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What
Makes
a
Marriage
Successful?

On this particular evening we are dining with some new acquaintances in south Florida. The night is tropical, balmy, and our table conversation becomes relaxed and informal long before dessert has been served.

“So . . .” our host casually remarks as he leans back against his chair, his body language open—an ankle perched on his knee, one hand clinking ice cubes in his swirling glass, the other resting around the back of his date’s chair—“how long have you two been married?”

We knew it was coming. When we are talking to other people, eventually, it seems, they get around to asking us “the question.” *Where is it written, we wonder, that we must always answer this one? The “So, how long have you been married?” question.*

“Twenty-eight years,” Steve replies.

“Twenty-eight years! That’s amazing! Congratulations!” these table friends blurt out almost in unison.

We receive their reaction with smiles and thank yous, but inside each of us is silently cringing. Both of us have traveled this path many times. We know some of the assumptions our dining friends are mak-

ing about us at this moment. We understand some of the misconceptions about long marriages they are “chewing on” as we speak.

“That’s what I’m looking for,” the character at the end of the table announces. His voice drips with sarcasm: “I’m looking for the right woman, next time.”

Good luck, Romeo! we’re thinking. Our social smiles hold back an honest response to his declaration, remembering that this casual social setting begs for a light touch, not a treatise on long marriages. We suspect none of our questioners *really* wants to hear how we’ve arrived at twenty-eight years together. Anyway, how could we tell them the truth we have learned in this marriage of such a long duration? (“Long” by this culture’s standards, anyway.) It’s like they’re saying to us, “Congratulations! Here’s to the couples who do not divorce, or worse—murder each other! Here’s to long-haul marriages!” In North America, where the average duration of a marriage is just over nine years,¹ let it be known that you’ve been married ten, eighteen, or thirty-eight years and you’ll probably get a round of applause. Twenty-eight continuous years together must mean a couple is having a successful marriage. A typical assumption: *Lucky couple! They each found the “right” partner and the rest has been easy.*

We consider “Romeo” seated across from us. It’s apparent he’s thinking that there is one right person out there who is perfect for him, and probably problem-free. He just has to locate her. Simply find the “right” person and then you can expect a successful marriage. These new friends want to believe that about us. They want our enduring marriage to support their belief in the culturally cherished fantasy about relationships.

What we want to tell them (and what we sense they really don’t want to hear) is that we were not just lucky! Nor has our marriage been easy. Actually, good marriages are rarely easy, but more often the result of hard work. Furthermore, even good marriages can be bad sometimes—and painful.

HONEST WORDS ABOUT MARRIAGE

This Romeo at our table should have had the talk we had years ago with Valerie’s Great-Aunt Corda. Our extended family was celebrating Aunt Corda and Uncle Jeff’s fiftieth wedding anniversary in California. We were newlyweds. That evening Corda took us aside and confided, “The first twenty-five years were the hardest. After that our arguing be-

came less intense and less frequent. Just remember, the second twenty-five years are the best.”

The Best Comes Later

Aunt Corda’s words were prophetic. Our marriage is like the wine served at the Galilean wedding in Cana (see John 2:1–10). The best wine (which was only water until Jesus got involved) was served near the end. The best part of our marriage also began after Jesus changed us, leading us toward greater spiritual intimacy in our marriage. For us, the best has come more toward these later years of our relationship, as we’ve come closer to God (and thus closer to each other’s souls).

What we want to say to Romeo and other romantics like him: A successful marriage may not be what you perceive it to be at present. No one experiences the marriage he hoped for just by finding the “right” person. There is no such thing as a marriage lottery where a few “lucky” couples end up winning big and everyone else loses. Although marriage could be considered the ultimate risk, what unfolds in real life is much more about investment than chance.

The Cost Is Great

Consider the perils of marriage. On the strength of a fragile promise before family and friends two individuals close their future options and escape routes and vow to “be there” for each other forever, no matter what the personal price. People like you, like us—who are too sane to risk life and limbs on extreme sports or gamble away hard-earned savings in casinos—still willingly risk their future happiness on the perilous possibilities of love.

