



Marriage on My Mind

Trudy Boyle

Marriage is on my mind. More accurately, the question of what it takes to have a good marriage is what attracts my attention. Thirteen years ago, Gottfried and I began a life together, and we went looking for something that would help us live well together, under the same roof, in harmony and goodwill. That is one of the reasons we were attracted to the principles of Morita and Naikan therapies. Also my daughter is getting married next May to a wonderful young man. Like many parents who joyfully anticipate their child's marriage, we know that love and good intentions will not be enough for them to enjoy a lifetime of loving and committed togetherness.

So I am doing my own small-scale and totally biased study. What does it take to have a long standing (not long suffering) marriage? One where the partners genuinely like and respect each other after many years. One where they treat each other with admiration, civility, and loving actions. My research involves pestering friends, relatives and acquaintances who have been together for more than twenty five years, and, who appear to have made a better go of it than most. I ask them for their advice, their stories, their words of wisdom

Three themes that keep re-appearing are as follows: (1) an attitude of acceptance (or as one friend put it, “no

blame”); (2) ensuring adequate time together; and (3) creating and cultivating small but important rituals in daily life.

Acceptance

In a recent workshop we asked participants to choose someone they admire, living or dead, and list the reasons for their admiration. Everyone took notice when the CEO said that her most-admired person was her husband of thirty years. This was the first time in a hundred workshops that someone chose their spouse!

The reasons she gave for her admiration were as follows:

1. his ability to pay attention, to focus, to listen and to be aware.
2. his sense of humor
3. his perseverance in always moving forward even when obstacles are in the way.
4. his ongoing acceptance of her and continual encouragement for whatever she is doing.

Acceptance is a quality that has come up in all these “good marriages.” And it is a quality that is particularly difficult to cultivate when so much of our efforts go into trying to change the ones we love. Family therapist Jim Roberts puts it so clearly in his recent book,

Deliberate Love (N.L. Euwer & Co, 2004):

“It seems human nature to desire something other than what is . . . clients hear of “perfect husbands or perfect wives and they want one of those themselves. They hear of people who are “fulfilled,” “happy,” or “successful” and they want to be such a person. They know these goals require change and believe that therapy can make it happen. This zeal for change is often appropriate and even admirable. But after many years as a provider and consumer of psychotherapy, I think there is too much emphasis on change and not enough on acceptance. Accepting reality is not just a seemingly alternative we can settle for as a consequence for not getting what we want. Accepting things as they are is a prerequisite for good mental health, inner peace, and relationship harmony.

Roberts’ entire book is devoted to a subject that is short-changed in Western psychology — the role of *mindful attention* and *acceptance* in intimate relationships. How we choose to focus our attention, and how we accept the other, clearly makes a difference between destructive behaviours and loving behaviours.

A good friend, married 35 years, explained that an

important aspect of their exceptional marriage was an attitude of “no blame.” “Early in our marriage,” she said, “we instituted a policy of *no blame* and we have stuck to it, even when it was difficult. This means that no matter what happens, we assume the other is doing the best they can under the circumstances and any obstacle or setback belongs to both of us to solve, in an intelligent, civil and thoughtful way.”

I enjoy being with this couple. They laugh at each other’s stories, they include each other in conversation, they don’t criticize or point out flaws, and they express appreciation naturally, each one giving the other credit for their fortunate marriage. In other words, they treat each other the way they would their best friend.

The research of John Gottman, Professor of Psychology, and author of *The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work* (Crown, 1999), validates, in the laboratory, what my friends discovered experientially. “Certain kinds of negativity,” he writes, “if allowed to run rampant, are so lethal to a relationship that I call them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse — criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.” Gottman’s key to saving marriages came from studying happy marriages, and his strategy for “divorce-proofing” a marriage is not based on “working out” the negative behaviour, but rather is largely dependent on seeing how we treat each other when we’re not fighting. “The foundation of my approach is to strengthen the friendship that is at the heart of any marriage.”

