

St. Paul's Counseling Ministry
Key for Living--August 2009

"A Key for Women Unhappy in Marriage"

*(Note: In this column I am **not** addressing women who are leaving unaccountable men who are violent, engaged in severe addictive behaviors, or having affairs, when these men have refused to do the necessary recovery and change work. In those cases a woman needs to take clear action to remove herself and her children from those toxic environments.)*

In the last several years in the counseling ministry here at St. Paul's I have been noticing that more Catholic and other Christian women seem to be joining the trend of secular women and giving up earlier on their marriages than in the past. And too often they are receiving support from family and friends to divorce before they have explored all their options for help.

Dear sisters, please know that I am sympathetic about your unhappiness and frustrations. You are looking for a **partner** in areas like emotional intimacy, parenting, spiritual growth, cultivating ongoing romance and sexual sharing, providing financially for the family, social and church involvements, intellectual growth. You may have other items to add to this list, also. You have tried to engage your husband in this kind of partnership using many different approaches: asking kindly, looking unhappy, pleading for help, praying for him, asking him to go to counseling, asking him to read books on relational skills with you, asking him to go to a Marriage Encounter or other marriage enrichment workshops, raising your voice, complaining, criticizing, crying, making it clear you've lost interest in sex, etc. Maybe some of the time he responds positively (to at least the first several approaches!) and then after a short while he slides back to old behaviors.

All too often our husbands are still operating under the old job description of husband and father: work and be a provider, maybe take care of the yard, possibly buy an anniversary card. With probably more involvement in childcare than his dad offered. In too many cases men have not yet been challenged and helped to develop their intimacy skills which were shut down in childhood as they were trained to "be a man" and to "suck it up and get on with things". Some men are medicating the pain of years of buried wounds, and the stress of living only at the level of provider (which requires constant competition in the work world) by various harmful activities like excessive working, alcohol and other drug abuse, violent raging, excessive time on the Internet, pornography, affairs, gambling, and others.

So, after some years of feeling increasingly unhappy in your marriage, you are noticing other men and fantasizing that one of them might be your Prince Charming. Or you are imagining being single again and how happy you would be without this guy. Or you're stewing in resentment which oozes out in ways that further erode any remaining warm connection with your husband. It probably feels like you have only two choices: to put up with the status quo, or to leave the marriage.

The good news I have to offer you is that there is a third way, a way which often (though not always) leads to a new, more satisfying marriage. This way requires learning some new skills and, yes, going **first** in using these new approaches. Most of the men I've worked with in the counseling ministry over these 24 years are good-hearted men, who do respond once they discover that their wife is serious about standing firm (in new respectful ways) for a better marriage.

This culture has sucked **all** of us, to some degree, into attitudes of entitlement, self-righteous anger, fighting to prove we are right at the other's expense, etc. We women can get stuck in male-bashing, in resentment, in seeing ourselves as the all-innocent and loving partner and our husband as the all-selfish and uncaring one. Christ wants to free all of us, women and men, for mutually sacrificial, forgiving, and warmly loving relationships.

The positive pay-offs of going first in making changes in your relationship are huge. You will develop skills which enrich your marriage, or if your husband absolutely refuses to change, still allow you to be wiser, more loving and effective in your other relationships. If you and your husband become more relationally skilled you will be offering your children a new model of marriage (we tend to repeat what we grow up with) and a more peaceful home. Even if he doesn't respond very much, you still will be modeling more respectful, firm ways of loving for your kids. You will discover a new pathway to spiritual growth. And, in the hard times which are already beginning to affect our families and communities (related to the contraction of the economy, resource depletion and climate change) we will **want** committed marriage partners with whom we can share the challenges. For example, it is much easier to cope with rising fuel and housing costs, and job insecurity, if there are two adults sharing the household budget.

While we don't have the power to **change** our husbands into this kind of partner, we **can**, with God's help, become this kind of partner and then invite our husband to join us on the Relational Life path. In my experience, it's well worth the hard work! Walking this Relational Life path has stretched me into becoming a more faithful follower of Christ. With Walt joining me in this practice, we are enjoying more mutual warm appreciation and love than ever in our 21 years of marriage. The support, comfort and encouragement that we share gives us a powerful anchor when the cultural winds blow wildly around us. I am so grateful to share this loving partnership with this great guy who is now my best friend! I wish this for each of you in your marriages.

For an overview of the Relational Life path, read my web-column, Key for Living, February,2008: [A Key for More Peaceful Marriages](#).

For further study read *The New Rules of Marriage: What You Need to Know to Make Love Work*, 2007, by Terrence Real. This book includes exercises for couples; the exercises are written so that they can also be practiced by one partner alone even if the other is not yet willing.

If you would like some coaching in putting these new attitudes and skills into practice, you might consider talking with me about how counseling could be of help.

May you receive God's grace and peace today!

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