

Wang Zhong Hua, *Lust No. 8* (oil on canvas).

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*So one in five of us yearns for someone other than our partner.
Why are we so unhappy with what we have?*

BY LINDA BLAIR
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A survey of some 3,000 individuals has found that one in five adults claim to be "in love with someone other than their partner." This "other" is usually a friend or work colleague. "Even in a happy relationship," a spokesman for the polling firm said on Tuesday, "it seems to be possible to have a wandering eye or even crave affection from another person."

So far, so unsurprising, at least to me. The human brain is geared up to imagine that which is not — "Would I be happier with her as my lover?" — and to make comparisons — "Would he be easier to live with than my current partner?" We're also more likely to imagine what life might be like with people we encounter in our everyday life — friends and colleagues — than with people we've never actually met.

However the report goes on to claim that one in 25 people say they have been in love with someone else for more than five years and one in 50 say they have loved another for as long as they could remember. Furthermore, 29 percent of men and 19 percent of women say they plan to leave their partner.

Now I don't know about you, but I find those latter statistics both surprising and incredibly disheartening. It's so sad to think that at least one in five of us feels that our current situation is so unsatisfying that we're planning to leave it, and that we've believed for some time that there's someone better "out there." However, rather than adding to the general dissatisfaction that's apparently rampant, I'd like to put these findings into some sort of context.

It's generally accepted in psychological circles that more people in the Western world today are feeling unhappy and dissatisfied, particularly with regard to their relationships. We know, for example, that divorce rates are rising, especially among the over-60s, and that many younger people — particularly men in their 30s — report startlingly high rates of loneliness and unhappiness. What could lie behind this unhappiness?

There are, I believe, three reasons why dissatisfaction is so rife today. The first — and possibly the most critical — is our misunderstanding about what it means to be "in

love." When asked, I suspect most people would describe being in love as feeling strongly attracted to someone else, as considering another person to be overwhelmingly desirable. When people are in love, we imagine that they're constantly preoccupied with thoughts of their beloved, and that they want nothing more than to be with that person.

Actually, however, these feelings don't describe love at all. They describe lust. Lust is an initial physical attraction to another person. It's overwhelmingly powerful and it's driven by pheromones — although we're not generally aware of that. When we're madly attracted to someone else, it's because we sense (unconsciously) that they'd make an excellent genetic match, someone who would allow us to produce the strongest and healthiest offspring. Lust is all about the survival of our DNA. It's not about long-term compatibility, about "happily ever after."

Love, on the other hand, isn't an immediate feeling. It grows over time. Love is more akin to a friendship than to a coupling. To paraphrase the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, love is the desire to extend yourself — at whatever personal cost — for the purpose of nurturing the growth and furthering the dreams of another individual. Love is effortful; it involves personal sacrifice, and it grows slowly. Love is not about "me" — what I can have? — it's about "you" — what can I do to make your life richer? When we separate "love" from "lust" in this way, it's less distressing to note that one in five people desire someone other than their partner. They're simply confusing lust with love.

Fair enough, you might say. But what about the fact that the respondents claim to have had these feelings for many years? Didn't I just say that lustful feelings don't last long? They don't if put to the test. But people imagine that lustful feelings can by themselves hold a relationship together forever. And this brings us to the second reason why so many people are feeling dissatisfied in today's society. We find it difficult to differentiate between what we have and what we imagine we could have. That's not surprising. We're constantly bombarded with images of "perfect" (air-brushed) bodies, and stories of "idyllic" (edited) relationships, which, as soon as they're no longer idyllic, can easily be traded in

for another idyllic relationship. These images and stories, together with the advertising mantra that "you deserve better," has led many to believe that "better" is outside of us, somewhere, if only we can find it.

Finally, the third reason why so many of us are feeling dissatisfied is that we're constantly reminded of the myriad options from which we can theoretically choose. We're repeatedly told that "there's a whole world out there, just waiting for you," and that if your current relationship isn't working, you simply need to leave it, because there will be plenty of others to choose from. Instead of making us feel rich, this suggestion of infinite choice leaves us feeling uncertain when we finally do choose a partner. Instead of setting to work to bring that relationship alive, we may start to wonder if we really have chosen the "right" one. Maybe we should search a bit more, for a bit longer? The doubt stops us from truly committing.

These three reasons may help explain the depressing findings of this survey. But the therapist in me refuses to leave it there. I can't help but wonder why so many people continue to live their lives feeling so unfulfilled, when there's an alternative, a way to feel more content.

A better way to live, I believe, is to stop searching outside of the self for someone who can "make" you happy. Happiness, satisfaction, contentment — call it what you will — isn't something you'll find "out there." Instead, it's something that you'll create when you decide to work with what you already have. Of course, there will be circumstances in which you will have tried everything you can think of, and you've done so repeatedly, and still things aren't working out. But in the vast majority of cases, a change of attitude is all that would be necessary to alleviate the great weight of dissatisfaction so many of us feel. The key to contentment has nothing to do with what you do or don't have. It's all about what you decide to do with what is already yours.

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Labors *of* love