



MARRIAGE MYTHS

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About Marriage But Aren't*

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Introduction

When our kids were little, my wife and I found ourselves face to face with the dreaded Santa conundrum. On the one hand, we could propagate a widely-told untruth—the one about this North Pole-dwelling, high-speed overnight delivery guy who parcels out gifts in direct proportion to one’s naughtiness or niceness. On the other hand, we could play the role of spoilers, throwing cold water on the Saint Nick fable. If we passed on the lie, would they later believe us when we told them truth? If we spilled the beans, would we squelch their fun?

Parents resolve this dilemma in various ways but, in a nutshell, here’s what we did. We told them Santa wasn’t real but we were going to pretend like he was. “It’s a really fun game we play every Christmas,” we explained. From that point on, we played it to the hilt. We tracked in ashes from the fireplace, put out plates of food for Santa to eat (which I ate), and marked some of the gifts “From Santa.” I even risked life and limb one time by climbing up on the roof and hollering, “Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas” down the chimney. They understood the make-believe nature of all this, but had a blast with it nonetheless.

Myths can be fun, interesting, even inspiring. Most contain elements of truth (there actually was a gift-giving Greek bishop in the fourth century named Saint Nicholas). But they can also be destructive if the perception created is destructively false. Or if they're believed past the expiration date—imagine my now-adult children crying on Christmas morning because Santa didn't show up. Truth is our best ally, but falsehood is our worst enemy. For example, if we were to hop on the spectrum shuttle and travel to the opposite end from Santa, we might come to, let's say, Hitler. The Nazi Chancellor and his propagandists seduced the masses with heroic tales of gallantry from Teutonic mythology. They used the veil of myth to shroud the truth. And they almost pulled it off.

On a far less tragic scale, some relational myths are making the rounds that damage the ones buying into them. They sound credible enough when you hear them because, after all, they're accurate on some level. But like fast food, what's delicious may not be nutritious. The purpose of this ebook is to challenge and debunk ten of those myths. Each of these is in some way true, but damages the relationship if pushed too far.

Marriage Makes You Happy

I'm a psychologist in private practice and office with four other therapists. One of my colleagues specializes in pre-marital counseling. I kid her sometimes about the amount of laughter I hear piercing the walls from inside her office. "Therapy is a serious business," I joke. "You're not supposed to have that much fun." But the folks she meets with in her office are having fun. From their pre-marriage vantage point, what lies ahead is blessing and bliss. The mood in that office is upbeat, as if they were meeting with a travel agent to plan a Caribbean cruise.

Indeed, there is a connection between marriage and happiness as many studies indicate. But with the ecstasy comes some agony. Perhaps agony is too strong a word, although it's a fitting descriptor in some cases. "Love is blind but marriage is an eye-opener," the saying goes. We're attracted to each other's positives but we encounter our negatives when we get in close. And the closer the connection, the more evident our negatives become. That's what happens in marriage. We like nuzzling up to the warm fire of each other's good parts, but encountering the bad parts douses the flames—or the sparks jump out and burn us.

Quote for me any line from James A. Garfield, the 20th President of the United States. Go ahead and do that. Need more time? I only know one. I heard it on my car radio. I liked it so much that when I got back to my office, I Googled it to make sure he said it, and then printed and framed it. It now hangs in my office. Here it is: “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” I’m a fan of the quote because of its accuracy. You may be happy as a lark but have cancer and not know it. You get the diagnosis and now you’re not so happy anymore. But you’re better off because the possibility now exists of being liberated from the cancer. When we get married, we inevitably discover negative aspects about ourselves and about that other person. The revelation isn’t happy-making but if it’s used as an incentive for change, growth occurs. Thus, the negative discovery serves a positive purpose.

So, what am I suggesting here . . . that marriage makes you miserable? No, but some people quickly become miserable if they expect only happiness. If you seek marital happiness, you’re not likely to find it. But if you seek marital growth, you’ll experience it and happiness will come along the way.