Little Rituals

Besides seeing each other as best friends, another attribute common to the couples I interviewed was the cultivation of rituals in the marriage. These rituals included the more obvious celebrations such as anniversaries and holidays as well as less obvious ones used in everyday life. One couple described their daily exercise ritual. For the past 30 years, other than when their children were small, they have exercised five days a week at 5:30 AM. As the children grew they also joined in. “This ritual has proven sound for body and mind and heart,” they claim, “and it has strengthened our friendship.”

To do this daily ritual they had to say no to all kinds of other attractive offers: night school, book clubs, and other leisure activities that would have kept them out late. Getting up everyday at 5:15 A.M. meant going to bed by 9:30 P.M., another important ritual, and one they credit for fostering togetherness.

Gottfried and I have mealtime rituals which simply involve cooking good food, lighting a candle, setting a pretty table, putting on a lovely piece of music and sitting down together to eat and talk. When we toast, we always look each other in the eye. It is a little like a blessing for the other.

William Doherty, in his book, *Take Back Your Marriage* (Guilford Press, 2001), talks about the importance of rituals as a way to help us “stick together in a world that pulls us apart.”

“The biggest threat to good marriages is everyday living . . . what I mean is getting lost in the logistics of everyday life. We spend most of our time at home managing a household, taking care of children, and pursuing solitary activities like watching television or working . . . at best we feel like effective co-managers of a family business. At worst, we feel like ships passing in the night. By the time the kids leave home, we may not remember how to be different with each other.

But it doesn't have to be this way. The key to growing a marriage that is personal, and not logistical, is to be intentional about the connection rituals of everyday life. If more couples

did this, I am convinced that a lot of divorce lawyers and marital therapists would be put out of business. And doing it is within the reach of all of us, no matter what our family backgrounds or personal problems or past marital problems.”

Connecting rituals that some couples use are things like reading aloud to each other, greeting and good-bye rituals, celebrating achievements, a daily walk, cards and notes of affection for no special reason, going to bed at the same, and as Doherty adds, “moving the television out of your bedroom.”

Time Together

The couples I spoke to all seemed to have meaningful rituals in their lives, one of which was creating time just for each other. For three couples, the early years of marriage were spent living

far from family and friends. The couples reflected on this experience with comments such as, “it required us to rely on each other; it forced us to call on our own resources; we became good friends at that time; we cultivated common interests that we still have; we grew up together; it allowed us to create our own rituals around how we celebrate holidays.”

They all considered this early formation “time away” as instrumental in creating and sustaining a good marriage. They matured as couples, and as individuals, and gained confidence in their ability to create a life together.

A consequence of these early experiences for our friends is that they recognized the importance of *time together*; and they continue to cultivate it. One couple, both teachers, explained it as the reason they turned down high paying and high status positions. “We have seen too many couples drift apart, as the demands of work ate up all available time, and we didn't want that to happen in our marriage. Time together is of vital importance to a healthy marriage and is one of the most difficult rituals to maintain as everyday life keeps getting in the way.”

Friends recently explained why they took an unexpected holiday. “It was good for our marriage,” they both said. I thought about this when I wanted to do something contrary to what Gottfried wanted to do. I

All of us are so liable to human error that unless we have some capacity to bear with the errors of others, and they with ours, we will not be able to maintain a lasting relationship with anybody.

- Eknath Easwaren -

asked myself, “at this time, is this good for our relationship?” My own answer was “no” and I changed my plans. We are both discovering that we need to decline some of the wonderful invitations reality offers us, because our marriage needs “time together.”

My study is far from over. Fortunately I know several couples who have wisely and purposefully built healthy, loving, long term marriages, and I am still collecting their words of wisdom. Perspectives from eastern psychology, spiritual traditions, and writers like those mentioned here, offer us encouraging words and practical tools to help us make our marriages work well. And of course we have each other to practice with and that is the hopeful and glorious part of this journey.

In our case, Gottfried and I are in this lifeboat together; we work hard not to flounder too long on rocky shoals. Occasionally a wave swamps us. We hold on, trust in each other’s goodwill and commitment, do what needs doing next, and see what can be learned for the next time. Now in our 14th year together, we can appreciate the storms as well as the smooth sailing we have encountered. We continue to honour the journey.

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