

A Tale of Two Marriages
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Reading –

Excerpt from Lake Wobegon Days by Garrison Keillor

“[Marlys and Willard] are slowly getting over a big argument of months before. He got so mad he threw the bible out the bedroom window right through the glass. She was showing him the verse where it says, husbands love your wives and be not bitter against them. He grabbed it and threw it. It started out about breakfast, he was going to make French toast and didn’t put oil in the frying pan and she said, “Don’t you know how to do this?” and he said, “It’s not my job.” He talked about Ephesians 5:22 saying, “Wives submit yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the Lord.” So she wanted to show him the rest of the biblical passage. She yelled some things at him—something she had been saving up for a long time and when he heard it, he said, “That’s it. I don’t have to take this anymore.” Willard marches straight to the front door and throws it open and a blast of cold March Minnesota air hits him. He turns around. “If it wasn’t for winter, I think I’d be a divorced woman,” Marlys tells her mother the next morning.”

You don’t have to go far to get relationship advice these days. The self help section of any book store, your mother-in-law, the bible, and even Good Housekeeping are only too glad to tell you what you should do to improve or save your relationship. There is a lot out there, some helpful, some not. Resources for almost any stage in a relationship. In fact, when my husband and I were first *dating*, we listened to the book on tape, “Men Are From Mars, Women are from Venus,” just so there weren’t any future misunderstandings I guess.

Let me say that I speak broadly of romantic relationships. Many books use the term “marriage” but also speak of same-sex unions. Most researchers will say that many of the issues are the same. There are books full of lists of how to have a good relationship. There are the 8 Commitments of a Spiritually Fulfilling Life Together that include being warm, making the relationship a priority, and being patient during change. There are the Ten Ways to Promote Relationship Success from Extraordinary Relationships which range from not being anxious, to taking responsibility for you. There are the Three Essentials for a Happy Marriage which includes commitment to growth and accepting conflict. In The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by psychology professor, John Gottman, some version of all these things is included in the seven as well.

Each of these books and I am sure there are hundreds more, say similar things, just from different perspectives. One professional in the field told me that really most come down to the same thing, that it is generally agreed that making a relationship work requires acceptance and what he called, the “F” word. I am talking about the crucial act of forgiveness. Gottman, one of the leaders in relationship study, writes that instead of appreciating the qualities that are good in your partner, we sometimes focus on the flaws. On top of that, if you’re self-critical, you see your own flaws and get discouraged about ever being able to solve any problems. Accepting and forgiving flaws in yourself and in your partner is one of the best things you can do for yourself and your relationship.

But if you are anything like me, there are just some things that aren’t going to change and you just can’t let them go! Gottman calls these “perpetual problems.” These are the issues that resurface on a regular basis. He notes that what is important is to avoid being gridlocked by them. Eventually you may have to forgive the escalated emotions and accept that you just won’t agree on the subject. “Despite what many therapists will tell you,” he writes, “you don’t have to resolve major marital conflicts for your marriage to thrive.” Of course, I have found that most relationship

experts believe that most problems are solvable. It doesn't mean the problems are any less painful, but finding ways to see your partner's perspective and being a good listener without rolling your eyes can go a long way! In some cases, we do have to judge how important the issue is and decide that acceptance and forgiveness is the best solution rather than talking or shouting the issue into the ground. In my own relationship, I have grown to accept that my husband believes that there is a right and a wrong way to put toilet paper on the roll. He is wrong of course, but he is entitled to his opinion. I also forgive him that he will never stack the dishes in the dishwasher the way they are supposed to be for optimal cleaning. I have found what issues are important enough to me put energy into. There are disagreements that I have a bigger stake in, like the one about my favorite rhododendrons outside the kitchen window being cut down to make way for a 50 foot deck off the back of the house!

But even that conflict is not enough to end the relationship. Thankfully, many people find that there are many more positive things than negative in their relationships, if only they would stop and consider them. One way I like to do that is to take the little quizzes and love scales you can find in books and magazines. Ok, some are really weird, but whatever works to get a couple really communicating about what bothers them has to be a good thing! My husband finds it funny and sometimes irritating when I corner him to ask, "What is your wife's Social Security number? Favorite 18th century novel?" In the end, his answer to these queries is, "Our relationship is as good as anyone else's. Are we done now?"

Some books and quizzes though, may lead you to believe that following the eight strategies or repeating nine mantras will make everything all right. Whether same sex or opposite, relationships are work, but we just want a quick fix. I still remember being just months into my own marriage when I said to Jerry, "Nobody said it would be this hard!" Getting high compatibility scores on these quizzes doesn't guarantee a harmonious relationship. Making a romantic relationship work is not rocket science. If it were as easy as that, more people would be successful at it and there wouldn't be so many books about ways to work on it!

No matter how many magazine quizzes you pass or how many couples counseling hours you receive, some partnerships don't work. There are some relationships that just can't be fixed. I will tell you that that was absolutely true for my parents. I'm glad they recognized it early on before they drove each other crazy! That is my well informed opinion now. In my 20's I thought that I could be in a serious relationship with most anyone. I really didn't fully grasp why people ever separated. I imagined that the 50% divorce rate in this country had to be because people were lazy and didn't even try to work on the relationship.