Compatible People Just Get Along

Years ago, Billy Graham was a guest on Oprah Winfrey's show where she asked him to reveal the secret of his long, successful marriage. "Ruth and I are happily incompatible," he declared. He went on to explain that he and his wife weren't the same person. They had dissimilar wiring and approached just about everything in life differently. And so, they clashed. But they'd learned to work through their differences so well that they were happy with the outcome—hence the term "happily incompatible."

In my humble and accurate opinion, too much gets made these days of compatibility. In the minds of some, compatibility is the sine qua non of marital success. According to this line of reasoning, the higher the compatibility, the better the marriage. If that were true, would it not be best to marry a clone of yourself? Would you want to marry you? (Narcissists, stop nodding your heads). *Saturday Night Live* once spoofed a commercial for "Me-harmony.com" in which clients were matched with perfect duplicates of themselves. It was funny because it parodied a circumstance that all of us would find ludicrous in reality.

Compatibility is certainly not a bad thing; it's just not the essential thing. I would suggest that marital success has less to do with compatibility and more to do with the ability to work through areas of incompatibility. I've seen couples in my office who are amazingly compatible but have lousy relationships. I've seen other couples with limited compatibilities who have great relationships because they solve the problems stemming from their differences.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, James Carville was Bill Clinton's campaign manager—single and very liberal in his political persuasions. Mary Matlin was George H.W. Bush's campaign manager—single and very conservative in her political persuasions. At the end of the campaign, to everyone's shock and awe, they got married. No one could believe it, most thought it couldn't possibly last. As of this writing, that was 22 years ago. Tim Russert, the late host of *Meet the Press*, used to have them on to argue different sides of political issues. They were nice to each other, but most often I could not detect a molecule of common political ground. During the commercial, they'd go backstage and get their kids and as the show went off, here was this happy family sitting on the set with Tim Russert. Go figure! The only thing I can assume is that they'd learned how to relate

well despite deeply held differences. Compatibility is not required to get along.

If You Don't Find Your Soul Mate, Good Luck

I used to participate in an annual weekend conference for pre-marrieds—people who were engaged or strongly considering engagement. Speakers were brought in to address various aspects of married life such as finances, in-law relationships, etc. I was always asked to speak on conflict resolution, which is my area of specialty and interest. If I do say so myself, I'm a pretty fair presenter. I use lots of stories, illustrations, and humor to keep the topic interesting and engaging. But you know what I noticed? My talk to these pre-marrieds was usually a snoozer. I could look at their faces and tell what they were thinking: "Conflict? We don't have conflict; we love each other." I always felt like I was talking to a roomful of high school students about their 401K plans. But if I gave that same talk to that same group two years later, they'd be taking notes feverishly and pummeling me with questions. Why? Because the conflict of marriage would've made them hungry for information about conflict resolution.

The soul mate myth is much like the compatibility myth: "My marital holy grail is out there somewhere. Once we discover each other, we'll fit like a hand-in-glove. We'll fill

each other's gaps. We'll know we've found the treasure because it'll just work," the thinking goes. There's a term from classical Greek literature that describes such thinking —poppycock! You can look it up.

The soul mate myth (as described above) is the stuff of movies and romance novels. But the idea has become so culturally-imbedded that many commit themselves to the search. And once that soul mate is presumably found, they quickly become disillusioned when the inevitable problems of marriage arise. In some cases, they discard the mistaken partner and re-join the hunt for the yet-to-be-discovered actual soul mate.

Despite all this trashing of soul mate theory, I'm going to say something that will sound ridiculously contradictory: I actually do believe in soul mates. But I'm convinced that we don't find them as much as we make them. This is not to discount the validity of every love-at-first-sight experience. Those happen but even when people have strong initial chemistry, they still have to roll up their sleeves and make it work over the long haul. How many movies tell heartwarming tales of soul mate discovery but never tell hard-work tales of soul mate construction, thereby perpetuating the myth? Wouldn't those stories be just as romantic? OK, probably not.

