

THE HERALD

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How to Make a Marriage

By Gary Thomas

Most Hollywood romances focus on finding “the one.” A common plot point early in the movie is to have two individuals, destined to be together, almost meet. They’ll walk right past each other, perhaps even glance and smile as they pass, enter and exit the same room, bus, or café just seconds apart, or they’ll be on opposite sides of the same park as the camera hovers overhead. If only she would walk that way, she’d run into him; if only he had turned his head one second sooner ...

Since the actors are the two best-looking people on the set, you know they will meet eventually, but it creates a little tension to put it off for a while.

This romantic mind-set is based on the false and harmful notion that a good relationship is something you find, when in fact it is something you make. Infatuation is something you find. Sexual chemistry is something you find. A lost cell phone is something you find. But a strong, intimate,

God-honoring marriage that leads to a life-long partnership and that fosters a sense of oneness? That’s something you make, and it takes a long time to make.

I want to say this again: A good marriage isn’t something you find, it’s something you make.

A relationship, by its very definition, can’t be found; it has to be built. It requires two people getting to know each other, and then every day they have to choose to keep relating to each other or risk drifting apart. Intimacy is created stitch by stitch, through verbal sharing, dedicated praying, acts of love and service, expressions of commitment, and building increased understanding through regular communication and by experiencing life together.

In fact, one study suggests that it takes from nine to 14 years—at least a decade, and sometimes a decade and a half—for two individuals to stop thinking of themselves as individuals and to start thinking of themselves as a couple. That’s right—the journey from “me” to “we” takes years to achieve. That’s due in part to the way our brains are wired. In a very real sense, we shape our brains with our lifestyle; the things we do and the habits we choose create neural pathways that become our new

norm. That's how addictions are built; that's why habits can be so difficult to break.

Put it this way: Have you ever driven home from work or church, pulled into your driveway, and realized you didn't make a single conscious decision the entire drive home? That you were essentially on autopilot? That's neuroplasticity in action. Your brain has become so familiar with that route that once you start out on it, habit takes over. You almost stop seeing the journey as individual turns and instead process it as one basic decision: Go home.

Relationally, if you've been living as a single for 20 to 30 years and then get married, your brain doesn't immediately turn into "Okay, I'm married now; I have to think like a married brain, act like a married brain, stop putting up the defenses of a single brain, and embrace the intimacy of a married brain." Those patterns of relating that served you as a single must be dismantled. You have to consciously adopt new forms of thinking and learn how to understand, serve, forgive, be vulnerable, move toward someone rather than away even in the face of hurt, and drop your former defenses. You are no longer evaluating this person; you are dedicated to sacrificially loving them. It takes time for you to make such a monumental cognitive shift. To reach true intimacy, and that sense of oneness that we all desire, requires two things: the initial death of infatuation (which doesn't recognize reality and therefore can't serve true intimacy) and at least nine to ten years of practice, faithfully moving toward each other rela-

tionally.

Neurologically, a relationship can be built, and it can be systematically torn apart or die of neglect, but it is not "found" or "lost."

The following characteristics are essential to make a marriage. You can't expect a 22-year-old to possess all of them in their full mature form, but you should see the foundations of these elements. The degree to which they are not present is the degree to which you'll have difficulty building intimacy with this person and the degree to which you're going to struggle in the early years of marriage.

Humility

A quick definition: Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking less about yourself. It is someone who, like Jesus, believes he has come "not to be served, but to serve." Jesus knew His talents, and He knew His deity, but He used His power to serve. Unlike Jesus (since we are not perfect, and He was), a humble person is someone who has experienced and is experiencing conviction of sin: They are aware that they fall short, every day, and that they have much to work on, and biblical grace is the only place they put their hope.

Ability to forgive

If you believe the Bible, you are going to stumble many times throughout your marriage (James 3:2). You will break your spouse's heart. You will disappoint her. You will embarrass him. Your sin will inconvenience her.

