

The Throw Away Marriage

by Laurie Israel

I always cry at weddings. It's not because I think the wedding is so beautiful or the newlyweds are so adorable. It's because I know (and they don't) how difficult marriage will be for them. You will see tears on the faces of everyone over a certain age at a wedding, especially those that are or have been married. The truth about marriage is that marriage is difficult for everyone. But the higher truth is that, even though marriage is difficult, it is worth it.

Many of the people that walk into my divorce law firm asking for my services are men or women, recently married, in their 20s or early 30s. They have completed the honeymoon period of 18 months to 2 years, and find that marriage is not at all what they expected it to be. They were surprised and deeply shocked at how quickly the love (and lust) at the beginning turned into rage and disgust.

They did not go to the next stage of their marriage – the stage of communication, cooperation, and learning about the *real* person with whom they fell in love. There is probably not much that can be done at that point, when the feelings have turned 180 degrees around and the participants of the marriage (or one of them) has a fixed mind-set that the marriage must end.

But it is actually at that point – when a couple experiences the first signs of disagreement, faulty communications, mistrust, repulsion and lack of respect -- when the real work of “marriage” can begin. It's interesting and valuable work. A couple will eventually find that the work on a marriage not only sustains the marriage and helps it deepen, but also promotes personal growth. Marriage and the work it involves is always worth it. And it can even be fun!

A long marriage invariably has its ups and downs, but over time a married couple builds a history of life together and gathers shared memories that strengthen their marriage. As important, each spouse provides one another with the moral and economic support to enhance their mutual and separate lives. A good marriage is a living process that breeds contentment. It is something precious and attainable by many more people than the current fifty percent divorce rate would indicate.

So what can you do when the first thunderclouds hit?

Well, the most obvious thing (and the thing most people don't think about!) is to *do* something about it. I am always totally floored by how people spend more time with their hobbies or watching TV than improving their skills in marriage. Even a little time spent learning how to have a better marriage will be worth it. And yes -- marriage is a totally, learnable skill.

Couples can try marital therapists, and if they do not progress with one therapist, try another. There are also many books, CDs, courses and internet material available on how to improve marriage. A couple can look at these materials, choose some, and try to apply them. Experimenting with these techniques on each other can be fun! You can also see a mediator, not for divorce, but to try to help you with conflict resolution techniques that will help your marriage. I call this “Mediation to Stay Married”.

It's best if both spouses work together on this, but if you have a resistant spouse, then read the books (or go to the therapist) yourself, and practice the techniques and insights on your spouse. (When you do this, your spouse might say, with a chuckle, "Are you practicing on me?") Try anything you can to break bad patterns at the beginning of the marriage when they arise. Otherwise these bad habits can become entrenched and can doom the marriage to unhappiness and discontent.

I find two books especially helpful for married couples. They are *The Relationship Handbook* by George Pransky, and *Taking the War Out of Our Words* by Sharon Strand Ellison. I re-read these books often and give them to my clients.

Pransky's book is short, well organized, and can be read (by the two of you) chapter by chapter. An example is the chapter entitled "It's Never Too Late to Get A Fresh Start". Doesn't that sound good? After reading it, you (and your spouse) will believe it and you will be able to begin anew and overcome discouragement and the "tapes" in your head that says the marriage is no good.

Sharon Strand Ellison's book requires close reading and lots of practice, but it's worth it. She posits that "power struggle" is at the root of all imbalances in relationships, and has devised a program called "Powerful Non-Defensive Communication". It is based on eliminating communication problems by learning to ask questions that won't lead to a defensive response. A great deal of surprising material is uncovered by asking questions in this way, and great progress can be made toward eliminating arguments and improving mutual understanding of each other.

Both the Pransky and the Ellison books can be purchased on the internet. Buy the books, read them, study them, apply them, and experiment with them on your spouse. These techniques really work and may lead you toward a happy marriage. And, you will find an extra benefit. Learning how to improve the dynamics of your marriage will improve your functioning with others everywhere – at your job, with your family and with your friends.

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About Laurie Israel:

Laurie Israel is an A-V rated lawyer practicing in Brookline, Massachusetts. Laurie helps clients resolve their disputes with a high level of dignity, integrity and creativity.

Laurie works in the areas of collaborative divorce, divorce mediation, divorce negotiation and prenuptial agreements. She also helps people who wish to stay married through providing marital mediation (a/k/a mediation to stay married) and negotiation of postnuptial agreements.

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