

JOY DOUBLES WHEN SHARED

Today marks our 35th wedding anniversary. My marriage to Carolyn Sheets Owen-Towle has been the touchstone of my existence, so forgive me if I feel like celebrating it outloud with you this morning. It isn't my only love, but it's my primary one, and its health serves as the barometer for all my other loves as parent and grandparent, professional and citizen of the universe. In short, as my marriage goes, so goes my life.

Please understand, what I say today has relevance for friendships as well. And please also understand, I'm not saying that partnership is the only or best way to consummate fulfillment in our lives. Countless folks are content, fully happy, being single and unattached, or periodically committed. But I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that my current marriage is the core replenisher and stretcher of my daily life.

I know marriage is a raw and rough topic for many gathered today. You may have experienced failures in intimacy or you simply aren't interested in exploring love at this time in your life...so I would speak gently and let you know that my good fortune is just that. I'm damn lucky, but I *do* believe that we humans are built for loving relationships of one kind or another (and, yes, I advocate strongly "marriage equality for all") and that our joy in life truly doubles when shared, even as our sorrows can be halved when shared.

And, if I may be so bold, I would transmit lessons today on what has enriched my love-bond with Carolyn, thus far. I wrote a book 20 years ago delineating 40 lessons for staying together, but the older I get, the less I know for sure, so here are but 7 tips, and, if

Carolyn and I are blessed to reach our 50th anniversary, I'll probably just muster a cheer and ample tears, but no words.

Now, my seven lessons hardly constitute an exhaustive list, plus they even bypass standard ingredients in mature love, such as the need for trust, sexual passion, fidelity, and bedrock communication, all of which are crucial. I've simply chosen 7 elements that tend to be under-stressed in popular love manuals. What I called "hard blessings" in another book.

So, for any among us today, who might be seeking an alliance of abiding love or wish to fortify their current vows, here are a few lessons drawn from the joyous struggle of my 35-year marriage (and counting...in fact, there's no doubt in my mind, we're going all the way home together).

I. *Create a Partnership Not a Merger*

When I celebrate couples in holy union, I recommend three candles rather than the traditional unity candle. Why? Because I believe in relational synergy: one plus one equals three. Mature partners, I've found, don't blur themselves into one entity but remain separate yet intact—creating a third reality that includes each person yet transcends us both. As 19th century Unitarian sister, Margaret Fuller, penned: "The highest type of love is the pilgrimage of two souls toward a common shrine", the third reality, if you will.

This perspective is critical, because most loves, I think, falter for two main reasons: (1) individuals lose their own identity through being submerged; or (2) partners grow distant without sufficient attention to their common, centering bond. Healthy, joyful

love banks largely on getting this math right. One plus one equals not one (submerger) or two (separateness) but three (solidarity).

Some old French cognates for the word *partnership* point to our word “partition”, reminding that each of us is an irrepeatable individual and can’t be blurred without being lost. Similarly, the biblical phrase in the creation account of woman in Genesis should never be translated as “helpmate” or “fit helper” as patriarchal society has been wont to do, but as “a corresponding strength.” Or, as the Hebrew scriptures note later in Proverbs, “as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

One reason couples endure for better and for worse is because they don’t become either bullies or weaklings. Rather they’re willing to pit their evolving strengths alongside each other. That’s certainly been the case for Carolyn and me; we married the expansive not the constrictive sides of each other; hence our intimacy often crackles, but we wouldn’t have it any other way. We enjoy the feel of velvet as well as sandpaper, iron with iron.

II. Change Thyself

Numerous people in a love-relationship tussle to control, even change, their partner, especially those with overweening savior complexes. No, no, no. A partner’s job is to make the necessary alterations in one’s own being, and if our soulmate is also laboring on his or her identity, then growth can result. We exist to take responsibility for our own pain rather than blaming it on our partner. For when we take responsibility for our part of any difficulty or disharmony, the burden is lightened, sometimes lifted, and the issue can be worked out in mutual understanding. Usually.