The wedding symbols abound with romance: flowers, ribbons, white lace, frothy icing lavished over towering wedding cakes, and stringed quartets playing Mozart. They suggest only idyllic before-the-Fall, Garden-of-Eden-like days to come. The potential personal cost of these magnanimous lifetime pledges is rarely addressed in any wedding ceremony.

George Bernard Shaw noted one great irony about the wedding ceremony: “When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.”²

This enormous gap between wedding symbolism and marriage reality sometimes makes the two of us wonder, *What do weddings have to do with actual marriages anyway?* We need truer marriage symbols on the wedding day. Perhaps society should require couples, clad in army fatigues and combat boots, to bungee jump to their places in front of the minister. Ushers should then be allowed to roam the aisles with microphones to publicly interview crying wedding guests to discover the *real* reason for their tears. And if we really want the symbolic to reflect reality, then a great new tradition would be that the bride and groom demonstrate their ability to synchronize swim in a baptistery stocked with piranha, while a soloist sings “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers Anymore.”

But why be that honest? Brides and grooms will eventually learn the truth, the voice of romance protests. And besides, why scare them off? Only a mere few would get married if weddings were that baldly realistic!

And perhaps there’s a kindness in that thinking, but after twenty-eight years of marriage and twenty-five years of full-time ministry, including counseling and marrying more couples than we’ve kept count of, we suspect that even the baldest symbolic truth would not deter most couples in love from marrying. The prevailing attitude seems to be that *newlyweds will learn the truth about marriage soon enough. In the meantime let them enjoy the honeymoon.*

Let’s be realistic. Would most brides and grooms even be open to a more honest approach early on? After all, no one is more hopelessly hopeful or apt to think that the relational laws of gravity do not apply to them than couples who are in love. Most couples in love think like we thought before the wedding. *We’re special, not like everyone else. In the history of mankind, no one has ever been this in love. We are a match made in heaven, pulled together by some great magnetic force, perfectly paired. We are twin souls, whose spirits throb as one heartbeat.*

OUR PERSONAL REVELATION

Ah, Youth!

We were young, ages twenty and twenty-one, when we married as college students. Endorphins flowed, hormones raged, and, in our thinking, signs pointed to an effortlessly agreeable, tension-free marriage. We were not so naive to expect life together to be perfect; but honestly, we thought “ideal” was within reach. During our dating years

and courtship we had intentionally discussed every subject imaginable pertaining to life, yet never had an argument. We seemed to be in complete agreement in our outlook. Life was sweet.

Looking back there were other signs, but at the time they seemed insignificant compared to the looming, wonderful possibilities that were unfolding for us. Early in our dating relationship I had been impressed with Steve's ability to care for me. My parents were wonderful in many areas, but their *laissez-faire* approach to life resulted in overlooking some details of their children's lives. Additionally, money was scarce. We all made do. It was considered a resourceful trait in the Burton household to learn to do without. Coats often lacked accompanying gloves and scarves. Shoes were always the most basic of colors. I was hesitant to ask my parents for anything beyond what was absolutely needed.

Enter Steve. Without knowing about these gaps in my childhood, and with apparent ease, he began attending to the physical details of my life. I had never met a young man with such organizational skills or ability to juggle details. He showed an amazing capacity for hard work and earning money. All of this he showered on me. He had a great life force and incredible energy, requiring only four or five hours of sleep a night.

For the first time, someone was ordering my disorder. Nothing seemed to matter more to him than me, and he demonstrated that by giving even the smallest matters involving me his focused attention. Little by little life started to change. Thanks to Steve's generosity, I had supplies of panty hose in various colors, instead of one patched-up, all-purpose pair. He made sure I was never without change for the phone or money for shampoo. He supervised my class schedule, arranging for the best teachers and best class times. Here was a luxury—I didn't have to stuff cold hands into coat pockets to stay warm; my coats now had matching mittens or gloves. He also made sure that I wore them. I didn't have to do without, or even ask. With an ability far beyond his age, he cared for me. This was a kind of seduction I had never experienced with anyone before!

We were both aware of what we stood to gain in relationship to each other. Steve felt the same magic. "Valerie brought flair to my order, soul to my function, creativity to the myriad details of my life. Whereas she says I brought her incredible care, energy, order, and joy, I found she gave me a new, spontaneous edge, a focused purpose to my make-something-good-happen approach to life and relationships."

