

Making Your Marriage Last

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“The bloom is off the rose!” my young neighbor told me one morning. Her tone was light, but I sensed the hurt behind those words.

“Meaning?” I encouraged.

“Meaning,” her lip trembled ominously, “that Bob and I have started to argue. After only six months of marriage we seem to be strangers. I guess I didn’t expect anything like this to happen—at least not so soon.” She sighed. “You old people probably never had these problems. How else could you have stayed married so long?”

I wanted to laugh. If she only knew! Among my “old people” circle (those who have been married twenty-five years or longer), none had escaped serious problems and some are still carrying heavy loads. The fact that we are still living with our mates—and for the most part enjoying it—is testimony to the innate courage of the human spirit, the power of faith and love, and the practical, often painful, lessons we had learned along the way.

Suddenly, I thought, why not share some

of these examples with the younger generation (if they'd be willing to listen)? With my neighbor's "How have you stayed married so long?" query ringing in my ears, I asked several middle-aged Christian couples to comment on and discuss the most valuable lessons they had learned on their travels together. Here are some of the important points that emerged from our discussions.

You Are Not Alone

It was interesting to discover that everyone remembered the "end of the honeymoon" stage that my young friend was experiencing. For some couples, the pedestal syndrome had crumbled early. For others, disillusionment did not set in until the first baby arrived or the first check bounced. Whatever the timing, all agreed that the "happily ever after" myth had eventually died, and for a while both partners had felt bewildered, hurt, and lost.

"This is the first fork in the road," one man

explained. “You can take one turn and allow a habit of quarreling to develop and escalate, maybe into divorce court. Or you can take the other fork in the road, deciding that even if you don’t have a solution right now, you’re going to hang in there, do your best, and wait it out. Eventually a newer and more realistic pattern of living together starts to emerge.”

Although newlyweds often don’t yet know it, long-married couples also agree that marriage resembles a roller coaster ride. There are downs, of course, but there are also plenty of good times; and they seem to ebb and flow in a predictable rhythm. Keeping lows in perspective and looking forward to the inevitable upswings strengthens a budding relationship and says, with or without words, “No matter what’s happening right now, I believe in us.”

This is the beginning of maturity in marriage. It is also an acknowledgment that choice is possible. Happy unions do *not* happen by accident. They are the result of hard

work, determination, and constant nurturing. Partners must consciously decide to make the effort.

Remember Your Commitment

During difficult times it helps to remember that feelings are not an accurate barometer of success.

“There are times, even now, when I don’t like my husband very much,” grinned Carolyn, wed for almost thirty years. “But liking a person is based on emotion, and feelings are unreliable; they can shift and change for any number of reasons, even the barometric pressure!”

Love, however, is a commitment and not a feeling. Living up to a commitment of any kind—a job, child-rearing, etc.—will inevitably involve some emotional lows and negative feedback. “When I’m annoyed or dissatisfied with my marriage,” Carolyn said, “I try to remain faithful to the vow I took before God,



Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4,5

probably the most important promise I will ever make. I act on the outside the way I want to feel on the inside—loving, caring. And it's never failed. Eventually my insides catch up and I feel good about us again."

This technique does not mean that partners should stifle their feelings or hide them from each other. On the contrary, research has shown that in many cases divorce results not from open conflict but from a lack of any significant communication, a reluctance to trust the spouse with anything but surface sharing. By contrast, in strong marriages, partners are always attempting to enlighten each other rather than shut each other out. Often they are unsuccessful, but it's the attempt that makes the difference.

Admitting that you are fearful, upset, or lonely does help vent emotions that might otherwise fester and eventually explode. But admitting and sharing feelings does not always change them, at least not right away. While we struggle with our more troublesome

sides, we can still honor our “for better or worse” pledge; earning the paycheck, cleaning the house, smiling at each other, and keeping the relationship going, at least on the outside. Eventually, as Carolyn testified, a deeper love results.

“Call it the grace of the sacrament if you wish,” writes Richard R. Gaillardetz, author of *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, about healing his own marriage. “All I know is that we [my wife Diane and I] began working harder to voice our resentments and frustrations directly to each other. ... The difficulties did not disappear, but each of us seemed to recognize, beyond our own pain and frustration, the effort our spouse was putting forth, and that mutual recognition triggered a reversal.”

Start With Yourself

Most partners believe that their marriage would be perfect if only their spouse would

change. Some spend many uncomfortable years waiting for this miracle to occur. However, there are certain things that a partner simply cannot provide. A husband who has not learned to value himself, for example, may expect his wife to constantly prop up his ego; a wife may expect her husband to alleviate the stress she suffers on the job. But one of the most simple but difficult life lessons is that you cannot change anyone but yourself. When trouble comes, it's a good idea for each partner to first look to himself/herself for the solution.

Often, of course, one person must take the lead. Marabel Morgan, author of *The Total Woman*, suffered for years because her husband did not pay enough attention to her, and when he did, he was usually critical. She saw herself as a helpless victim, unable to change her spouse's behavior and thus enjoy a fulfilling marriage. But one day she looked at the situation from a different perspective. She asked herself what *she* could