Once the Warmth is Gone, You Can't Get it Back

Carole King performed a song entitled "It's Too Late". The lyrics describe a relationship that started off warm but heartbreakingly morphed into coldness. Sometimes, people sitting in my office ask, "Once those warm feelings have gone, can you ever get them back?" It's posed as a question but it's really a conclusion, a sad resignation that the warmth that once was is no more. And they've tried everything they know to make it work. They've instituted regular date nights, only to sit in restaurants with nothing to say. They've studied each other's "love languages," but flunked out of language school. They've performed acts of kindness toward each other for weeks at a time in a sort of fake-it-till-you-make-it attempt. Some stirrings of warmth were experienced after a weekend marriage conference, but fizzled quickly like lighter fluid squirted on a charcoal fire. And they've read books, oh so many books. Like an ER doc futilely shocking a dead body with defibrillator paddles, attempts to revive their lifeless marriage have failed. Like Carole King's song title, it does indeed seem too late.

If you were outside in subzero temperatures with no gloves and no pockets, how would you warm up your freezing

hands? You'd rub them together. Even if you had never taken a science class, you'd instinctively know that friction creates warmth. The same applies to relationships. The friction experienced in close connections warms up the relationship—as long as it's the right type of friction. One type of friction is like a grain of sand on your eyeball. If you don't get it out of there, you might lose your sight. Another type of friction is like thousands of grains of sand glued to a piece of paper. The action of sandpaper turns something ugly into something pretty.

There's no such thing as friction-free relating. Close connections bring conflict. In marriage, the choice is not between conflict and no conflict; it's between the good friction type of conflict and the bad friction type. When couples avoid friction, it cools off the relationship but things warm back up with good friction.

So, my answer to the question, "Once those warm feelings have gone, can you ever get them back?" is yes—through friction correction. Well-handled conflict warms back up a cold relationship, but staying stuck in bad conflict perpetuates the iciness.

If Mom Ain't Happy, Nobody's Happy

Another version of this myth is, “Happy wife, happy life.” The assumption underlying this clichéd chestnut is that if a guy can simply crack the code for what it takes to keep his wife content—you know, that wife who perpetually teeters on the brink of discontent—then they’ll have a great marriage. It expresses a view that’s cynical and quite condescending: “Just figure out what she wants and do it. That way she’ll shut up and stop her griping. And if she’s not griping, we’re all happy.”

I had a man in my office once whose wife had insisted he talk to someone about his marital muteness. He was quite chatty about most things, but when it came to personal, relational subjects, he was wordless. That was my experience with him as well. Talk about pulling teeth. I’m not sure he would have opened up more if I had water-boarded him. I asked him to tell me what happened when he had problems with his wife—like differences of opinion, misunderstandings, etc. Here’s what he said: “Hey, I’ve just learned that if Mom ain’t happy, nobody’s happy.”

That sounds noble, like he's being driven by genuine concern for his wife's emotional well-being. But it's actually a self-serving way to chicken out of facing conflict. He's thinking less about her and more about his own need to avoid potentially difficult conversations. This way of relating is predicated upon the erroneous assumption that the absence of arguing leads to relational harmony. The less said, the better, the thinking goes. But this husband's conflict avoidance stance had precisely the opposite effect—it created disharmony and diminished the marital warmth. They never worked anything out. He simply ran up the white flag of surrender every time they hit a snag, figuring it's better to just go along to get along. But that didn't make her happy; it made her frustrated. And, by the way, he wasn't exactly wracked with jocularly about it either.

Love Means Talking About Feelings

This myth isn't usually stated quite so succinctly but the idea is pervasive. And admittedly, it emanates more often from the feminine branch of the Homo sapien tree. Talking about feelings: not exactly a prominent motif in man flicks starring Steven Seagal or Vin Diesel. I've never seen a prison movie in which a 400 pound inmate named Skull Cracker couldn't wait for group to start so he could talk about his feelings.

