

Beyond Romance

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I'd like to start this observation on romance by asking you to imagine two different scenarios.

1. For the first scenario, imagine that you are at home one Sunday afternoon and you get an unexpected visitor. It's the little girl from next door, all grown up now into a fine young woman of 25. You haven't seen her for several years, but she's home to visit her parents for a holiday and she stopped to hi. After hugs and hellos you both sit on the sofa and you ask about her life and what she is up to these days. She says:

“Oh, I'm so excited. I'm embarking on a new venture. I'm getting married.”

Now, imagine your response. I'm guessing it would be something along the lines of “Oh, how wonderful.”

2. Now let's leave that scenario and imagine the second one. This one starts exactly the same way; longtime neighbor girl stopping by for a visit. But this time, when you ask what she is up to, she says:

“Oh, I'm so excited. I'm embarking on a new venture. I've cleaned out my savings and checking accounts, cashed in the certificate I got for graduation, sold the stock I inherited from my grandmother, sold my car and most of my stuff and...I'm going to Las Vegas and I'm going to put all the money on one single spin of the roulette wheel. I'll put it on black so I'll have an almost 50-50 chance of doubling my money.”

What is your response to this scenario? “ARE YOU CRAZY? That's a foolish, foolish risk. You need a better chance of success than that!”

Now, assuming that “Oh, how wonderful” and “Are you crazy” are reasonably representative of our societal responses to these two scenarios, the question occurs, WHY are the reactions so different? Aren't the young woman's chances of success about the same with either venture?

Well, maybe, but maybe not. It depends on how we define success.

- In Las Vegas, the definition of success is pretty clear. Her venture succeeds if the roulette spin ends on black. It fails if the spin ends on red or a house number.
- In marriage, the definition of success isn't so black and red. We could define a successful marriage as one lasting until one of the partners dies. In this case the woman's chances of success are about the same at the altar as they are in Las Vegas — about 1 out of 2 at today's 50% divorce rate.

But what if we define success not as longevity of the union but as long-term happiness within the union?

Then the odds shift in favor of Las Vegas. In addition to those marriages that end in divorce, we have to count as failures those marriages where the partners wish they were divorced by aren't because of family, financial, religious or social pressures. We also might count as failures those marriages where the partners don't actually wish they were divorced but who still would not classify their marriages as happy.

To my knowledge there are no statistics for these additional failures, so, just for the sake of this discussion, let's make a guess. Let's say that for every 50 couples out of 100 who actually get a divorce, there are another 10 to 15 couples who wind up staying married for life but not happily so.

This ups the failure rate to somewhere between 60 and 65%. In other words, our beloved former neighbor girl has a mere 35 to 40% chance of achieving a successful marriage.

And what's worse, that's the chance of success for a venture that isn't random. The roulette wheel in Las Vegas is random. But in marriage, the young woman picks her teammate, she works toward success, she has society rooting for her, she has Dr. Phil and live counselors and a zillion self-help books standing by, yet still her chances are only 40%, or less.

And still, we think it's wonderful that she's getting married.

Well, maybe this standard of success is drawn a little too tightly. One way to improve the young woman's odds for a successful marriage is to redefine success.

- We could say that successful marriage is one that stays intact until the last child is in college.
- Or one that doubles its net worth every five years.
- Or one that produces at least one high-achieving child.
- Or goes ten years without hitting.
- Or we could say a successful marriage is one that leads the neighborhood in conspicuous consumption.

For most of us, though, these redefinitions are not soul-satisfying. What most couples envision on their wedding days, I believe, is some form of long-term happiness.

So why, one wonders, does our society typically greet the news of an impending marriage with the "Oh, how wonderful" response when we know in all probability that the couple is headed for big trouble?

It could be several things:

1. It could be that we don't know what else to say. Nobody said anything much different to us when we got married so we've got no track to run on here.
2. It could be the knowledge that we if we say anything that is not endorsing the couple will tune us out.
3. It could be that we have no alternative to suggest. We want grandchildren, by golly, and marriage is still the best bet for having the babies raised in two-parent households.
4. It could be that, despite the numbers, we still think love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage and a young couple's love and natural attraction will be enough to see them through. We are romantics at heart and the existence of any small potential that a couple in love could really find true happiness overshadows the larger, harsher realities of everyday life.

Whatever the reasons – and all of these may play a part – our typical societal response of “Oh, How Wonderful,” is wildly out of step with the nature of the risk. And my purpose with this talk is to wonder aloud whether that mismatch between our response and the true nature of the risk might not itself be a contributing factor to the level of risk.

Are we, as parents, relatives, friends or associates of a young couple contemplating marriage, doing enough to help them prepare for the realities of married life? Or do we think that our little cheer from the sidelines — Oh, how wonderful — is all the proaction the situation needs.

Perhaps we tell ourselves that knowing how to build a good marriage is instinctual. But if we think about it, we must realize that this is a thoroughly false notion. Nature is interested in one thing only: the propagation of the species, same as prospective grandparents.

So, on some level we know it is not instinctual. But perhaps we assume our young people are learning all they need to know about marriage through osmosis. There is no question that people do learn about marriage from our culture and from seeing their own parents' marriages in action, but are these lessons helpful?

