

Self Reliance: Having a Healthier Marriage

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The transition from pre-marriage into marriage can be wonderful. Beginning a life with someone you love is exciting and hopeful, and captures much of what many of us hold dear—the possibility of finding love and creating a family unit of our own. With high expectations of what marriage will be, many of us do not anticipate how stressful and even disillusioning early marriage can be. When the wedding celebration and honeymoon end, and we are left to work out a life with another flawed human being, we are often unprepared for the disharmony experienced in those early days. When so many of us anticipate bliss in marriage, what do we do when we find ourselves confronting disappointment and conflict? What meaning should we make of the discord, and what can we do to make our marriage better?

Part of the challenge is that early marriage often contrasts with the dating period that preceded it, where excitement and hopefulness is abundant. Finding someone who reflects our desirability and specialness is compelling. We often believe we have finally met someone who will understand us, accept us, and even *make us happy* (no matter how immature or self-serving we may be). As anthropologist Helen Fisher points out, when falling in love our brains are flooded with dopamine—a neurotransmitter that effectively glues you to your partner, magnifies your partner's virtues and reduces your capacity to discern his or her flaws. This is what author and clinician Terry Real calls the “Love Without Knowledge” phase, where you love your partner, you may even feel you have known them for all eternity, but you have no idea yet what they do with their checkbook or dirty laundry. And while you might tell yourself that their limitations won't really matter, the blindness in this phase makes it *fragile*.

The illusion of the “Love Without Knowledge” stage is usually punctured when we marry and move in together. The high expectations of being adored and accommodated are usually ruptured by the emergence of our spouse's conflicting desires and expectations. And we often find that not only is our partner not going to *make us happy*, and not only are the traits we once saw as attractively different from our own now irritating, but our spouse may also demonstrate that they are perfectly willing to withhold precisely what we desire. Unlike the “Love Without Knowledge” stage, the emerging “*Knowledge Without Love*” stage (where you know a lot about your spouse but are not sure you love all that you are discovering) can *hurt*. It hurts because our longing for validation and accommodation bumps up against the limitations and autonomy of our spouse. It is an open secret that this phase of a relationship is difficult. Not only does one confront disillusionment, one must

confront inherent aloneness in the relationship—the places where we are not understood or validated—and the discomfort of both may lead one to question the wisdom in their marital choice. Did I choose the wrong person?

Given high religious and cultural expectations of marriage, we may feel ashamed of the challenges we are encountering, not recognizing that the struggle is not only normal, but *valuable*; Valuable because it offers a powerful way to forge our interpersonal and spiritual development. In the thinking of Dr. David Schnarch, marriage, as imperfect as it may seem, is doing what it is designed to do: expose our immaturities and pressure us to become better people. Consistent with LDS theology, marriage is a divine institution precisely because it pressures us away from self-centered love towards mature love—love freely offered, love as the choice to care for and invest in another person, even when they disappoint us. When falling in love, love and desire *happen to us*. And while there is excitement in it, there is no virtue. Truly loving another human being in the face of disappointment, even disapproval, is virtuous. As Christ says, “For if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye?” (Matthew 5:46).

So how do we move out of neediness and entitlement to love, and develop instead the capacity to love another person out of our strength? The secret lies in our willingness to see ourselves accurately, repent and develop. We must do the hard work of confronting our very human, yet selfish impulses that expose themselves in the pressures of marriage. This includes the self-absorbed desire to be adored and validated, as well as to punish, withhold or resentfully accommodate when we are not. Our self-centered tendencies are what I believe Mosiah means when he claims that “natural man is an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19). It is *natural* to be self-focused and entitled, as are the unloving behaviors that flow from that immaturity. But our self-service only perpetuates our unhappiness in the relationship. It is easy to justify these behaviors against the limitations we encounter in our spouse, but if we are to create a relationship that is an expression of friendship, that is in fact loving, we must reach for something better in ourselves, even when our spouse’s choices makes it easy to indulge the worst in ourselves.

The difficult truth is that until we learn how to love, marriage will be hard.

So, in the face of conflict or frustration, here are some questions to ask yourself to engage your spouse more constructively: What would it be like to be in a relationship with me? What are the behaviors I would find hard to live with (for example, pride, a desire to control, an unwillingness to take responsibility for my desires or choices)? How do these actions affect my spouse? How do these behaviors justify the worst in my spouse—meaning how might my spouse use my immaturities to excuse his or her own?

Facing our unconstructive and hurtful choices allows us to see how we are participating in and perpetuating our troubles. You can’t make anyone love you, but you can deal with the behaviors that contribute to the challenges between you. To

move forward differently, ask yourself: What kind of relationship do I want with my spouse? Do my behaviors lead me closer or farther from that goal? If I were to act less like a victim of my spouse's choices and more like a person willing to stand up for a better relationship, how would I engage differently? For example, if I want my spouse to desire me, punishing when he or she doesn't, will not increase my desirability; it only justifies the disengagement. On the other hand, behaving like a desirable person—being kind, respectful and self-respecting—will.

But being a force for good in a relationship requires the willingness to take risks, to let our desires be known, and to offer goodness even when our spouse may not reciprocate. This is what I believe Christ means when he says "resist not evil: But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). Christ is not teaching us to be martyrs. He is teaching us to find the moral courage to not retaliate and instead to offer strength in the face of another's hostility.

This is not to say that controlling our own choices will force a spouse to be a loving partner in return. However, becoming a more accountable and loving human being *will* increase the likelihood of a spouse confronting their negative participation, and will pressure evolution in the marriage. The truth is, this type of functional autonomy is hard personal and spiritual work. Most of us are more interested in punishing our spouse for not being what we want, than we are in doing our part to create a warmer, more assertive, and more constructive marriage. This requires faith in ourselves and faith in the reality of love. It requires the willingness to submit to the struggle and forge personal strength within it. The difficulty of marriage is a blessing if we will allow it to be.