

In Search of the Good Marriage

It's not just couple-centered.

By Lauren F. Winner

A few days after I got engaged, my mother presented me with a Barnes & Noble gift card, which a colleague had given to her. "You can have this gift card," she said, "but you must promise to buy that book that was just on Oprah, the one with the list of questions engaged couples should discuss." I knew just what book she meant—*The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say "I Do"* had become a minor sensation. So I took the gift card. Mom said I could use the change for a mystery or a magazine or a cappuccino, whatever I wanted, so long as I didn't leave the bookstore without *The Hard Questions*.

The Hard Questions—ranging from "Who prepares the meals?" to "What if one of us is attracted to someone else? Superficially? Deeply?"—is just one of a truckload of books designed to help couples get married well, be married well, and stay married well. Many of these marriage books, like other staples of the self-help genre, codify their wisdom into a simple program comprising seven (or nine, or 100) easily digestible (and often alliterative) rules. To wit, *The Good Marriage*, by Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee. Wallerstein, who is best known for her studies on the impact of divorce on kids, optimistically asserts that good marriages are possible, and suggests nine steps couples should take to protect their nuptials. "The first task in any marriage ... is to separate psychologically from the family of origin" (don't give your mom a key to your new marital home). Step two is "building togetherness and autonomy, [that is,] putting together a shared vision of how you want to spend your lives together." Good marriages have a strong sense of "we," but, following Kahil Gibran, good marriages also have space in their togetherness. Then comes having children, coping with crises, and "build[ing] a relationship that is safe for the expression of difference, conflict, and anger." Tasks six and seven are to "create a loving sexual relationship and to guard it so that it will endure," and to laugh and ward off boredom and ennui. Finally, in good marriages, partners nurture each other emotionally, and they "hold onto ... idealized images of courtship and early history along with a realistic view of the present."

In a similar vein, psychotherapists Linda and Charlie Bloom sketch out *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love Last*. Their lessons are indeed a little simpler than Wallerstein's. The Blooms urge couples to remember that "there's a difference between judging and being judgmental." They call for good communication (this sounds like presidential candidates saying they're pro-education—is there a marriage counselor anywhere who celebrates *bad* communication?), and suggest that spouses refrain from issuing ultimatums.

All those singletons who successfully followed Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider's *The Rules*—a blockbuster that coached women in "how to captur[e] the heart of Mr. Right"—can now avail themselves of *The Rules for Marriage*. Here Fein and Schneider lay out precisely 43 rules, including the seemingly contradictory "Don't Use the D Word (Divorce)," but then "Divorce with Dignity." (Fein is herself divorced. As she explained in one interview, "I was very happily married for many, many years before

the book came out. The sudden rise to fame and overnight celebrity was just too much for me and I filed for divorce when I just felt like it was all too much. I had stopped going out on date night and was too tired to do all the things I used to do, and it was so overnight! Rather than filing for divorce, a few weekends away alone would have been better!")

In the main, *The Rules for Marriage* (and "Rules," by the way, is trademarked) is consistent with the original dating rules, which are all about manipulating the guy and appearing not to need or desire anything on your own terms. Dating women are instructed, for example, to let their hair grow, because men prefer long tresses. Husband-hunters are told "don't call him and rarely return his calls," and advised not to accept invitations issued at the last minute—you wouldn't want to appear to have anything other than the fullest dance card. Once you are married, you should practice a Machiavellian submissiveness: Do not, for example, return the gifts hubby gives you "unless you absolutely can't look at them and are positive that you will never wear them." Calling him at the office is forbidden (but since you didn't call him while you were dating, you probably won't even be tempted). Oh, and also you're to "keep ... to yourself ... how *not in the mood* you are to make love," and you're to have sex whenever he wants: "When it comes to sex in a marriage, husbands rule the roost. Whether you like it or not or think it's right or fair, your husband determines your sex life."

Animating all these tips, suggestions, rules, and questions is a vision of what the good marriage is. So one might expect Christian marriage guides to differ markedly from their secular counterparts. And in some respects they do. Consider my three favorites.

