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Flourishing Love: A secular guide to lasting intimate relationships

Enrico Gnaulati, 2023. UK: Phoenix Publishing.

I was asked to write this review, a somewhat expected request from an editor, but this time, it was the author who directly approached me to review their new book. This has two implications. Firstly, on a practical level, why not? I would be inclined, pending the reviews editor's approval. But on a deeper level, I wondered "Why me?". I have often questioned whether anyone reads my reviews. Surprisingly, over the last two months, there has been a clear indication that at least three people do, which is not bad considering none of my family members subscribe to the *Journal*. Perhaps it is due to the upcoming publication date, coupled with my tendency to promptly turn around reviews. However, the author wouldn't be privy to that information; it's something between reviews editor and myself. Am I overly positive and amiable, or too lenient, seeking the positives in a book, thereby leading the author to believe they are onto something? Yet, I recall at least one of my past reviews being forthright and critical, to the extent that I was surprised it was accepted upon initial submission. The author expressed appreciation for my reviews, which seems plausible.

Why am I writing this? I have been grappling with an internal conflict, trying to strike a balance between being critical and constructive in a way I have not encountered before, even when familiar with an author or harbouring specific preconceptions about a book before reading it. I feel a sense of obligation – a notion that someone is specifically entrusting me with their hard-earned manuscript. I feel this review is 'business as usual' and yet there is also a possibility that it is not, and to conceal this would seem disingenuous.

Next, the book landed in our hands (read the SEA's), not because it is a therapeutic book demanding attention – it is not primarily intended for therapists as the initial one-hundred-and-fifty pages are engaging but hold minimal clinical relevance. And yet, certain sections convey insights in a

manner that seems tailored solely for a therapeutic readership, rather than for couples, as purported.

This conflicts somewhat with how some case studies were written, with phrases such as “initial global therapy formulations” (p30). Throughout all the case studies, there is a noticeable sense of responsibility implying that the ownership of the issue lies with the client. In this regard, I would argue that the book misconstrues its intended existential roots. This could potentially stem from disparities between English and American therapeutic approaches, or perhaps due to the author’s background as a psychologist rather than a psychotherapist. While this grated me slightly, but only slightly, realistically if I were to dismiss every book that exhibited this, my ‘library’ would be thin on the ground. This starting point however is the cornerstone issue.

One case vignette concerning a client, Peter, his wife, Julia, and the woman he had an affair with, Barbara, left me wanting more. There is a detailed description of what happened during the therapy, including the reaction of Julia when she finds out about the affair which resulted in Peter ending it with both Barbara and the therapist/author. Yet, what follows is somewhat unexpected. Instead of delving into the therapy sessions, discussing the rationale and potential errors in hindsight, the author engages in a fantasy of how therapy with Julia and Peter could have unfolded, a scenario that had no indications of ever being a possibility.

I do not have specific training as a couple’s therapist and, generally, I am not keen to work with couples. From my current perspective, I found Gnaulati’s direct approach on establishing therapy with a couple quite compelling. I concur with his viewpoint that “therapists are taught to be ‘neutral’”, aiming to assist couples in fostering open communication, clarifying their issues, and supporting independent decision-making (p152). While I am uncertain if this entirely aligns with existential training, within a broader integrative context, especially in today’s increasingly litigious environment, it certainly holds merit. He further asserts that for “seriously contemplating the dissolution of their marriage...divorce may be a forgone conclusion unless the therapist is prepared to take an affirmative stance surrounding putting off any decision about divorcing until therapy is given a solid chance” (p152). This statement leaves me conflicted. Initially, the idea of an affirmative therapist guiding the couple back toward a loving relationship seems appealing and, in some hypothetical cases, it could potentially work. On the flip side, should not the therapist prioritise understanding the individual desires within the couple and build from there? Gnaulati’s suggestion seems to rush into taking a stance without thoroughly grasping the perspectives of the clients. Similarly, I am uncertain about the assumption that a therapist could wield significant influence over a couple beyond what they already exert on each other, along with their friends, family, and colleagues. This seems to portray clients in a somewhat immature light.

There was a thought-provoking conversation regarding gendered communication styles, suggesting that men often take turns to listen respectfully, while women tend to engage in affirmations or commentary that create a more collaborative exchange. Initially, my reaction leaned toward mild offence; how could these discussions play into gender stereotypes? However, upon reflection, I realised there might be some truth to this observation in my own practice. Presently, I am predominantly working with men, and the women I do see often come seeking a space to address and resolve problems that they cannot address elsewhere in their lives.

Yet, with longer-term clients, I notice I tend to interrupt more readily, adhering to the notion that interruption demonstrates engagement (p58), a concept advocated in relationship dynamics. This would of course fit. While I am not my client's spouse, over the years our relationship has evolved and I have become part of their lives just as they have become a part of mine. Our way of conversing has naturally changed as a result. Initially this realisation, or potential realisation, was somewhat disconcerting, but as I sat with it, it began to make sense and, paradoxically, felt affirming.

I liked this book, despite its somewhat ambiguous target audience. Gnaulati's writing style evoked a sense of warmth, as if engaging in a fireside conversation while sipping wine, although, being a non-drinker, this sensation felt a bit strange. The book's tone is intimate yet not overly imposing, resonating with someone who writes from a place of considerable experience. As a relatively new father, I appreciated the candid accounts of navigating the complexities of parenting an older child; balancing their wants, developmental needs and the requirements within the marriage. There were valuable lessons abound in these narratives. It is clear that Gnaulati involved his family in this endeavour; the email exchange with his son (pp51-52) was a confronting yet honest portrayal of his son's feelings toward his father.

Would I recommend this book? I believe it depends on who is asking. Some colleagues, especially those inclined toward academic focus, might find it too reliant on anecdotes. However, for some friends seeking a realistic portrayal of marriage and love, one that diverges from the idealised images of social media, I would certainly recommend it. As is often the case with books not exclusively focused on therapy, there is an inherent value for therapists (such as me) in observing the main themes; it is akin to politicians understanding the cost of milk. This book could be a valuable resource for many couples, potentially serving as a preliminary step before seeking therapy. Therefore, it is a worthwhile investment of time for all of us navigating relationships.

Ben Scanlan