Here's the scenario I like to hear while counseling couples: "You know what? My partner wasn't meeting my expectations, and I was unhappy. Then I chose to become the kind of person whom she would likely want to love, enjoy, and like...and now, voila, I'm much happier!"

My friend and couple therapist, Rebecca Cutter, puts it this way: "We need to ask ourselves every morning questions such as: What was it like being partnered to me yesterday? What is something simple that I can do today that would make life easier for my lover? What is something that I already do that helps us as a couple? And am I willing to do that again tomorrow, even though it might not have been acknowledged that I did it today?"

Relational esteem grows from changing our *own* habits; changing 5% of what we do would be a great start.

III. *Practice Silence*

Flowers are important, well-spaced getaways are critical, and honest, heartfelt talk is the cornerstone of a healthy partnership. And our bonds shrivel without the saving grace of humor. And surprise back rubs, that aren't leading to a specific goal, just touch for the sake of touch, are also crucial. In fact, when Carolyn and I have led couples' enrichment workshops over the last 30 years and focused awhile on physical intimacy, do you know what constitutes the height of sexual fulfillment for both females and males? The almost unanimous response is this: "When all is said and done, what I most need from my mate is an embrace, a warm, lingering embrace." Yes, that's what we want all the way home. Something that touches back, that holds us...safe and secure.

Biblical King David, near death, was cold and frightened, even though he was fully clothed. The Hebrew scriptures read: “King David could not get warm.” So his servants found a woman to cuddle and lie on his bosom. There was no hint of overt sexuality in this gesture, only gentle affection. And King David died peacefully in the warmth of this soft clasp.

Don’t ever underestimate the power of respectful, affectionate touch...and yet silence, oh the healing, restorative power of quietude! Nothing is more bonding for my marriage than sitting quietly in different parts of our home yet feeling cozy and in alignment. Believe me when this “talking head” claims that meaningful partnership doesn’t bank on nonstop chatter or activity!

A Jewish proverb implies that the deeper the love, the less tongue it hath. One of love’s foremost lessons is to discern when words are necessary and when they’re futile or harmful. Hence, robust communication requires both caring disclosure *and* sensible hush, in rhythmic measure. Being an open book to one’s lover is neither possible nor desirable. Plus, even open books never reveal more than two pages at any given time.

Silence entails more than one or both partners piping down, although that’s a good start. There’s also silence in the sense of ignoring certain things. We simply need to edit ourselves. And successful couples know how to exit an argument, oft-repairing the situation before it bursts out of control. For example: changing the topic to something completely unrelated; using humor not sarcasm; stroking your partner with a caressing remark: “I understand that this is hard for you”; or making it clear you’re on common ground: “this is *our* problem”; and, in general, simply offering signs of appreciation for

your partner and their feelings along the way: “I really appreciate and want to thank you for...”

“Often the difference between a successful partnership and a mediocre one,” wrote Harlan Miller, “consists of leaving about three or four things a day unsaid.” That insight cuts directly to the solar plexus of my marriage.

When our marriage was a bit unsettled years back we sought counseling. Our therapist kept driving home the point that Carolyn and I should listen intently to every word the other was saying, but, more importantly, listen to every sentiment not being spoken. She urged us to heed the nuances of our partner’s being, to listen lovingly to the silences.

Most lovers of ample duration will confess that much of their valued interaction arrives by body language—a nod, a gesture, a look, without benefit of words. In Buddhist tradition there are some 21 different terms for silence. Resourceful couples are familiar with an infinite variety of forms of silence and routinely enjoy word-fasts.

Onlookers shouldn’t feel sorry for couples who’ve been together so long that they don’t say much when they go out to eat. Of course, it could be a matter of deteriorating hearing or sometimes a matter of screening certain stuff out. But often silence is the surest gift of love, especially when combined with touch and tears.

IV. *Pursue a Good Match*

Life is imperfect and impermanent. Everything changes. We grow old and infirm. There are ups and downs in every partnership, good days and bad days, and nobody gets better than that—yes, none of us, so get used to life’s imperfections and impermanence.