So, what does the phrase "talking about feelings" even mean? I'll use an old illustration to answer that question. Think of emotions as serving the same purpose as the lights on your dashboard. You're driving down the road and suddenly notice this newly lit up dashboard light. When that happens to me, two things go through my head: "Oh, no. How much will this cost and how much trouble will this be?" At that moment, I don't have a light problem; I have an engine problem. The light is serving the very useful purpose of telling me I need to take my car to the shop. If I take my car in and they fix the engine, the light goes off. Good thing I had that light. That's what emotions do. They alert us to something that needs correction. But imagine this scenario: I'm driving down the road, the

dashboard light comes on, and I handle my discomfort by covering the light with black electrical tape. Sure, I may feel better at the moment, but my engine burns up because I've disregarded the light. Similarly, it hurts us to ignore the signals our emotions provide.

Let's answer our talking-about-feelings question in the context of this illustration: One meaning of the phrase would be to sit in the car and stare at the dashboard light. The better meaning would be to take the car to the shop because you noticed the light. Some people think talking about feelings simply means articulating your emotions while the other person listens. Helpful to a point, but not so much. For example, suppose my wife tells me she's angry and I say, "It's important for you to feel your feelings, so tell me about your anger. Go ahead, get it out, vent that rage, let your inner child scream. That's good, you're making real progress. Can I go watch ESPN now?" Not so helpful and not so loving. The better meaning would be to heed the emotions to make needed corrections. Suppose I said, "Why are you feeling angry?" and she said, "Because you dropped one of your dirty socks in the spaghetti and now the whole meal is ruined." Then I say, "Oh, no wonder you're angry; I'd be angry, too. I was pitching my socks into the washer from across the room and one fell short and

landed in the spaghetti pot on the stove. Sorry, I won't do that anymore. Dump out that spaghetti and let's go to a restaurant." That would be helpful and that would be loving. In the first example, talking about feelings accomplished little. In the second example, talking about feelings helped the relationship. That's love.

I Have to Give Up Me to Be With You

If a guy refers to his wife as “the ole ball and chain,” his sentiment is reflective of this myth. It means saying goodbye to your independence and resigning yourself to a sort of permanent house arrest. Before marriage, your hundred-yard-dash time was noteworthy. Now, your three-legged-race time is unimpressive.

A healthy relationship has three components: a me, a you, and a we. If I have to give up me to be with you, we’ve lost something important. If you have to give up you to be with me, we’ve lost something important. We’ll never have a good we by forfeiting you or me.

Humans are driven by two competing forces. On the one hand, we search for identity—a sense of what makes us unique as individuals and what distinguishes us from the crowd. On the other hand, we search for intimacy—a close connection with someone else. Marriage creates a field on which these two forces compete and the challenge is to handle this completion well. If intimacy wins, I lose my identity. If identity wins, I lose my intimacy. In good marriages, both win and neither loses.

Like my officemate, I sometimes do pre-marital counseling. I'll ask these pre-marrieds, "Tell me, in your mind's eye, how do you picture marriage?" The younger they are and the more idealistic they are, the more prone they are to say, "Oh, it's going to be wonderful. We're going to think each other's thoughts and complete each other's sentences. What's yours is mine and what's mine is yours. . . It'll be wonderful." And I'm thinking to myself, "Oh, bless your heart. This Siamese twin relationship you're describing now is going to lose its luster later."

Here's what I'll say in response. One way to picture marriage is that we're two hotel rooms right beside each other. In marriage, we're going to tear down the wall that separates the two rooms so that the formerly two rooms become one room. What's yours is mine and mine is yours . . . it will be wonderful. **BAD PICTURE OF MARRIAGE!** A better picture of marriage is that we're two hotel rooms right beside each other. In marriage, we're going to install a set of adjoining doors between the two rooms. Sometimes, the doors will be open, sometimes they'll be closed, sometimes you need to knock, sometimes you don't. But relational success will be directly correlated with door management.

