

SIX WORKS OF MARRIAGE

Nine Psychological Tasks for a Good Marriage

Research on what makes a marriage work shows that people in a good marriage have completed these psychological "tasks":

1. Separate emotionally from the family you grew up in; not to the point of estrangement, but enough so that your identity is separate from that of your parents and siblings.
2. Build togetherness based on a shared intimacy and identity, while at the same time set boundaries to protect each partner's autonomy.
3. Establish a rich and pleasurable sexual relationship and protect it from the intrusions of the workplace and family obligations.
4. For couples with children, embrace the daunting roles of parenthood and absorb the impact of a baby's entrance into the marriage. Learn to continue the work of protecting the privacy of you and your spouse as a couple.
5. Confront and master the inevitable crises of life
6. Maintain the strength of the marital bond in the face of adversity. The marriage should be a safe haven in which partners are able to express their differences, anger and conflict.
7. Use humor and laughter to keep things in perspective and to avoid boredom and isolation.
8. Nurture and comfort each other, satisfying each partner's needs for dependency and offering continuing encouragement and support.
9. Keep alive the early romantic, idealized images of falling in love, while facing the sober realities of the changes wrought by time.

The following material goes beyond the psychological tasks to the actual physical work that it takes to make a marriage.

THE SIX WORKS OF MARRIAGE

“Until Death”- Working While There’s Life

Let’s deal with the six works to which a husband and a wife committed themselves by their comprehensive vows in their wedding. I’m not much concerned about the various wordings of these vows, but about the intent, about the nature of healthy marriages, and about the mutual work which keeps them healthy. “Faithfulness unto death” means working while there’s life.

In practice, these tasks are not easily divisible. They entwine and qualify each other. Spouses are engaged in several at once, even in the moment of a single act. But we will divide them here in order to name and analyze them—and in order to reveal the complete responsibility of either spouse. No, sir; no, ma’am. Having done one thing, you’ve not discharged the whole of your obligation. It is when you both work at all things that the marriage is made sturdy against storms external and internal. So we count up tasks to the number six, and we pray that each partner sees the sum as his and her own *Haustafein*, or table of duties.

But before we take them one at a time, it’s important that we make clear each partner’s best attitude toward all of them together.

These are not six “laws” of marriage. They are not meant to burden you as with new commandments, which, if you don’t keep them perfectly, accuse you and cause you guilt. In fact, the identification of these tasks is meant to relieve you!

In any job, ignorance is the heaviest shackle—like leg irons halting you. If you know you are to do something, but know not what that thing is, the job itself seems continually oppressive. But when finally you learn what that something is, and that you are able to do it, that job becomes your own—your place in the universe, your opportunity for development and self-expression, your challenge for accomplishment, your value. Then it feeds you, body and soul. So are these tasks meant merely to identify what has been true all along? And you can do them. You are capable.

But these are your tasks. They are not six rights which either partner might claim of the other. These, most emphatically, are not six demands a wife may make of her husband, or a husband of his wife. Rather, they are the six areas of work to which your marriage vow has obligated you, your service to the relationship, your glad opportunity for a whole participation, your livelihood therein.

Most marvelous of all, these are a means by which you may, within your marriage, serve the Lord. It is the Lord you serve when you serve his child, your spouse. It is the loving Lord you serve when you cause his image to be manifest in action in your household—the

Lord who “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Then let no one, reading these tasks, think: “Yes, he should be doing this for me.” For if anyone imposes them on the other, the marriage will suddenly be locked in the law; and then stern standards of judgment will have been established, commandments after all, which any spouse will finally fail to keep. The marriage will deteriorate to criticism, complaint, self-righteousness, and dissatisfaction. These are not rules for your partner’s behavior.

Rather, let everyone reading these tasks exult: “So this is how I can bless my spouse! This is what I can most effectively do for her!” For if everyone makes a free gift of these services, the marriage will be characterized by willingness and a holy grace, and every act performed may seem pure kindness, unexpected, undeserved. Where there are no judgments, there is no question of failure; and the spirit of gratitude casts out the spirit of criticism. What abundance will that marriage seem to have, where each receives more than either asked for!

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The First Work: Truthfulness and Dependability

“Truthfulness and dependability” might at first glance seem adjectival nouns, abstract conditions only, and qualities of being. In fact, they are jobs. They are, together, a task requiring our careful work—and they will have a very definite effect on the relationship. When this task is conscientiously accomplished, it produces in your spouse the dear and necessary fruit of trust.

Each marriage begins with a period of trust; but it is a limited period. For a while she will trust you just because she loves you; for a while he will trust without evidence, because he wants to. But finally that trust must find a more solid ground—and in most marriages it must be reproduced since it is so commonly broken by the natural shock of living together and truly discovering one another. Now the task takes on its significance.

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Truthfulness

Truthfulness in regards to your speech to your spouse:

- that it hides nothing in lying;
- that it neglects nothing important;
- that it distorts nothing, either consciously or unconsciously;

- that it communicates as accurate a picture as possible of anything it chooses to offer, whether of the world, or of yourself, or of your spouse.

Such watchfulness of talk takes work, not only to resist the impulse to keep things to yourself, but also to train yourself in choosing what to say and how to say it most effectively for the sake of your spouse. Though God gave us tongues, we are a race lazy at speech; though he gave us eyes, we are lazy in observation; and though he gave us hearts, we are inclined to be self-centered.

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What, specifically, is the work required here?

Certainly, truthfulness means that you do not willfully lie. That hardly needs explanation or an argument, does it? Surely everyone realizes that lying is the dry-rot of any relationship, destroying it at its center until it is no more than a hollow form. A crisis, when trust is most needed, brings the whole house down, liar and spouse and all.