The training of love is the training to break one's heart, so if you can't endure a cracked heart occasionally, then don't commit to love.

Rilke was right when he urged that "love means holding to the difficult": holding to the fact that sadness and anger and mistakes flood our lives. Everyone can hold to the easy. Love means holding to the difficult: staying at the table, assuming the vow of stability and endurance.

As they say, selecting a partner always entails choosing a *specific* set of possibilities and problems. Deadends and downfalls in our loving often occur because we keep dreaming about what might have been or fantasizing about elsewhere as being greener. But we'll never manage more than imperfect but sufficiently good connections in either intimacy or friendship. We must bridge gulfs, both huge and small, of background and habits that will separate, but need not alienate us. We are frail creatures, when alone *and* together, or as poet Robert Bly puts it: "We are imperfect birds building an imperfect nest!" Yes, a good match will do.

A solid partnership must be kept in good repair: forgive, patch, forgive, mend...knowing full well that forgiveness remains our deepest need and highest achievement as humans negotiating intimacy.

In the end, to love another requires dropping all our narcissistic agendas, so that we may look freshly and see "the raw other, the sacred other" just as he or she is. In truth, you and I must be accepted at our worst or we're never truly accepted at all. For we partner live individuals not abstract ideals.

I resonate with the way naturalist Diane Ackerman puts it: “My partnership in spite of its ill-conceived beginnings and sometimes tumultuous course, has endured for twenty-seven years. My partner smells right to me.”

V. *Choose Joy Over Rightness*

I would wager that most of us, if pressed, would far rather experience sufficient peace in our friendships and intimate bonds than be considered right. Even when we might be right, it’s fruitless to demand recognition of the fact. Mature mates gladly sacrifice victory for the sake of a cheerful love. In a happy relationship there are no winners and losers, only two people who agree to put up with each other—exasperating as that can be. As James Thurber put it: “Love is something you’ve been through with somebody!”

Integral to mature partnership is negotiating compromises on a regular basis, yielding and shifting, time and time again, each sacrificing something that the union might be served. *Compromise* literally means that each partner promises to contribute something for the benefit of a relationship larger than our separate egos. Being right is the booby prize; staying healthfully together is the objective of joyous love.

VI. *Start Each Day Well*

Studies show that the first encounter of the day proves critical to the well-being of a partnership. Whether the opening conversation is harsh or soft sets the spirit of the day. In short, “foreplay” in its fullest sense, begins with daybreak.

To celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary, a couple returned to their honeymoon hotel. After retiring, the husband said, “Darling, do you remember how you stroked my hair?” And she stroked his hair. She reminded him of the way they cuddled,

and so they did. With a sigh, she said, “Won’t you nibble on my ear again?” With that, the husband got out of bed and left the room. “Where are you going?” cried the upset wife. “To get my teeth, to get my teeth!”

May we nibble on our lover’s ear all the way home, starting every morning—knowing well that it’s possible to live happily ever after *only* on a day-to-day basis.

VII. *Keep An Evergreen Awareness*

Finally, soul-mates can get so consumed by the dailiness of our bonds that we lose sight of the overall mission of cultivating a life-long partnership. We must love leisurely, think extended thoughts, focus on the long haul. Partnership, at its richest, is for marathoners not sprinters. I like the way Salvador de Madraiga put it: “Love me little by little, be not in haste. For I would have you love me long. Love me slowly, love me deeply, love me long.” True love requires the kind of commitment that assumes a future where things might get better or worse but the loving will go on.

Staying together through the dull stretches and drab intervals, the impasses and losses furnishes the litmus test for a vital partnership. A Zen student was asked “What is absolute truth?” and the Zen master said: “Walk on, walk on.” I didn’t appreciate that truth in my first marriage; I now do.

So, on this very date of our 35th anniversary, I vow to Carolyn that I will renegotiate our marriage in light of the constant changes in each of us and adjust in light of circumstances beyond our control. I promise to remarry her again and again, all the way to one of our graves.

Tom Owen-Towle
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