it. In a way he slowly became interested in his background through me. I knew he felt more strongly about his Jewishness than he admitted. I wanted to belong to his group, which he was ambivalent about.

Jews, for whom Jewishness is a powerful sentimental attachment to the past, who have a strong but unintegrated feeling of being Jewish, often feel that their Jewishness, precisely because it is so unintegrated, could easily be taken away from them. It lacks an active expression in their lives and tends to express itself as a deep sense of vulnerability (Wasserman, 1988). Their sense of Jewishness is a strong, but passive and often unarticulated group loyalty, which is unbalanced by the situation of intermarriage. Intermarriage raises both the specter of betrayal of the group and its history and the fear of loss.

The reaction of Steve, in the following vignette, stems more from the fear of being overwhelmed by Tracy's "gentileness." In his confusion, Steve is pressuring Tracy to commit herself to a Jewish way of life in an attempt to maintain his fragile sense of Jewishness.

> *Steve:* I feel very strongly about being Jewish. I can't explain it. I am not religious, but I do want to raise my children Jewish.
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> *Tracy:* Why should I give up my Christian beliefs and practices when you don't follow your religion? I have a feeling that Judaism is being forced upon me with no respect for my own cultural beliefs and how important my heritage is to me. In your desire to have a Jewish home, you are not ready to accept any other influence. Why is the non-Jewish partner supposed to bend completely?
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> *Steve:* I know it does not make sense to you. Why this gut reaction, "carry on the religion," when I don't even believe in God? But I feel very strongly about the history of my people and there is a part of me that feels like I would be abandoning the dead.

In his ambivalence, Steve transmits a number of mixed messages. Although he wants to raise his children Jewishly, he does not really want Tracy to convert and become like him.

> Be like me but not too much. Be acceptable to my parents but remain acceptable to me. Convert, but I don't want you to become too Jewish.

She is willing to consider conversion, but he maintains that he is not religious and that being Jewish is a feeling that cannot be acquired through conversion. Yet, he wants her to alleviate his guilt and puts her in charge of his ethnic continuity. Her feeling of resentment stems from the one-sided commitment to have a dominant religion in the family, which is his and for which he does not take responsibility.

In such situations, the Gentile partner often becomes resentful and fearful of the pressure, and the issue becomes whether to submit or rebel, rather than to examine feelings about his or her own background and about Judaism.

To create change in such an entangled situation, it is necessary to shift the focus from changing the other to defining oneself. This can be achieved by engaging in a guided exploration of each partner's identity and helping them articulate this to their partner. When each partner becomes more secure in him- or herself, the

other becomes less threatening. With this reduction in anxiety, the partners can become creative in their negotiation of the cultural fabric of their family and the future identity of their children.

Jewish identity is both an ethnic and religious identity. For Jews who are not religious, it is often difficult to explain the notion of peoplehood and its emotional implications. Yet, their conflict often centers around the sense of betraying their people. In contrast, the Gentile partner sees Judaism solely as a religion. The Gentile partner often fears jeopardizing the soul of the child if the child is not baptized.

Children often represent a blank screen against which the partners can project their ethnic and religious differences that they are loath to confront within themselves. Because children symbolize the continuity of the family, its values, and traditions, they bring into focus the differences of the partners' background—the challenge of transforming two cultures into one.

In the intermarried family, children bring to the fore a host of questions.

> I don't know why after not caring about my Jewishness for years, I suddenly want to pass my heritage onto my children.

> If the children are brought up with the same religion as the mother and the father remains a different religion, how does the father maintain his religious independence but also become a vital part of that aspect of our family life?

> If you say we'll teach the kids about both religions, that's pretending religions are academic, not emotional. If you want your child to share your convictions but not negate your partner's, how do you educate your kids?

> I am concerned that the children will deny my values because I am not Jewish.

In particular, holidays reawaken one's connectedness to rituals and childhood memories. Religion, its meaning, and linkages to the family become especially significant at holidays. The so-called December dilemma is a focal point in the Jewish-Gentile couple. More than any other time, it brings into play the differences between Gentile and Jew, majority and minority, and places an individual relationship into a larger historical context.

> I am Christian but always considered myself an atheist. David is Jewish and also considers himself an atheist. Religion is really not an issue in our life. But when Christmas comes, I feel like I am standing on the sidelines. I want to participate in the holiday with my partner, but am unable to because he suddenly becomes Jewish at Christmas. He opposes any symbols of my Christianity, even though for me it is not religion, but tradition, family, and a feeling of belonging. I not only feel an alienation from my family, but I feel very distanced from David. I've become a minority in my own tradition.

As partners become clearer and more secure in who they are they can be clearer about if and how to explore and negotiate the two worlds to create one of their own.

EXPLORING AND NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE

Religion and culture are all-encompassing phenomena. They comprise the intellectual and the emotional, the conscious and the unconscious, the irrational, the visceral, and the tribal. Their experience is synthetic—at once physical and sensual, taste, and smell. Once the partners have become clear and more secure in their own identities, it is then the task of the therapist to help the couple explore and negotiate their two worlds and create their own unique one for their family. Or else they may decide to go their separate ways.

In the mutual exploration, the partners become anthropologists of each other's cultures and archaeologists of their own history. A number of structured exercises enable the couple to look at their childhood memories associated with their ethnic

and religious upbringing. Such exercises draw out the ethnic identity lifeline of the family, patterns of communication around religion, forms of affiliation and observance, and the ebb and flow of ethnic involvement.

In doing the exercises the partners compare and contrast the parental messages they received about their own group and its religion, as well as about their partner's group and religion. They also examine the people and events that strongly influenced their ethnic identity. They discuss their views and experiences of the restrictions and supports they have found in their respective traditions. They establish the commonalities in their values that will serve as a foundation for creating a new world for their family, allowing them to bridge their differences. It is this simultaneous process of deconstruction and conservation in dealing with the past that underlies the potential for change.

The couple negotiates choices and strategies for such issues as planning the wedding, determining the extent of involvement with their families, celebrating holidays, planning their children's religious upbringing, or deciding whether to affiliate formally with any religion. Three main strategies emerge—conversion, integration, and rejection. In the first the couple responds to the differences by having one partner convert to the other's religion. In the second the couple creates their own blending of what they have chosen as important from their backgrounds. In the third, they relinquish any involvement with tradition and even reject all forms of ethnic and religious group identification (Mayer, 1985).

Most common among intermarried couples is the integrationist approach in which observance, ritual, and celebration enhance the richness and pleasure of family life. More than a blending, it is often the recognition of continuity, where each one grants limited territorial rights for their respective heritages in a jointly shared home (Mayer, 1985).

Ours is an open society in which we enjoy wide exposure to members of other groups in school, at work, and with friends. We are at the end of a long process in which the marital pact has been stripped of the old rules of alliance and is legitimized by the feeling of love. Although the wedding is a public event, a marriage is made at the initiative of individuals and is a private affair at the center of which lies the notion of intimacy. In the modern ideology of intimacy, the spouses stand in the center of the marriage, replacing the extended family and culture. Society has chosen Romeo and Juliet over the Montagues and the Capulets.

Intermarriage points to the continuous dialectic between distinctiveness and similarity. It poses the question of how to reconcile mutual love with the love for one's tradition. Expectations of mutual self-revelation lead to the disclosure of ethnic and religious differences. Yet in our embrace of the victory of love over tradition, we have come to overlook the persistence of meaning, symbols, and attachments to our ancestral heritage. The integration of these divergent forces is a crucial task of the intermarried couple as well as of family therapy as it enhances the capacity of these couples for more effective communication and greater intimacy.

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