Les and Leslie Parrott's helpful *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* rehearses many solid and standard marriage basics—learn to fight well, learn to communicate, cultivate intimacy and commitment. But the Parrotts also insist that men and women can't make marriages work by themselves. "On our own," write the Parrotts, " ... We can't ... look all the uncertainty of life full in the face and say, 'I will make one thing certain: my faithfulness to my partner.' "That proclamation relies on God's faithfulness, without which "marriage would have no hope of enduring." Walter Wangerin's wonderful *As For Me and My House* insists that sin has distorted God's ideals for marriage, and hence Wangerin puts the practice of forgiveness at the center of married life. And Mike Mason's *The Mystery of Marriage*, which has a cult following in some corners of the kingdom, is shot through with the understanding that marriage is not "in any sense separate from or subordinate to the life of faith." Marriage is a "practicing ... for Heaven," an institution in which God disciplines us, "helping men and women to humble themselves, to surrender their errant wills."

And yet, alongside these distinctives, there are some underlying assumptions about marriage that are common to almost every marriage self-help book I've read, secular or Christian, and these assumptions are, I think, questionable.

The first has to do with *eros*—or, more plainly, sex and romance. It's no surprise that many of the current marriage guides focus on sex: According to *The Sex-Starved Marriage* (and according to a lot of shopworn jokes), married couples are in an outright crisis of libido. Twenty percent of married couples have sex less than once a month. Couples are harried, busy, stressed, exhausted. They're clinically depressed,

or their hormones are out of whack, or they're dealing with childhood sexual abuse. Whatever the cause, married folks don't seem to be having much sex.

So don't worry if your sex life has gotten a little humdrum—you're not alone. What's more, these guides suggest, a solution is staring you in the face. You need only "work hard" at creating a romantic atmosphere and cultivating sexual desire.

As Marg Stark puts it in *What No One Tells the Bride*, "brides and grooms are working, cleverly and secretly, at their sex lives. ... Couples *have* to work at it, especially today, with the average couple marrying in their mid-twenties, when the demands of burgeoning careers can overtake even the raging hormones of youth." So if your libido is low, consider escaping for a romantic weekend; going to a sex therapist; hiring a babysitter and checking into a Motel 6 for the afternoon. To prevent sex from becoming routine, alternate the time of day in which you make love. *What No One Tells the Bride* suggests that couples "Buy some 'dirty dice.' Roll them on the sheets of your bed and then do what they say to do" and tells women to "Wear the thong even though it's lace and really scratches." *The Rules for Marriage* warns that wives who "do not take date night ... seriously" are likely to end up in marriages where "the couple starts to act like roommates, not lovers." A host of Christian sex guides (think Alex Comfort meets the Song of Songs) echo the theme. Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus' *Intimate Issues*, for example, lays out three different types of sex—hors d'oeuvre sex ("it satisfies and whets the appetite for a good, regular meal"), home-cooked sex ("fifteen minutes to a half-hour of warmth, foreplay, and intercourse"), and gourmet sex ("long, lazy, luxurious romance with no responsibility except loving"); husbands and wives are encouraged to plan at least one round of gourmet sex a month.

It is, of course, a salutary thing to suggest, as Stark does, that our frantic jobs are less important than the fabric of our marriages. But is the "solution" to America's married sex "crisis" really simply to work harder at sex—an idiom that befits a society in thrall to advanced capitalism? Maybe roommate-like status is not what we ought to be aspiring to in marriage—but neither is the thrill and romance that one associates with one's fondly remembered dating days. (Why bother with marriage if the romance of dating is all you're after?) Surely what married people should aspire to is, well, living as husband and wife.

Enjoy the occasional weekend getaway at a B&B, sure, but create an *eros* situated squarely in the household. That means not just sex and candlelight, but much more often sex and domesticity, sex and routine, sex that is part of, rather than abstracted from, the day-to-day life that is marriage. Our task, then, may not be to "work harder" at romance and desire, but rather to reconceptualize *eros*. Our task may be to move away from the logic that tells us that erotic love is the thing that married couples try to approximate at the end of their date nights, and to adopt instead a robustly domestic and household sexuality. Our task may not be to cultivate moments when *eros* can whisk us away from our ordinary routines, but rather to love each other as *eros* becomes imbedded in, and transformed by, the daily warp and woof of married life.

