



The Good Marriage

What It Means To Be Well-Wed

(From Judith Wallerstein, "The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts")

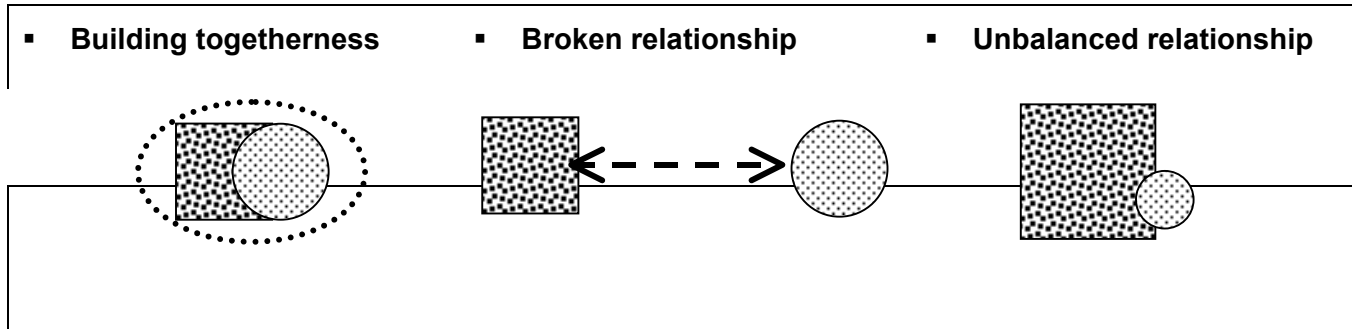
1. Separating emotionally from the family of one's childhood.

- 1.1. This has to do with creating a "we-ness" when we have lived our lives with an "I-ness." It means being interdependent with your spouse when you have been dependent upon your parents. It is the first transfiguration. The man becomes a husband-man and the woman becomes a wife-woman. It is a profound redefinition of what man and woman are to be.
- 1.2. Separating emotionally means not rubber banding back to previous growing up experiences. It means redefining normalcy to include the perspectives of your spouse. It means to rethink what you have been taught in growing up and creating a new and shared reality.
- 1.3. This "we-ness" is often absent or weak in marriages that end in divorce, especially in young couples that divorced early. Well-wed couples thought of their marriage as a separate and unique presence that required nurture and care. These couples tried to anticipate the consequences of changes (such as a new baby or a vocational move) not only to their individual happiness but to the marriage.
- 1.4. We ask couples in premarriage counselling what it would be like if the groom's father was married to the bride's mother (and the groom's mother to the bride's father) to help them understand and separate emotionally from their family of origin.
- 1.5. Note – it is sometimes harder to separate from a good family than it is a bad family.
- 1.6. Separation is not an emotional cut-off. It has to do with examining and understanding the influence that parents have had (for good or ill) in growing up. This permits a greater flexibility in how the couple responds to and approaches the parental couples.

2. Building togetherness.

- 2.1. Building togetherness has to do with friendship and mutuality as husband and wife define how they will merge their lives. This is the structure and shape of the marriage.
- 2.2. The couples Wallerstein interviewed based their marriages on shared intimacy and an expanded conscience that included both without encroaching on the autonomy of either one.
- 2.3. A common wedding symbol is the candelabra with three candles. At the beginning of the ceremony, the two "identity" candles are lit while the "shared" candle remains virginal. Following the sharing of vows, the centre candle is lit by bride and groom using the two outer candles. Those "identity" candles (representing husband and wife) are extinguished leaving the marriage candle alone afire.
- 2.4. Building togetherness has to do with the identity of husband and wife remaining alive for the betterment of the marriage. Neither identities are extinguished. Separate identities define and enrich the marriage rather than compete against it.

- 2.5. Establishing the unique identity of the marriage is half the job. Couples have to somehow carve out autonomy within the shared concept of the marriage. That means keeping the marriage flexible enough to express the needs of each spouse, as well as the couple.



3. Establishing a rich sexual relationship.

- 3.1. Wallerstein's studies of both divorce and marriage show that a couple's sex life is the most vulnerable part of the relationship. Work stress, children's demands, depression, worry and just plain fatigue can all interrupt and shape a couple's love life.
- 3.2. Almost all of the happily married couples worked hard to protect their private time together. An emotionally rich sexual life is not a fringe benefit. It is a protective factor because it makes the marriage worth the many sacrifices that are required if the marital bond is to remain strong.
- 3.3. Contrary to myth, she did not find that sex was most frequent or passionate in the first years of the marriage and then declined. In some marriages, there was little change in the sexual relationship over many decades. In others, sexual activity was at a high level during early marriage and pregnancy, declined steeply when children were young, and rose again when they left home.
- 3.4. All of the retired couples that had a good marriage enjoyed sex regularly.

4. Embracing the roles of parenthood.

- 4.1. Absorbing the impact of the dramatic entrance of a baby into the marriage is a critical task of new parents.
- 4.2. A child entry into the marriage redefines the couple. They are again transfigured from husband and wife to father and mother. This not just a role change; it is a psychological and spiritual redefinition of who they are.
- 4.3. The child also makes the marriage a family in a way that they were not while living together as a couple. They are now more than a couple.

5. Maintaining the strength of the marital bond in the face of adversity.

- 5.1. Based on her study, good, lasting marriages are not problem-free. "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health" are reality statements of marriage. It is how the couple approach their difficulties that defines the success and stability of their covenant. A well-established marriage is a firm foundation to accept problems and stresses. In fact, these difficulties strengthen the marital bond by increasing it.

6. Creating a safe haven for the expression of differences.

- 6.1. Wallerstein, who calls the idea of a conflict-free marriage an oxymoron, says that even scrupulous compromise and communication cannot prevent interests from occasionally colliding. There is no way to avoid disagreements.
- 6.2. The couples in her study admitted to stormy quarrels. But they said that learning to disagree without fear of dire consequences is important in keeping the marriage intact.
- 6.3. Many good marriages agree to not approach conflict areas until they have the resources to solve them. Issues such as sexual frequency and creativity, or the discipline of children, are better left for when resources are greater prior to trying to resolving. This is not denial – this is wisdom.
- 6.4. A good marriage strengthens braking power by providing a safe holding environment that can permit and contain aggression without harm to the individuals or to the relationship.
- 6.5. For a significant number of people, the sense of the marriage as a safe place where both love and anger could be expressed without fear is enormously meaningful.

7. Humor and laughter to keep things in perspective.

8. Providing nurturance, comfort and support to each other.

- 8.1. Although the best marriages protect each spouse's autonomy, it still must satisfy his and her needs for dependency. Husband and wife offer continuing encouragement and support to each other.
- 8.2. Unbalanced marriages – where the husband takes care of the wife – are not bad or wrong in and off themselves. They take this shape for many reasons and if they are meaningful, they can produce stable and satisfying unions.

9. Keeping the romance alive.

- 9.1. Romance is not sex (though it may include lovemaking) but it has to do with the “ethos” or feeling tone of the relationship. It is tenderness, carefulness, and a cherishing attitude. It has to do with treating the other in the way that the other wants to be treated. Remembering the early romantic, idealized images of falling in love is the final — and, like the others, continuous — task of marriage.
- 9.2. "This is perhaps the task that is most closely linked with maintaining love over the lifetime," Wallerstein says. "What is clear in these findings is that these images can remain passionate and powerful over many years of marriage, even into old age."