Reality Sets in: Opposing Forces

Neither of us had any idea that there might be a downside or personal cost in being married to each other. In the years that followed, time, that great teacher, would reveal the truth about our relationship. Not only were we not twin souls, we were not sibling souls; our souls were not even distantly related! Unconsciously we had married not so much because of similarities but for our differences. In many areas, we were each other's opposites.

It didn't take very long after the wedding for us to realize we were no longer the picture of *joie de vivre*. The anticipated utopia, the effortless closeness, the exquisite permeating sweetness of the Garden of Eden seemed like a lost piece of our naive history. Real life didn't seem to have much in common with the "Garden" anymore.

The very traits that had initially attracted us were developing the power to repel. Magnetic forces became opposing forces. My insistence on attention to details increasingly felt like overbearing control to Valerie. What had previously been considered a wonderful ability now seemed like a ridiculous passion for the piddly. And on the flip side, while I was still drawn to Valerie's free-spirited, spontaneous love of life, I began seriously wondering, *Will she ever get her act together? Go-with-the-flow was fine and loads of fun in our courtship days, but is everyday life like this even sustainable? Can I handle it over the long haul?*

We had our first arguments. We experienced anger with more intensity than we had ever felt in our lives. And fear: We were haunted with unspoken thoughts too frightening to bring into the light. *Was this marriage a mistake? Did I marry the "wrong" person?* We spent lots of energy in those initial years trying to recreate each other into our own particular images. But without success.

THE END OF YOUNG LOVE

What was happening between us—or not happening!—was taking its toll. How we wish someone had told us that much of what we were going through is a normal, though grievous, loss of youthful love—a loss, we believe, that is experienced by most couples. Our human love, we sadly realized, would not be enough to fulfill, satisfy, and care for each other in the days ahead. We were like the sculpted pair in the introduction of this book: wanting more from our relationship, leaning and straining toward each other, but unable to close the ever-widening intimacy gap on our own.

Not Giving Up in the Midst of Pain

A marriage at this relational impasse can be loaded with pain, so much pain that some couples refuse to examine truthfully where their relationship stands. They surrender their hopes for a fulfilling marriage, settling for a dull coexistence or a mere mutual toleration. But for couples who have the courage not to give up on their relationship, who maintain the conviction that life together could be more meaningful, this passage can become not an impasse, but a door through which there is the potential for a more honest and healthy intimate relationship—a love based on reality, not fantasy.

C. S. Lewis was realistic about the pain involved in the loss of romantic love, but he was also positive about the potential gain it presents to couples. He viewed this loss as a necessary step to achieving mature love. “I believe it [youthful love] must *always* be lost in some way: every merely natural love has to be crucified before it can achieve resurrection,” he wrote. “Happy *old* couples have come through a difficult death and re-birth. But far more have missed the re-birth.”³

Perhaps that was what Great-Aunt Corda was trying to tell us. If someone had just spelled that out more clearly early on! We thought that only “bad” marriages experienced such relational bankruptcy.

Within that very first year of married life, something between us had changed, had been lost, had maybe even died. We would never divorce. That was a given. But at what an enormous personal price we stayed together!

Marriage can cost a person more than any other single investment in life. There is so little return on the promises to stay together when a marriage is at this stage. Life that was meant to be celebrated in relationship together becomes a practice in enduring. For the investment of your entire lifetime, too often the return is meager affection overshadowed by disillusionment and disappointment. No one who is truly honest would blame someone in this kind of marriage for sometimes thinking, *There has to be more!*

Perhaps that is your unspoken thought. It certainly was ours back in those early days. In our own ways we longed for a closer coming together, a way of melding our differences. We ached for intimacy and the return of our innocence. We wanted what we had experienced before. In spite of the ongoing struggle, which persisted with tremendous intensity at times, we each held to a conviction that we had been made to be loved. Something inside us refused to let go of that hope for meaningful intimacy.

