

Lasting Marriages

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Permanence

“For the times, they are a-changin...” Bob Dylan

It has been said that the rapidity of social, economic and technological change that we humans are experiencing at the beginning of the 21st century is like being in a “permanent white-water world.” Take a moment to reflect back a few years and think of the first time you ever saw a microwave oven, a fax machine, a cellular telephone, a CD player, the internet, an e-mail message... and the list goes on. And technology is not the only thing that’s changing: our understanding of the universe, planets and stars, the environment and global climate, health and the human genome, long term concerns about the toxins we have released into the air and water around us. Feeling anxious yet? Do you get that same sort of feeling when you listen to the news?

Seems like every day you can see or hear something new that could be very important to you, maybe even critical for your future or your children’s future, and yesterday you didn’t even know about it. So what else could be lurking out there that may be just that single critical piece of information on which your future will pivot? If it ever were true that “what you don’t know can’t hurt you,” it certainly is not the case now. It very well may be that the biggest reason a constant diet of world news can generate a large dose of depression and anxiety is not because it’s all bad news (and sometimes it is) but because it all changes so fast, and seems so far beyond our control. Many of us go through life these days

with the same feeling one might have in a nightmare in which one is a passenger in a car being driven too fast through totally unfamiliar surroundings.

Stop the ride. Take a deep breath, and if you’re at a spot where you can do it right now, go outside and look at something that has been changeless for years. An old tree, a river, the sky with drifting clouds, the sun, moon or stars, a simple flower which would have bloomed in the same way centuries ago, the waves which have crashed into the beach for centuries. We all need anchors. A sense of connection to the timeless. A personal sense of a changeless core within that will remain whole regardless of whirlwind changes without. That is at least one reason why a strong spiritual faith is important, or a sense of roots in a family, or a connection to geography that has been the setting for much of your personal story. These things define our selves and our values, what is most important to us. And paradoxically, a strong connection to the changeless will make it easier for us to adapt to the changes necessary to thrive in our rapidly changing world. Stephen Covey puts it this way, “As you live your values, your sense of identity, integrity, control and inner-directedness will infuse you with both exhilaration and peace. You will define yourself from within, rather than by people’s opinions or by comparisons to others. Ironically, you’ll find that as you care less about what others think of you, you will care more about what others think of themselves and their worlds, including their relationships with you. In

addition, you'll find it easier and more desirable to change because there is something - some core deep within - that is essentially changeless."

This sense of inner permanence, personal integrity defined as a value system that would stand regardless of the opinions of others (even a husband or wife), forms the basis of one of the mysteries of marriage. It is only when I am truly independent and wholly capable of living on my own that I can be an anchor for my spouse, someone dependable enough to be leaned on. It is possible to say in effect, "I don't need you, but I love you enough to choose that we can go to the end of our days leaning on each other, complementing and completing each other." Personal independence forms the only solid foundation for true partnership.

But, if I don't need my spouse, what then? Am I not more likely just to walk out? Wouldn't a sense of need, emptiness without you, two people feeling incomplete without the other be a more secure situation? Maybe then I would be too scared to walk out on the marriage. Not really. Who wants to live like two parasites for long? The drain is too great, the emotional cost is high, and ends in too many sad failures where neither husband nor wife can figure out why they can't stand living with a person they feel they can't live without. Only two people each with a permanent, changeless core of self that could stand alone can create a marriage that will weather the storms of an unpredictable and changing life.

Finally, another type of permanence is critical to creating a marriage. That is the permanence of the marriage vow itself. "I promise you my faithfulness, until death parts us." That vow becomes a solid rock, a shelter, a refuge, a fortress against the dizzying assault of rapid change in our world. What if my old friends forget me? What if my birth family scorns my values? What if I discover in middle age that I need a change in career? What if I get sick with a chronic or life-threatening condition? What if our

children don't live up to the dreams we had for them? What if the tides of economic fortune turn sour for our family? The answer in all these uncertainties is that someone said to you, "I promise you my faithfulness, until death parts us." No other human relationship has that permanence. Absolute dependability. When all else is a gamble, one other person has said, "I will never leave you."

Walter Wangerin put it beautifully in As For Me and My House: "time does not affect the contract. Time should neither change nor conclude it. In fact, the covenant's very purpose is to establish a surety, a bank, a wall, a dike against the dizzy destructive batterings and evolvments of time. 'Until death parts us' declares that though all other things shall change (because all things else do change, causing dreadful uncertainty in this world) this one thing shall persist to comfort you; this shall be a trustworthy stay against confusion, this marriage of ours, this covenant of mine.... 'Until death parts us' has the faithfulness of the divine. It makes a home for the vulnerable, beseiged and worried heart.... This covenant must *become* the principle of the relationship thereafter and be its abiding standard. It must be timeless, undiluted by time. It must by its very nature stand against the changings of time."

With all that said, we would love to hear your thoughts. We view this Lasting Marriages Network as a group of people with the same goal, but all with unique perspectives and thoughts. So please e-mail us your ideas, suggestions for future monthly letters or weekly thoughts and discussion points. While you're thinking about it, forward this letter to some friends, with an invitation to join us in the journey. All they have to do is enter their e-mail address in the ListBot button on www.lastingmarriages.net and then reply to the

automated response e-mail. We believe we can
make lasting marriage a joy for many couples,
and we look forward to going there with you.

Warmly,

Robert & Gail