

Lasting Marriages

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“First Strike” marriage

With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. - Jesus

We'll start this edition with a personal but somewhat painful story. Last Sunday evening, I (Robert) was out for a walk in the cool of the evening, getting a little exercise as well as time for peaceful meditation. I have come to cherish a good walk on either end of the day, it seems to clear my mind as well as invigorate me physically.

Near the end of the street, I saw a man out building a mailbox, and had previously complimented him on other brickwork he had done around the entrance to his home. I felt less than fully like a neighbor, though, as I realized that though we had spoken, we did not know each other's names. After once again passing a few seconds of small talk about bricks, I jerked myself out of self-centered thoughts, took a step forward, put out my hand, and said, “my name is...” At that point, his large German Shepherd dog attacked me, pulled me down by the right arm, and did some serious damage before he could be pulled off. I spent the night in the hospital and am thankful there is no permanent damage. I have struggled with my attitude since then. The emotional place to which I have defaulted most often has been a cynical, “that’s what I get for being friendly....”

Now what does that have to do with building a lasting marriage? Any of us who have been married more than a little while can remember at least once being hurt (more emotionally) when a

gesture of kindness or generosity was met with indifference, misunderstanding, or even open hostility. And we probably had much the same reaction that I did after being attacked in a moment of neighborly reaching out. “It’ll be a long time before I reach out like that again.” “Just see if I ever do another favor for *you* when you didn’t ask for it!” Or worse, thinking about how we might get even, hurt our spouse in return, plan a way to show them *exactly* how you felt on that hurtful occasion.

Now obviously, most of us aren’t spending our days and nights in sort of a marriage “cold war arms race,” a constant getting even and one-upmanship. But just as a trickle of water over years can carve a channel in rock --- small, subtle, quiet, everyday attitudes and behaviors shape and mold the patterns of our lives and relationships. And often, the subtle attitudes and behaviors that are most dangerous to us are invisible to us, “blind spots.” A blind spot is a weakness of which I am unaware, that is often an uncritically accepted assumption or thought pattern, or a set of subconscious beliefs about myself in relation to others. So without being even aware of it, we may be spending our time in marriage *reacting* to situations by trying to prove that “my position is right, yours is wrong, ...my behavior was justified, yours was not,” or working overtime at “doing things for you,” just to prove (reacting to your put-downs) that I truly am the hardest working, longsuffering spouse on the planet and aren’t you lucky to have me?

What's the way out? The key is to stop reacting, and live from a proactive center, what we're calling "first strike marriage." Living in a reactive mode simply means that my behavior is a function of what is going on around me. My moods, my conscious thoughts and my actions are determined by how others (and most especially my spouse) is treating me. In some ways, this is an easy mode to live in, because I am not responsible. "I wouldn't be this way if it weren't for him." "You have no idea what I have to put up with, don't you think you might do the same thing if you had to live with her?" "He *makes me* so mad that..." The implication is that we have no choice, and if I have no choice I am therefore justified and "not guilty."

What's the opposite, the cure? Being proactive. It means more than just being the first to act. It indicates a deep inner sense that I am responsible for my own actions, that my behavior is a function of my values and beliefs, not a reaction to what others are doing. A proactive person believes that s/he can write his or her own script for life. Using both conscience and imagination, a proactive person can see the future as an outcome of decisions and values. Then, regardless of the challenges, the difficulties and even the traumas, the central core of "who I am" does not change, and I have the ability to choose my response to any situation. Will this keep bad things from happening to me? No. Will it take away my emotions of sadness or frustration when others are not treating me out of integrity? No. But I will not let the weaknesses of others control my own behavior. As soon as I make that decision, I am *free!* And out of that freedom I can choose actions of love, kindness, generosity, and gentleness; not to prove a point in reaction to my spouse, but because those actions are a natural expression of who I am, sweet water welling up from a deep spring.

It would be possible to imagine a person who fits this description as very stern, perfectionistic, and certainly deadly serious. But in fact, a person who has been so liberated will find a sense of ease and lightness in relationships that had not previously been possible. The constant tension of proving to each other that you are right is gone, and spontaneity returns to giving because it is not an obligation, nor is anything expected in return. Stephen Covey (you knew a quote from him was coming, right?) put it well, "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."

So, "first strike marriage" means choosing to practice acts of kindness, generosity, and love spontaneously. It means not waiting to see what your spouse will do and reacting to that. It means choosing to act in loving ways even if the last time you did that your spouse didn't notice, or belittled your effort. It is most likely that living this way will eventually bring about a similar way of living in your spouse, but *even if it doesn't*, you will be living in freedom!

So, in the future, I will be more careful around dogs, but I will still be a good friend and neighbor.

When should we begin living this way? There's no reason to wait another day. Timeless wisdom from Ralph Waldo Emerson reminds us that

"You cannot do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late."

Warmly,
Robert & Gail

Please contribute to our discussion! Email us at gailandrobert@lastingmarriages.net