In the case of osmosis from our culture, it's pretty clear that the lessons are not helpful in the least and are actually counter-productive. Our popular culture – movies, TV programs, plays, magazines, books, song lyrics and advertising in all its forms – all of that presents a simplified two-dimensional view of marriage: The thrill of romance and the agony of dysfunction.

Boy and girl meet, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl get married. End of story. And the storytelling doesn't pick up again until the marriage is in crisis.

There is nothing in between. Nothing to show unmarried people what marriage, especially the early part of marriage, is about. Or how it works. Or that you can do things a variety of ways, some of which strengthen the marriage and some of which weaken it. The whole vast middle part of marriage — all the stuff between the thrill and the agony — is ignored by our popular culture. Why? Because it makes a lousy story. Thrill is a story. Agony is a story. Daily living is not a story.

One of my favorite illustrations of our culture's fixation on romance is the 1993 movie *Sleepless in Seattle*. The entire movie focuses on two people from opposite ends of the country who have never met nor spoken on the phone but are being brought together by the man's 8-year-old son. The adults finally get together for the first time on the top of the Empire State Building. They meet, they fall in love and the movie ends. And the audience goes "Ahhhh."

What would be really helpful from a cultural-message-to-engaged-couples standpoint would be *Sleepless in Seattle II* — a sequel that starts out on the very next day and shows this young, romantic and in-love couple trying to blend their lives. Working through the little logistical differences, communications differences, expectations differences. All the stuff that needs to be worked out if two people are going to be successful at living together. But we will never see a *Sleepless in Seattle II* — at least not with this story line — because it's not a story. It's everyday life. It's made up of small tensions, not big conflicts.

Books and movies and ads and TV are in the business of telling stories. They are not in the business of telling us about everyday life.

Our popular culture equates marriage and romance. It offers nothing to help young people realize that romance of the premarital variety is not sustainable. It's not meant to be sustainable. It's a beginning. A catalyst. An appetizer. It's not the main course. It can't be.

We who have been married awhile know that, but how can the never-married people know that? From the time they are kids they have been fed the notion that romance is what love and marriage are all about. So when they feel their own romance wane in the wake of disagreements or fights, they figure they've got big problems. They figure they are getting cheated. They are not getting their share. Something's wrong; it didn't work. The marriage is over.

This rant is not a complaint about our popular culture, mind you. I, for one, am a romantic at heart. I like movies and books and TV shows better when there is a romantic element. I always root for the boy and girl to get together. So, I'm not suggesting that our popular culture needs to change. I just want our children and all the young unmarried people we know to be fully aware of the fact that our popular culture is a horrible-bad teacher when it comes to real life.

Well, so much for learning about marriage through the media. What about the learning people get from observing their parents' marriages. Here, the lessons are not automatically damaging like the lessons from our culture, but they are not the only or even the critical lessons that need to be learned.

If the parents have an unsuccessful marriage, the children might learn a few things not to do. But even in cases where the parents have a successful and happy marriage, their marriage is only a model of what a successful and happy marriage looks like once it is up and running. It is not a model of how to build a successful and happy marriage from the get-go.

A pilot doesn't learn how to fly a 747 simply by observing the goings on in the cockpit at 33,000 feet. There's a whole bunch of stuff you have to do before, during and after takeoff that you don't have to do at 33,000 feet.

And so it is with marriage. If you do it right, right from the start, there is a whole bunch of adjustments and workthroughs that you don't have to repeat later on. But a child doesn't get to see the early part of the parents' marriage so the child doesn't see the patterns getting set and the rough spots getting ironed out.

In our own marriage, Julie and I got off to a bit of a rough start. The early weeks were nowhere near as blissful as they were supposed to be. There was a two-month stretch that was so stressful and at times depressing that we started calling it the period of the Forty-Second Wars. This because the little kafuddles, the small spats, the short arguments seemed to be coming every forty seconds, which was, of course, impossible because it took anywhere from five to fifty minutes to sit down and talk each one out.

The irony of this is that we brought it on ourselves. In trying to learn from the scars of my first marriage, we consciously decided to talk out each and every hinky moment that came along. We subscribed to the belief that uncomfortable feelings of whatever sort are valid emotions; they don't have to be logical but they do need to be aired. We just never guessed there would be so many uncomfortable feelings so soon.

We were a little concerned — Julie especially, since she didn't have the benefit of a prior learning curve. This was not what marriage was supposed to be. "This is no fun." "This is too much work!" "Is it going to be this way forever?" "Do other couples go through this?" "Is this normal?"

Fortunately, about two months after they started, the wars subsided. All of a sudden we noticed we were getting along for longer periods. We were going days at a time between incidents. Then weeks. Sometimes a month or more. Being married was finally getting to be good. Being together was a joy again. We were having fun. Yes, this, at last, was what marriage was supposed to be.

Every now and then we would look back at those early wars and try to figure out just what was going on. We didn't get it figured out until our third year of marriage, when we were in the process of moving to our present house. Actually, Julie's the one who figured it out.