The Benefits of a Long Look Back

With a long look back, we remember major arguments marked by great intensity and heated verbal exchanges. Like any other couple, we had the potential to turn our marriage celebration from wine into blood. For us, however, bloodletting or physical battering was only figurative; but unforgettable afterimages of anger in our memories certainly qualified us to heed the scriptural admonition, “Beware of ruining each other” (Galatians 5:15 TLB).

The present is safe enough to examine and expose the truth about the past. We agree with Great-Aunt Corda—the latter part of our marriage has been so much better than the beginning. We have learned not just to understand or tolerate our differences, but literally to honor and celebrate the diversity of our personalities that make up this unique union. We know we need each other precisely because we are not alike. Through these years together we have gained the understanding that this marriage was part of a divine plan, a spiritual meshing, a needed alliance, which when seen through God’s eyes makes sense, even when we ourselves still occasionally experience the painful “rub” of just how different we are.

With a long look backward, we can now see that Jesus has performed the miracle at the marriage of Cana over and over again for us. He has taken our watered-down marriage, with its disappointments, frustrations, sadness, dullness . . . and miraculously, spiritually rebirthed it into marriage wine! It’s sweeter. More caring. More understanding. There is grace for each other’s shortcomings and minor offenses. We are a resurrected, rebirthed version of the young people who began this journey of commitment together.

“But,” you may be protesting, “what if we’ve tried being spiritually intimate without success? Honestly, we struggle to get much out of Bible reading, or to see it translating into our relationship in any meaningful way. Prayer between us is so awkward. Spiritual intimacy just doesn’t seem to work for us.”

Then, good news! This book is for you. There are many ways to access God into a marriage. Defining spiritual intimacy in marriage as a couple having a structured devotional life is too narrow an interpretation. Experiencing a “quiet time” as a couple is just one of the avenues to God—a means, not the end. Often a couple needs some additional spiritual groundwork laid before they can be very successful in studying, praying, or worshipping together. That is the purpose of the spiritual intimacy exercises described in this book. Most couples,

including many we know in ministry, need to build a foundation for spiritual intimacy before they can move very far with traditional prayer and quiet times together.

Our desire is not to further weigh down anyone with frustration or a sense of failure about methodologies. Our hope is that we may facilitate your letting go of any guilt you may feel about the lack in quality of spiritual intimacy between you and your spouse. Guilt shames us away from God. Instead, we want to help you rediscover the relational delight, joy, and great comfort of His love for both you and your spouse. The goal, the desired result of spiritual intimacy with each other and God, is a mutual flight of dependence into God's arms and His love.

Will this work for you? What is your alternative? Most marriages have become too accomplished at adapting to hopelessness. It's harder to hope. It takes humility to admit to wanting more. It takes courage to believe that the longings of your heart are possible. Whatever the discouragement, know this: Even though a couple may not be "soul mates"—that is, similar in all or most ways—they can still be profoundly connected when both are mating their souls to God.

This book is for married partners who want more, who experience unfilled longing in their marriages. If you've ever felt so lonely and isolated it was physically painful; if you've ever cried out to God the exasperated cry of Eden, "This woman [or this man] you have given me!"; if sex has become mechanical, if conversation is formulaic, if relationship is all but gone, if the spark has died—you are in a good position. You are ready for God to show up in your marriage. You are ready to turn wedding water into marriage wine.

Afterimage

November 11, 1968

Honey (yes, you!—I can call you that now, can't I?)

Three things:

1. I love you!

2. Today you paid me the most beautiful compliment a girl can ever receive. Yes, yes, I'll marry you! But I don't deserve you. Thank you for the carefully considered and prayerfully thought-out way you proposed. I know our love has room to grow, although I can't imagine now where it will expand—it seems so big now. Anyway, we have a year and a half to learn and grow before you acquire a little wife and all my bills. (That library fine ought to be pretty impressive by then!)

3. I want to take advantage of this time God has given us to the fullest extent. That means to enjoy each day together, not to throw this waiting time away as insignificant. I want to grow to be an asset to your life—a person to encourage and love you, a pal, a sweetheart, your biggest fan and unreserved lover. Let's not grow impatient but increasingly happy for all the memories we'll make during this part of our lives. I hope we go broke buying scrapbooks and albums.

I am so happy!

Much love,
Val

(Excerpted from a letter written the day Steve officially proposed)