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Intimacy is not an accident, it's a work in progress, a review

By Dr. Tony Butto

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Schnarch, David, Ph.D., *Passionate Marriage: Sex, Love and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997.

The great comic and tongue-and-cheek philosopher, Groucho Marx once said, "Whoever named it necking was a poor judge of anatomy." After reading David Schnarch's new Book, "Passionate Marriage," it is clear to see that Schnarch would agree with Groucho. According to Schnarch, the route to mature sexual fulfillment, has little to do with specific body parts or the condition of those parts, but has everything to do with the minds of and the level of differentiation (emotional maturity) of the participants.

Utilizing Bowenian theory as its undergirding, David Schnarch has graced us with his second book on integrating sexual and marital therapy. His first book, "Constructing The Sexual Crucible" (1991 Norton Press), is a comprehensive, albeit challenging treatise that traces our history of conceptualizing and treating sexual dysfunction and explicates his new paradigm of sexual and emotional intimacy.

"Passionate Marriage" is written in a style that is geared toward the highest common denominator. Schnarch offers us a window into real change that is not promised easily. This is not an approach that guarantees the reader a key to quick and simple intimacy. There are no clear "how tos" that will fix the dashed hopes of frustrated lovers and marital partners, or their therapists. Instead, Schnarch's second offering of his sexual crucible paradigm is a substantially more digestible approach to helping couples raise their level of differentiation so that they can face themselves and their partner while simultaneously lowering their own anxiety. It is a book that requires serious contemplation and considerable risk in order to reap its potential rewards -- a lot like marriage itself. Colorful case examples and vignettes illustrate the application of his ideas.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "The Basics", lays the groundwork for the sexual crucible model and brings the reader up to speed on Schnarch's non-pathologizing view of sexual and emotional development. Part two, "Tools for Connection," provides the reader with ways to implement his new paradigm and makes for the most exciting reading in the book. This is the section of the book that most readers will be drawn back to because in Schnarch's examples they will invariably find themselves and their marriage. It is also the section which offers the most in terms of challenges, ideas and change opportunities.

The final section, "Observations on the Process", makes the greatest sense after the reader has not only read section two, but has made earnest attempts at exploring and internalizing its many suggestions. Here again, Schnarch proves himself to be a very different contributor to the field of marital and sexual therapy. His chapter on "Two-Choice Dilemmas and Normal Marital Sadism," is a therapist's delight. It gives one that "Ah-hah!" sense of knowing exactly what he means, both by our experience in our offices, and in our own marriages. His final chapter, "Sex, Love, and Death," may be his most courageous. Here Schnarch brings us to painful yet freeing costs of loving deeply. The links between sex, intimacy, spirituality and death are so powerful (and inherently frightening) that we most often avoid their connections. The deal we make in life to have fulfilling intimacy includes all the pain of life. It's inescapable.

Carl Whitaker has told us that therapy is in the person of the therapist -- that canned models, theories and techniques are useless to the therapist who is at a poor level of emotional development.

Likewise, Murray Bowen and Ed Friedman have told us that as therapists, we cannot take someone beyond where we are ourselves. David Schnarch has given us a book that is a considerable risk for our field and indeed our culture. He presents us with unique ideas which open him to considerable challenge. In taking this risk, he practices what he preaches and demonstrates his own ability to hold on to and validate himself.

My usual shtick about popular self-help/personal growth books is, "if they actually worked there would only be a few of them." With that said, I think "Passionate Marriage" is a book that every marriage and family therapist should read..., that is, if they are brave enough and willing to change their therapy and most of all, their own marriage.

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