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Marriage secrets

By MARGARET FOTH
I enjoy figuring out the messages that drivers pay to put on licence plates these days. One day between Charlottesville and Richmond, there were Virginia tags that said W-E-D, N-4-3. I decided they're saying they were married in November of '43. Forty-four years!

How do couples make it for 44 or even 14 years? Five years ago author Maxine Rock was celebrating her 18th wedding anniversary when a young editor who was about to get married asked her, "Why have you stayed married so long when other people seem to be splitting right and left? How did you achieve happiness?"

Rock said she couldn't answer those questions right away, but thought it would be a tantalizing experiment to find out—just why do certain people stay married when others do not? If they stay married, are they happily married? And if so, how do they do that?

What followed was three years of intensive research as Rock interviewed more than a hundred couples to write a book titled THE MARRIAGE MAP. (Peachtree) which can be helpful for almost any stage of marriage.

Rock found that marriages are predictable, following certain paths—a map. It is not as mysterious as we might think. Marriage follows sensible, predictable lines, almost like acts in a play.

First comes the Fantasy stage, as you'd expect, this is the honeymoon time or first year of marriage. During this time couples probably don't even want to HEAR that their marriage will likely go through a roller coaster course. "That sounds discouraging," said one recent groom upon hearing about Rock's book.

In years 2-7, most couples learn a new meaning to the word compromise as the little issues (like where do you squeeze the toothpaste tube) give way to compromising on more substantial issues.

As Rock says, "You're trying to figure out in your own mind how the fantasy could have disappeared. How could it be that the person you thought was perfect turns out not to be perfect, and can you live with that? Can you compromise your own standards?"

Rock is careful to point out that these stages are not fixed. Many of the stages overlap and couples, meanwhile experience wonderful, warm, bonding times that help keep perspective on the negative feelings.

During years five to ten "Reality struggles" often occur, characterized by coming to grips with the fact that "Your marriage will never be exactly what you wanted, it to be."

A stage Rock calls "Decisions" comes during years 10 to 15 when the pressures of life are often heavy. Most couples have children, there may be aging parents who need attention. "Children are probably the most disruptive force in any marriage," but they also provide emotional glue. Rock gives the following example:

"At first when I started the research, when I heard 'We're together for the sake of the children,' I would groan inside and say, 'Aw, these people are making a terrible mistake.' Yet, I realized as I went on that one of the functions of children, IS to keep you together, to provide the emotional glue that is strong enough to withstand much conflict."

Next comes a "separation" stage during years 12-17. Even if couples don't physically separate, many experience emotional separateness and feeling alone. If people do not panic during this stage, Rock says, they can recognize that spouses may need a little breathing room, independence, and chance to develop a sense of self.

After this period of feeling emotionally separate, if couples remain committed to their marriage they'll find a stage called "Together Again: a wonderful, relaxing time when you have finally erased a lot of the indecision and a lot of pain of the younger years and you can burst forth as rather content, mature individuals." "New Freedom" is the name she gives the years beyond 20 years of marriage.

It sounds wonderful—and it can be, but it is achieved through a lot of hard work—emotional growing up, allowing room for the others' mistakes. There is continuing growth and these are new issues even in the "New Freedom" stage.

Most telling in her research, is a discovery (not surprising) that couples are too willing to give up: "As soon as a rough period comes along, they think divorce." Rock says. She sees hope in the fact that people are beginning to stay married partially out of fear of sexually transmitted diseases and also seeing that "remarriages are so incredibly complicated, especially when children are involved. People have looked around now at family and friends and said, 'I don't want to do that. That's not for me.'"

And so, working through the marriage begins to look more inviting and worthwhile in the long run. Perhaps we are finally learning the beauty of the biblical promise: "Love perseveres." This column is provided by The Care and Share Shoppe, 39 Main Street West, Stouffville.



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