Granted, the door management verbiage lacks a certain warmth. I've never heard a romance song entitled, "I Wanna to Manage My Doors With You, Babe." But the picture is instructive. We can be close without being smothered. We can be independent and still be intimate. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

Sticks and Stones Will Break My Bones And All That

Of course, we know the last part of that statement: “but words will never hurt me.” I suspect the phrase was first used on some school yard playground where a kid, having been coached by his parents, said it to a bully and stuck out his tongue. It’s pretty effective as a bully de-powering strategy. But in actuality, words do hurt. We even have laws against libelous words which can assassinate a person’s character, destroy his reputation, and deprive him of income-making potential.

Hurtful words are to humans what swats-on-the-nose-with-rolled-up-newspapers are to dogs. They get remembered and remain influential long after the original uttering. Years ago, my wife and I ate pizza one day for lunch. That afternoon, I contracted a stomach flu virus that I later found out was making the rounds. In short, I lost everything I had eaten for about the last six years. You’ll thank me for sparing you the details but it was awful. Body aches, chills, fever and all the things that go along with the curse. From the bathroom floor, I got my wife’s attention and said, “Pray I would die.” The thing is, I actually meant it at the time I said it. Well, I didn’t die and was pretty

much back to normal within 48 hours. But the experience left a lasting impression. Up to two years later, if a friend said, “Hey, let’s go get some . . . pizza,” I immediately felt nauseated. The imprint left by my past pizza trauma was altering my pizza-eating behaviors up here in the present.

The closer the contact, the more words inflict lasting hurt. If your cranky neighbor down the street calls you a cottonheaded ninnimuggins (from the movie *Elf*, in case you’re wondering), you’ll get over it in short order. But if your spouse calls you a disparaging name—take your pick—those words will reverberate inside your head for a long time and whenever you hear the echo, you’ll feel re-injured.

Hurts can heal but time alone won’t do it. “Time heals all wounds” is another myth suggesting that with the passage of time, hurts go away. I did get over my pizza aversion, but you know what did it? Eating pizza without nausea over time. The first time I picked up a slice, my stomach said, “Are you freakin’ kidding me? Put that down.” But the more I ate it over time, the more the urge to lurch faded away. Old hurts get healed in new relational experiences. The pain inflicted by hurtful words can be alleviated only when helpful words become the new pattern.

Women Are Like This And Men Are Like That

Most of us are familiar with the Martian and Venetian ancestries of the different genders. Evidently, some ancient mutation occurred resulting in one gender per planet. Have you ever considered that reproduction would be extremely problematic under such circumstances? Well, let's not get off track here, back to our main question: "How on earth do men and women differ?" No one disputes the dissimilarities. Perhaps the chief factor distinguishing men from women is this: men LOVE watching Bear Grylls ingest raw organs wrenched from a partially decayed yak while women HATE watching their favorites get booted from *So, You Think You Can Dance?* That's the main difference, researchers have concluded, after centuries of observation.

I have two reasons for putting the above statement in the myth category. First, in some cases, it's simply not accurate. I've seen couples where the wife displays most of the stereotypically masculine characteristics, while the husband displays those deemed to be feminine. The planetary distinctions just don't work for them. Men-are-this-way

and women-are-that-way are sweeping generalizations, but exceptions to the rule are quite common.

Second, the statement sometimes leads to resignation rather than problem-solving. I had two people in my office once who rarely, if ever, resolved any marital difference. His philosophy of marital success was defined by the latest book he'd read on the subject. To his credit, unlike many husbands, he did read relationship books but would often miss the points the authors were trying to make. One time, he was pontificating about male/female differences, a topic he'd recently gleaned from his reading. "Men like to solve problems but women just want to talk about feelings," he declared quite confidently. He then turned to her, sincerely thinking he was helping, and said, "We've got 15 minutes left in this session and I know you want to talk about your feelings. So, go." At that point, I could tell she was feeling a little, you know, homicidal.

