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Dark Star Duet

A Model of Dysfunctional Marriage

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There can be a lot of reasons why marriages fail, but one model seems common. I call it the “Dark Star Duet.”

Imagine a binary star system: two stars revolving around each other. One star is normal like our sun, and the other is a black hole. The black hole sucks up more energy than it gives, and the normal star must give more than it gets. A continuous stream of matter and energy is drawn from the healthy star to the black hole, never to be seen again.

This is the perfect model for how many marriages work—maybe even most! One party is the provider, perhaps too strong and adaptive for his or her own good, and the other is the perpetual child: needy, jealous, demanding and increasingly unstable.

This model knows no sexual preference. It happens in gay relationships and straight ones, legal marriages or ad hoc ones. “He” or “she” could be either party, so I will just call them “A” and “B” using the masculine gender.

There have always been substantial differences between “A” and “B”. “A” is the responsible one, the flexible one, the one who can rise to any challenge. “B” is insecure one, the inflexible one, the one who freaks out at any unexpected change and who always needs a crutch to lean on.

From the beginning, “A” could probably see some of “B”’s helplessness, but it seemed endearing at the time, since being able to help made “A” feel loved and useful. “B”’s insecurities seemed like nothing love couldn’t fix. It turned out, however, that love only made things worse!

That’s the dark side of security. Whenever you have a communistic system where people are supposed to share everything equally, one party inevitably starts taking too much while the other must give more than his share to make up for it.

If insecure party “B” faces a painful decision in the real world but has the backup plan of obtaining the artificial protection of “A”, he’s usually going to take the easy way out, expecting rescue. “A”, being ever-adaptable, is usually willing to play the hero, especially to avoid “B”’s bad behavior.

But “B”’s behavior gets worse and worse! The more he relies on “A”, the more “B”’s self-esteem plummets and the more panicked he becomes about facing the outside world alone. Soon, he can’t politely ask for “A”’s help, which would be too humiliating; he has to manipulate “A” through temper tantrums, health complaints and other forms of trickery.

This bad behavior may not have been present before the marriage, when “B” was reasonably independent and functional. Marriage created the dysfunction! “B” assumes marriage means his partner will take care of everything, especially when “B” is feeling unwell. Indeed, “A” is usually willing to pick up the slack to keep the peace, which essentially gives “B” permission to be even more ill and dysfunctional.

Soon the binary model becomes obvious: Star “B” is sucking energy out of Star “A” and giving little in return.

You might think this would automatically result in divorce, as “A” gets tired of covering for “B” all the time, but it usually doesn’t. It’s a duet, remember!

“A” feels responsible and recalls his promise to stick by his partner “in sickness and in health.” As “B” becomes more “sick” and detached from outside reality, “A” feels he can’t withdraw because “B” would never survive without me.”

It’s the perfect dance of Yin and Yang, addict and enabler, black hole and entrapped star, and it will usually continue as long as sufficient resources are available to support the system.

In most cases, “A” isn’t willing to make the break unless the dysfunction gets so bad that he has no choice. Especially if there are children involved, the costs just seem too high. So he must survive through appeasement, denial and overcompensation. Marriages like this can limp along for years, and they are all around us if we care to look.

That’s a shame, because “B” would actually do better on his own, facing the real world directly without the artificial and debilitating protection of “A”. Unfortunately, “B” won’t go gracefully. He has to be pushed.

If the mutual dysfunction exceeds the resources to support it, the system will collapse eventually. Divorce will happen, but can take a long time to get to that point: years or decades. Too bad it can’t happen sooner, at the first milestone of trouble, but it’s human nature to hold on... and on!

I can’t tell you how to escape, but I can tell you counseling isn’t going to help. There’s no talking it out, because ones whole personality is the issue.

You either take action or you don’t.

—G.C.

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