

Needed: A Marriage License Warning Label

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Ever wish your marriage had come with a warning label? Most of us do. After all, at the altar, the bride and groom smile at each other, convinced their marriage will be sweeter and better than any they've witnessed. Then they're off to a honeymoon not only to consummate their new union but also to rest after the intense wedding preparations.

Bless their hearts; they don't know the real work is about to begin. And all too soon one -- or both -- will have this fleeting thought: *But nobody told me it would be like this!* If they don't know that sentiment crosses everyone's mind at one time or another, they may be tempted to bail out.

Hilda certainly needed warning labels on her marriage license. As a child, she felt she didn't fit. Her classmates had mocked her old-fashioned name, and at home her parents didn't know what to do with this daughter who was their midlife surprise. But Hilda held one thought close to her heart: Someday she'd meet someone who would truly love her.

That hope carried her into college. By then she had more sharply defined a future with her knight in shining armor, and at her job in the cafeteria dish room, she'd think about him: He would stroke her hair as he asked for details of her day, and they'd prepare dinner together before cuddling in front of the fireplace.

Then one morning, Jim, one of the new workers, smiled at her across a stack of trays. At their scheduled break, he asked her name. She gave it, but stammered she never liked it. He looked bewildered. "That's my grandma's name. She's fun. I bet you are, too."

Smitten, Hilda began to look forward to going to work. By the time Jim asked her to a campus movie, Hilda already had priced china at the local department store.

They had a rapid courtship and were married a week after graduation. Quickly they settled into a new apartment and plunged into challenging jobs. But something was missing for Hilda: Her "knight" didn't call her in the middle of his busy day, and he didn't stroke her hair in front of the fireplace, and he certainly didn't ask for details of her day. Soon, she decided this wasn't the way marriage was supposed to be.

Meanwhile, Jim was bewildered Hilda didn't laugh at his silly jokes anymore and was becoming critical of everything he did. In fact, he decided, she had changed from the sweet girl who had won him with her shy smile.

Had marriage changed them both that much? Of course not. Hilda had married an image. And her "knight" didn't fit the picture of what a husband -- especially hers -- was supposed to do. And Jim had his own preconceived notions of what marriage should be. Without meaning to, each mate had fallen short of the other's expectations.

It took a Saturday morning argument to open their eyes to what they had allowed to happen. Jim wandered into the kitchen and reached for a cup, only to discover Hilda hadn't made coffee. She was savoring tea as she read a magazine.

He could have greeted her, made coffee himself, and avoided an argument. Instead, Jim chose to voice disappointment Hilda hadn't done what wives were supposed to do.

"How come you didn't make coffee?" he snapped.

"Well, good morning to you, too," Hilda replied sarcastically, and they were off and running into an argument that included several "you nevers" and a couple of "boy, have you changed" followed by Hilda's tearful "This isn't the way it's supposed to be."

To Jim's credit, something clicked, and instead of storming to the deli for coffee and solitude, he chose a wiser route.

"Look, let's start over," he said.

Then he dramatically cleared his throat. "Good morning, dear wife. My, but aren't you the picture of loveliness."

Even though Hilda knew he was kidding, she smiled. He stared, then said softly, "I've missed your smile."

They weren't cuddled by the fireplace, but as Hilda looked at her husband, she decided it was time to learn how to communicate with this real man. And that realization provided a new start -- and one that wasn't built on unfulfilled expectations.

Adapted from **Men Read Newspapers, Not Minds - and other things I wish I'd known when I first married** by Sandra P. Aldrich. (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996. Used by permission.) Author or co-author of 17 books, Sandra is an international speaker who handles serious issues with insight and humor. For booking information, she may be contacted at BoldWords@aol.com.

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