

Make Love Last

During the minister's message part of a wedding ceremony, I'm supposed to impress upon the couple the importance of the vows they are making, to say something wise about marriage in general, to offer a glimpse of the couple themselves, and to say all this in as little time as possible. It's a tall order.

Recently, I had the honor of co-designing and officiating the wedding ceremony of my young cousin. I spent days mulling on the message I wanted to offer. I reviewed previous messages for tidbits. I thought about the journey unfolding in front of them, not just marriage but parenthood when their child is born next month. I thought about the people I love who also love them and what wishes they might have for them. In the end, I decided to speak from my heart about what I've learned about creating a lasting, loving relationship.

It feels risky, maybe even arrogant, to suggest that I know about this. True, I've been happily married for over 20 years, but my parents didn't get divorced until they hit 26 years. To me, the tenets I outlined for my cousin (see below) are common sense. The longer I live, the more I realize what a misnomer that is! I assert that they can be applied to any relationship – be it with our lovers, our children, our friends, colleagues, or even (gasp!) with ourselves – with positive results.

Marriage is a like a dance – two people learning how to move together through life with grace and joy. Sounds good, but how do you do this without forcing, resisting, holding back, spinning out of control, or stepping all over each other's toes?

Realize first that it takes time to learn to dance together. You will step on each other's toes because difficulties arise in every relationship. Sometimes it might seem as though life is conspiring to knock you out of rhythm. So many competing demands – school, work, kids, friends, and family – can strain your relationship. Even your own habits and ways of dealing with change, stress, and hurt can create distance between you.

However, difficulties often provide the nudge (sometimes it's more like a shove) we need to learn some new steps – to develop new skills, redefine your priorities, and expand your resiliency. They do not mean that you've made a mistake in choosing your dance partner. Hold the big picture, and don't let the part that seems wrong eclipse all that is good and loving and true.

So, what are the steps to this dance? How do you make a marriage last?

“L”

Like each other. I have come to accept that passion ebbs and flows.

During the pauses between the sparks, it's nice to be standing beside someone you'd want to hang out with anyway.

Listen. Often, carefully, completely, wholeheartedly.

Look at each other through the eyes of love. See the best in each other. Believe the best about each other. Interpret each other's actions in the best way possible.

Learn to negotiate – without intimidation or manipulation or capitulation – but with a commitment to each of you getting what you need. This is the concept of win-win. When one of you loses, believe me, both of you loses.

“A”

Act as a team. Focus on your shared goals, interests, and values. You are now the co-authors of and the co-stars in your life together. Each of your unique contributions is crucial to the smooth and happy functioning of your family.

Appreciate each other often. Appreciation is the highest-quality lubrication available in a relationship.

Accept that you are different. Don't expect that you will need the same things or do things in the same way. Honor your individuality and look for ways to use your differences to good advantage.

“S”

Support each other in your learning curve of becoming a parent. It's a little like trying to learn the steps of a complex, demanding, and fast-paced dance – overnight. In my experience, parenting is the steepest of personal growth paths, and it can either deepen or derail a couple's dance together. Children will help you define and redefine (and redefine!) that which is most important. They'll help you to understand, forgive, and appreciate your own parents. You'll learn to parent yourselves, to love fiercely, to let go completely, and to be your children's best teachers and most earnest students.

Encourage each other to be your biggest and best Selves, pursuing and fulfilling your individual destinies within the context of your marriage. This often requires extra doses of Suppleness, Silliness and Strength!

“T”

Treat each other with respect and consideration. No one deserves your respect as much as your spouse. So don't spend all your politeness on the bag boy, the cashier, your friends, or your boss.

Talk to each other a lot, speaking gently and clearly. Words are powerful. Not only can they empower, encourage, and delight; they can cut, hurt, and create distance. Our words, whether spoken or thought, are powerful shapers of our own (and others') experience. And remember, not all communication is verbal.

Endeavor to deepen the friendship between you by Trusting and being Trustworthy. And nourish your relationship with Time and Tenderness.

Marriage is not an easy dance. In fact, it's a little like signing up for a lifelong dance marathon. Still, it is worthy of you and your focus, your talents, your creativity, your courage, and your heart. No other relationship offers such rewards – a witness to and a partner in the unfolding of your life, with all its beauty and heartache.

May your love be the miracle that gently insists upon your growth, so that you can withstand the difficulties, weather the conflicts, and embrace the changes. When each of you takes responsibility for the quality of your life together, your dance will inspire and fulfill. Your love will LAST.

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