We were in the process of organizing the new kitchen. I had just pulled an implement out of a fresh box of fully packed kitchen stuff. Julie saw my radar homing in on a handy bare spot in the closest cupboard and said “Be careful where you set that because that’s where it will be for the next ten or twenty years.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because we’ll get used to it there and it will be too hard to move it somewhere else later on.”

“Why’s that?” I asked again.

“Because to move it to a new spot later means we’ll have to move something else from that new spot to a different spot, and the thing from that spot to another spot, and so on. We’ll be facing a whole reorganization of the kitchen which will be too big a task at the moment so we’ll just decide to leave everything where it was in the first place.”

“You’re saying the pattern we start with is the pattern we’re stuck with?” I said.

“Pretty much,” she said, “unless we want to do all this work all over again later. And it will be much harder then. Sort of like marriage.”

.....“A-HA!”

Then we knew. During those early months of our life together we were organizing our marital kitchen. Our agreement to talk things through was forcing us to work things out on the front end.

It made sense in retrospect. The melding of two lives, two histories, two pictures of marriage, two ways of communicating, two sets of baggage, two sets of expectations, two sets of personal habits, not to mention two sets of furniture, will naturally cause a kafuddle here and there. These kafuddles are the marriage’s learning curve. How we handle them sets a pattern of relating that will last for years.

In the midst of that initial angst, the agreement Julie and I made to handle each little funny feeling right when it cropped up seemed like a really bad idea but turned out to be one of the better things we’ve done. Still, it would have been nice if we had known ahead of time that the wars would be so many in number, that they were normal, that they would ultimately prove helpful and that they were temporary.

The way we see it now, it is better to organize your kitchen right the first time so you can enjoy future years of orderly convenience rather than hiding things willy nilly at the start and suffering through years of chaos. Or, putting it in a marriage context, a few weeks of wars followed by years of bliss is a lot better than the other way around.

But how can Julie and I help our kids learn this and other important lessons on what it really takes to build a marriage? Or, to enlarge the scope a bit, how can we as a society begin to counter the popular portrait of marriage as a simple continuation of romance? Preaching won't work. Lectures won't be heard. Books wouldn't be interesting.

It's a problem. A problem I think about even now, with just a nine-year-old boy and a six-year-old girl in the pipeline. I think about it every time they watch a movie that has the slightest hint of romance. I'm not all that concerned about them seeing sex or nudity on the screen. I am concerned about violence, of course, but equally so about the impressions they are getting of what romance, love and marriage are all about.

Julie and I wish we had an answer on how to counter the culture on this point, but we don't. Not a real, full answer. We do, however, have a suggestion for a starting point.

One of the clichés built into our culture is the image of a gruff father grilling his future son-in-law about the young man's job, his aspirations and his ability to provide for the future bride in the manner to which she has become accustomed. Our idea is a variation on this theme.

Imagine, if you will, another scenario with that same fine young woman. She is bringing her fiancé to her parents house for dinner.

The parents hug their daughter and greet their future son-in-law warmly.

Everyone goes into the kitchen to help with the final preparations.

Dinner is served, wine is poured, a toast is made.

After the main course and before dessert, the parents pull out a special gift. It's a folder containing a series of questions on two handwritten sheets of paper. But they aren't questions just for the son-in-law, and they are aren't about employment and fiscal responsibility. The parents start to read out loud from the document.

"How long do you two intend to be married?" asks the father?

Do you think your chances are of being married that long are average, above average or below average? asks the mother?

If the answer was "above average" as it almost surely will be, the father asks "What makes your chances above average?"

"What are some things a newly married couple might do to increase their chances of a good/successful marriage?" asks the mother.

"What are some of the common things a newly married couple does wrong or doesn't do that leads to such a high divorce rate?" asks the father.

And so it goes. Questions, and more questions. The questions designed to get the young couple thinking, to get them discussing, and to get them planning something beyond the wedding ceremony. In our fantasy, answers would be given, but a more likely scenario is that the questions are asked and the young people are left to discuss their answers in private.

What would happen to divorce rates and the happy marriage index if question sessions like this became a national tradition for couples betwixt the engagement and the wedding? Who knows? It will never reach that status because the process will surely seem too invasive for many parents. But I promise you this. This dinner tradition will go at least as far as our household. Alex and Meredith have such dinners to look forward to should they ever become engaged. It's the very least we can do.

I understand that that scenario may seem a little too proactive for your personal taste, so as an alternative, how about one last scenario.

The young woman who is paying you a visit says:

“Oh, I'm so excited. I'm embarking on a new venture. I'm getting married.”

And you say: “My, that's a brave thing to do.” or “Oh, how long are you planning to be married?” or “Hmmm. Tell me your marriage plans. Not your wedding plans, but your marriage plans.”

As it is right now, I must admit that our culture does give young couples a hint that the road ahead of them may not be all bliss, but the timing of the hint is not the best and the message may be too subtle.

When the young couple announces their engagement, we say “Oh, how wonderful.” Then, as soon as they are married, right in the receiving line, we say “Best Wishes.” Which is marriage-speak for “Lots of luck, you're going to need it.”