A couple I was pastorally counseling needed to work on building some relational intimacy. The guy confessed that he didn't want to fully open up to his fiancée about the stress in his life because he didn't want to be a burden to her. I told him that if his goal is to never be a burden to his future wife, he shouldn't marry her; he might as well break up with her right now. There was, quite understandably, visible shock on his face until I explained, "What if you get laid off and can't find another job and she has to double her hours? What if you get a stroke and she has to hand-feed you? What if you make a really stupid investment or a dumb mistake and get fired or have your portfolio tank? One or all of those things will happen over the course of your marriage. You are going to hurt and disappoint this woman very deeply, so you might as well learn how to do it productively."

It's hard to accept that we are going to hurt someone we love so much, but if we marry them, we will. That's a biblical promise. Which means forgiveness is absolutely essential.

Healthy conflict resolution skills

Because both of you stumble in many ways, you need someone who can not only forgive but can work through conflict in a healthy way. There will be conflict. The only question is, will you grow toward each other as a result of the conflict, or will your hearts grow ever colder because you avoid the issue or because you respond to conflict in hurtful ways?

Healthy conflict resolution means a per-

son can admit when he or she is wrong. Even if someone is only 10 percent wrong, that person can own the 10 percent. But it is not healthy to confess wrongdoing when there is no wrongdoing to confess. Some people will say "sorry" when there is nothing to be sorry for, just bring about peace. That's not healthy, and it's not biblical. You want to find someone humble enough to admit personal failings, wise enough to recognize yours, and courageous enough to hold his or her ground if you are acting arrogantly and refusing to see you sin.

Prayerful

Why would anyone want to be married without having God as a partner? I can't imagine facing the challenges of marriage without the hope of God to lift my eyes when I'm discouraged and the conviction of God to open my eyes when I'm blind to my own sin. Since marriage is something you make, and since marriage is going to be difficult, I'd want to marry someone who knows how to pray, who practices prayer, and who is growing in prayer.

A woman once told my wife and me that she feels so much safer when she knows her husband is praying and in the Word. She doesn't have to ask him if he's doing this—she can tell by his attitude, his actions, the tone of his voice, his overall demeanor. And knowing that he is regularly connecting with God gives her a peace and security that she treasures.

FUNNIES

A veteran Air Force major and a shiny new lieutenant, flying cross country, were approaching Lake Michigan when warning came of a thunderstorm ahead. At the controls the confident lieutenant dashed off a note on his knee-pad that they could easily beat the storm across the lake. The weather-wise major shook his head, signaling the lieutenant to go around the lake.

Not one to give up easily, the stubborn young pilot wrote: "Have 20 hours over-water flying time. Will go across."

The major promptly scribbled back: "Have two days in-the-water time. Will go around."

"What is your age?" asked the judge. "Remember, you're under oath."

"Twenty-one years and some months," the woman answered.

"How many months?" the judge persisted.

"One hundred and eight."

A woman tourist visiting the Holy Land went to a tourist office for information on roads. Told that it was now possible to go by car all the way from Dan to Beersheba, she confessed, "Do you know, I never knew that Dan and

Beersheba were places. I always thought they were husband and wife, like Sodom and Gomorrah."

A sweater is a garment a child wears when his mother feels chilly.

Immediately after she received the bill for the extraction of a tooth, a woman phoned her dentist. "I'm shocked," she complained. "This is three times what you normally charge!"

"I know," replied the dentist, "but you yelled so loud you scared away two other patients."

Needing some clothes cleaned in a hurry the businessman searched the small Georgia town in which he was attending a conference until he found a sign which read, "Cleaning and Pressing, 24-Hour Service." After explaining his needs the businessman said, "I'll be back for my suit tomorrow."

"Won't be ready till Saturday," replied the proprietor.

"But I thought you had 24-hour service," the businessman protested.

"We do, son," the cleaner said reproachfully. "But we only work eight hours a day. Today's Thursday—eight hours today, eight hours Friday, eight on Saturday. That's 24-hour service."