Now, approaching my 10th anniversary and my 40th birthday, I have a little different perspective. At different stages in our lives, the things that are important change.

I found having a partner with some differences of opinion was an important factor for me. When I first began dating in college, I thought someone who just agreed to everything and never expressed contrary ideas felt like heaven. Later, I saw it as a weakness. I figured out finally, that I wanted my partner to be strong and able to care for himself. I also needed to feel safe with them. I even had a couple of my own test questions for this. "Would I go to a foreign country with this person?" "Would I fall asleep in the car while this person was driving?" Silly, right? I realized that I did not want to be the person fully in charge all the time. I did not want to be the only "decider." Once I recognized this, narrowing down my soul mate was easier.

We hopefully all go into relationships knowing that there are just some things you will never agree upon. We work to respect the other person's point of view and not see them as a lesser human being for it. With that acceptance and forgiveness of yourself and your partner, there's a good chance you can make things work.

Several years ago, a young friend of mine sought marital advice from me during some rough spots in her marriage. She told me that she saw my marriage as a good example of how relationships

should be. We were full of love, liberalism, and latitude. They were having problems with what to do with their free time and where to spend their money. The husband eventually came to realize and accept that bike racing would never become a passion for his wife and she learned to forgive his impulse purchases of racing gear.

Her perception of our relationship surprised me. I haven't really seen my partnership as ideal. But perhaps what she saw was two people who took time to work at their relationship. I was stunned one day when someone spoke to me about her relationship problems and then added that I probably didn't understand how a relationship could be so stressful. Ministers are sometimes mistakenly seen as the gods and goddesses of good relationships. Just as many, if not more ministers' relationships, don't work out as other people's. In fact, when I began seminary, I was convinced that I would never marry because of how the private lives of ministers can be scrutinized. I thought it would be too much work to keep up appearances. Of course, I realize now that it really doesn't matter what you do for a living. Your relationship will take much more than a degree in rocket science!

When I officiate at commitment ceremonies and weddings, legal or not, my main message is always that relationships take work. It is hard, grueling, and sometimes maddening work. If they don't run from the church right then, I know they might make it! But when I speak of the work, the acts of acceptance and forgiveness, I stress that not all of the work is done with the couple locked in a room. It may sound a bit counterproductive, but some of the work is best done alone.

I have always been taken with Rilke's way of looking at the need for solitude in relationships. He wrote, "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see each other whole against the sky." Last year, for our anniversary, I asked my husband for a weekend alone. That, I thought, would be the best thing for us as a couple. I wanted some time to myself away from the pressures of pleasing members of the family. I wanted to be completely selfish for a couple of days and not feel guilty about it! It was a fantastic gift and we were all refreshed when we got back together. I wanted more than ever to show my family how much I loved them. I have offered this same gift to my husband.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh also saw the importance of being alone in relationships. She wrote in "Gift from the Sea," "It is not the desert island nor the stony wilderness that cuts you from the people you love. It is the wilderness in the mind, the desert wastes in the heart through which one wanders lost and a stranger...Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others...And for me, the core, the inner spring can best be re-found through solitude."

So this all sounds too difficult, doesn't it? As the song says, "Let's call the whole thing off!" Not so fast, Gottman says that making partnerships work is surprisingly simple. Happy couples are not "smarter, richer, or more psychologically astute than others." What they do is keep negative thoughts and feelings about the other person from overwhelming their positive ones. This reminds me of the only advice my grandmother ever gave me. "Never go to bed mad." I am sure you have heard it before. And I remember some pretty big arguments between my grandparents – most of them about turning the wrong way during a road trip or about my grandmother's cooking. Grandma was sure she was reading the map better than Grandpa, and Grandpa was a chef, but never cooked at home yet he was never short on advice on how to do things! Granted, many of the arguments were silly and blown out of proportion, but as angry as they would get and as bad as their language became (I learned some great words from them when I was 5 and 6), at the end of the day, you knew it would be over and by the next morning erased from memory. Now I don't ever remember any of these arguments actually resulting in a solution or someone winning. It just seems the issue sort of faded away and they agreed to disagree. As I remember it, they disagreed a lot. But what I

remember most is how very much they seemed to love one another! They said it often and in front of others.

To be fair, although many problems are easily resolved, not every one is solvable. There are situations that are beyond acceptance and forgiveness. From pastoral counseling sessions, from personal experience, to watching the relationships of family members, I sometimes see there are solutions and sometimes I do not. I am by no means an expert. Seeing something from the outside is far different than being entangled in the issue. If I am the one in the midst of conflict, I usually have no idea what to do! Ultimately though, in those huge issues in our lives, we both accept and forgive or we find the best thing for everyone is to move on.

Whether you are in a relationship, are looking for one, or remembering one, remember that good relationships are not rocket science, they are complicated systems of give and take, acceptance and forgiveness, listening and being heard, and taking the occasional couples quiz without rolling your eyes.