Lurking underneath the romanticized *eros* is a certain individualism, and, indeed, almost all of today's marriage guides frame marriage strictly as an individual project. The marriages that emerge from the pages of these books are marriages of two people who rarely engage their communities. Marriage is figured as something that is

undertaken by, and that serves, only the husband and wife. None of the books' rules, guidelines, or suggestions urge couples to understand marriage in the context of the communities to which they are committed.

Consider, for example, the Blooms' endorsement of fidelity: Having enjoined married couples, "If you chose monogamy, keep your agreement," the Blooms go on to suggest that "Ultimately the question of monogamy ... [is] a matter of enlightened self-interest. Keeping the agreement to monogamy provides a container within which we are able to experience greater depth and fulfillment in our marriage and greater levels of self-awareness and self-development." Fidelity, then, is not a social good; it is not a discipline that fosters goodness; it neither draws on nor offers anything to neighbors. It is merely good for the folks practicing it; it helps them attain self-fulfillment.

Even Judith Wallerstein, who aims to shore up good marriages and prevent divorce, seems to assume that marriage begins and ends with the couple. None of the nine tasks she lays out for married couples put husbands and wives in relation to a larger community. Her married people don't even seem to have friends. They have each other, and some kids; that's where their community begins and ends.

And, yet, marriage is meant to be communal as well as couple-centered both in its means and its meanings. At the most practical level, it is our friends, our brothers and sisters in the church, our aunts and uncles and colleagues, who can remind us why we got married in the first place. It is this community that, when we lay our marriages bare before them, are able to hold us accountable, and also celebrate with us. This is what the Book of Common Prayer's Order of Marriage is getting at when it prompts the celebrant to ask the congregation if "all of you witnessing these promises [will] do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?" The congregation's response is a hearty "We will." If we Christians want to get our divorce rates down below the national average, rendering our marriages visible to our communities—opening ourselves up to our friends' support, prayers, questions, and rebuke—would be a good place to start.

But recalling the communal dimension of marriage is not merely a strategy for sticking it out and navigating the rough patches. It is rather an assertion of God's purposes for marriage. Our surrounding society tells us that marriage is a private endeavor, that what happens between husband and wife behind closed doors is no one else's concern. But in the Christian grammar, marriage is not only for the married couple. Insofar as marriage tells the Christian community a particular story, marriage is for the community. It reminds us of the communion and community that is possible between and among people who have been made new creatures in Christ. And it hints at the eschatological union between Christ and the Church. As Catholic ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio has put it, "marriage consists not simply or even primarily of a personal relationship. Rather, it crystallizes the love of the larger church community. The couple is not just two-in-one, but two together within the whole, with specific responsibility for the whole. ... They must persevere in love, because the community needs to see God's love actualized among God's people."

The inflections of community are important because they get at the very meanings of marriage. Marriage is a gift God gives the church. He does not simply give it to the married people of the church, but to the whole church, just as marriage is designed

not only for the benefit of the married couple. It is designed to tell a story to the entire church, a story about God's own love and fidelity to us.

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Books discussed in this essay:

Intimate Issues: Conversations Woman to Woman : 21 Questions Christian Women Ask About Sex, by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus (Waterbrook).

The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say "I Do", by Susan Piver (Tarcher).

The Sex-Starved Marriage: Boosting Your Marriage Libido, a Couple's Guide, by Michelle Weiner David (Simon & Schuster).

What No One Tells the Bride, by Marg Stark (Hyperion).

The Good Marriage: How & Why Love Lasts, by Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee (Warner).

101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love Last, by Charlie and Linda Bloom (New World Library).

The Rules (TM) for Marriage: Time-Tested Secrets for Making Your Marriage Work, by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider (Warner).

As For Me And My House: Crafting Your Marriage To Last, by Walter Wangerin, Jr. (Thomas Nelson).

The Mystery of Marriage: Meditations on the Miracle, by Mike Mason (Multnomah).

Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts, by Les and Leslie Parrott (Zondervan).

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