He had resigned himself to the silly idea that marital harmony would result from laying aside his need to problem-solve (a male trait) and conceding to her need to express feelings (a female trait). He thought, erroneously, that if he could just accept the differences between men and women, his needs would somehow take care of themselves.

Well intentioned, perhaps, but this way of relating left all of their problems unaddressed and unsolved.

The more helpful statements coming from him to her would have been: “We’ve got some differences and whenever those come up, we have problems. Let’s put our heads together and solve those problems in ways that satisfy both of us. What do you say?”

That approach puts less emphasis on the differences and more on solving the problems stemming from the differences. That’s what they do on Neptune.

I Can't Fix You, I Can Only Fix Me

This idea has become so entrenched in our culture that it rivals other truisms we accept unquestioningly, such as:

- You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar
- Into every life a little rain must fall, and
- The only two things that will survive a nuclear holocaust are cockroaches and Cher

It sounds so right, but leaves so much out. It suggests that if two broken people go get themselves fixed, things will just work better when they reunite. I get the part about being responsible for your own growth and not being responsible for the growth of another and agree with it. But it diminishes the importance of relationships in personal growth.

A couple came to see me once because they were stuck. I asked if they'd had any experiences getting unstuck and they told me this story. He grew up as a nice, accommodating individual. He was a natural-born concierge, instinctively noticing the needs of those around him and doing whatever he could to help. When he grew up, he worked for a company that organized itself in teams.

It became his unofficial job to see to it that everyone's needs were met and the team functioned more smoothly because of his presence.

His wife grew up as an i-dotter and a t-crosser. She was a very structured individual. She told me once that she slept better at night if all the items on her to-do list had check marks beside them by day's end. If there was a bumper sticker defining her existence, it might be, "A place for everything and everything in its place." When she grew up, she became, guess what, an administrative assistant. She was wonderful at it—nothing ever fell through the cracks on her watch.

Well, Mr. Accommodation fell in love with Miss Administration. After marrying, she said to him one night, "We should divide up our household responsibilities. Let's figure out who does what." True to form, he said, "Sure, I'd be glad to." So, they determined that she would cook and he would clean. All was right with the world.

But here's what happened. On a nightly basis, he'd be loading the dishwasher and she'd come in to watch. "Would you mind turning those bowls in the same direction so that the water will hit everything uniformly,"

she'd ask. "Sure," he would respond outwardly while inwardly thinking her request was a tad excessive . . . and weird. The next night, it would be the plates, the next night the silverware, the next night the pots and pans. This went on for a while. Finally, one evening, he said exasperatedly, "Look, I told you I would clean up and I'm happy to do so. But if you're going to come in every night and scrutinize and critique my every move, I may just start sitting in the den."

Notice what happened here. This situation required something of him that, historically, he had too little of—assertiveness. He was an accommodating person but not an assertive person. But he cared about his marriage and, for it to work better, he had to strengthen his assertiveness muscle. By doing so, he became a more balanced version of himself. On her side, this situation required something of her that, historically, she had too little of—flexibility. She was a structured person but not a flexible person. But she cared about the relationship and, for it to work better, she had to strengthen her flexibility muscle. By doing so, she became a more balanced version of herself.

The closeness of marriage had revealed their weaknesses but valuing their marriage caused them to strengthen those

weaknesses. They didn't go get fixed so that the marriage would work better. They made the marriage work better and became more fixed. Their marriage provided the context in which personal growth occurred. Relationships reveal and heal weaknesses.

Final Thought

Let's face it, connections are complicated. Consequently, we all seek ways to reduce relational complexity down to a few simple rules we can follow to make them work better. That's why pithy myths can be so compelling—they give us tracks to run on to get from confusing complexity to manageable simplicity. And that's fine as long as the tracks don't run out at the edge of a cliff.

My purpose here has been, not to burst bubbles, but to provide clarity. As I said earlier, all of these myths contain elements of truth but false conclusions are reached when pushed too far. So, like a fisherman cleaning his catch, keep the good parts of the myths but toss out the bad.