Besides that, truthfulness means that you've taken careful time to examine yourself (the speaker) in order to identify truly your experiences, your feelings, the observations significant to you. And then you've found and you practice the best methods of communicating these things to your spouse—in words that he or she can understand. That's work.

The truthful husband (or wife) does not neglect to express the essential events of the day he spent apart from his spouse—however tired he generally thinks he is, however alien his world and his language may seem to her, requiring interpretation. To keep silent about his experiences, and therefore about his own being, is to shirk a necessary work. The truthful wife (or husband) does not make decisions which affect the family without including her husband in the early stages of that decision.

Unless the partners volunteer such talk, unless they clearly reveal the changes occurring in their lives, their spouses may be exiled from both the change and finally the life—till one day a wife complains of her unforthcoming husband, “I just don't know him any more!”

And when a husband asks his melancholy wife, “Honey, what's the matter?” the truthful wife will answer. Despite the silence she yearns for, despite the real difficulty of putting deep feelings into words, she works; she answers. Self-examination is always work. Self-revelation seems sometimes perilous. It is easier to forget the day, not live it thrice—once in reality, again in thought, again in conversation. It is easier simply to suffer a gloom than to try to understand it, easier to lie a little:

“Nothing's the matter. Forget it.” But an easy silence causes dis-ease in the end, not trust.

Truthfulness means that, when you talk, you make a most careful bridge of your words. This requires two cares, really: I care for the topic, to get it right; and care for your spouse, that she/he hear it right. That's work. For example, a blizzard of unconsidered words may be a glad release of personal emotion, but it can also blind your spouse to the true cause of that emotion. Either he ends up feeling as strongly as you do, but not knowing why (frustrating!), or else he confuses himself with the cause and wonders what he did to make you feel so bad. Work is the self-restraint that does not merely "dump" on a spouse but labors for clarity of explanations. It doesn't only seek a comrade in feeling; it honors the spouse with understanding.

And truthfulness, when the topic is specifically your spouse, does not attack. Always it is meant as a benediction, a good word seeking his or her well-being. She is the object of this truth:

It is true for her, on her behalf; it is true to her, to what is best for the best in her. This is something much more elevated than the "truth" that is mere fact; it is aware of the very spirit and purpose of your relationship. Too often, "Hey, babe! I'm just telling you the truth, just being honest" is justification for personal criticism. Under cover of the virtue of honesty, it's meant to wound, to snap her into shape, to improve your own life (pretending, perhaps, to improve hers). In other words, such truth is neither truthful nor true to the purpose of your marriage.

What then? Does truthfulness restrict you in praising your spouse only, to agreeing, approving, commending? Of course not. That would become its own sort of lie. You'll not conceal a truth which might truly improve your spouse. If you don't speak it, who will? Who better could he or she trust than you? But you will know (or you must labor to discover!) your motives truly. If your purpose is criticism only, who sooner will he mistrust than you? And then the marriage whole will suffer. Rather, speak that truth in sincere love. The motive of your speaking will be as evident to him as the words themselves. Surely, you will not drive this truth, some blemish in his character, like a nail into his skull with mean repetition, or twist your face to show how much it troubles you.

So, what is the work here? To assess your motive—if to pick and criticize, shut up. Likewise, the work is to assess the purpose of the marriage and the best in your spouse, so that when you do talk it will promote both. That is the labor of the spirit of truthfulness.

What sort of trust, then, does truthfulness produce?

That your spouse believes in her heart, "He tells me all." And further, "What he tells me, he tells me truly." Such trust produces security. And security produces peace.

Dependability

Dependability is truthfulness in action—in your actions. It regards your promises, whether spoken or unspoken, and your spouse's reasonable expectations that you will in fact do what you pledge to do, that you will fulfill anticipations. It secures, now, the future in deed.

The future is always cloaked in the darkness of our ignorance; we move into it by calculated guesswork and by faith; but the less we can guess by present evidence, and the less we can believe in those who move with us, the more fearful we are to move at all. In a sort of terror we may be paralyzed, unmoving—until we sit in a stony conservatism and wait for the future to come and get us. That is, we cease to risk, cease to make the significant decisions, cease in great measure to live.

And the world at large defrauds us, promising promises it never intends to keep. Advertising uses, but does not love, us. Friends disappoint. Governments propagandize for their own purposes. Economies rise and fall in mystery. Superiors walk on the heads and hearts of their inferiors as on rocks in a stream. This is a sad, familiar litany, but its very familiarity witnesses to the instability of the present, the treachery of the future. There must be something upon which we can depend in order to plan, to act, and to live.

You, loving husband; you, faithful wife: you may be the light which illuminates the future and frees your spouse confidently to enter it. But only insofar as you are dependable. Otherwise you are that world to him or her.

Dependability Requires A Careful Work:

- to make your promises wisely, realistically, according to your true abilities, according to your spouse's real needs;
- to remember the specific promises and your general marital duties in a hectic world;
- to make these promises a fixed priority in a world that will entice you persistently to other interests (she sings like a Siren, does the world);
- and to accomplish all the little pledges ungrudgingly gracefully. Each is a nail. Behold: you are building a lodge against the future, a structure in which to house the marriage hereafter.

Let's flesh this out, first, by a negative example:

There are people who, to escape the burden of today, make wondrous promises against tomorrow. These people live in their words alone; they are infants in responsibility. More than their bond (less than their bond) they think their words themselves are deeds! In fact, they are pleased to believe that by promising something they have already accomplished something.

“When we have children,” says such a husband earnestly, sincerity softening his eyes upon his wife, “I promise I’ll cut back at work and spend more time at home.” He is earnest. But the emotion that trembles in his voice is due, at least in part, to an awe at his own wonderfulness. Aren’t I a good husband, he thinks wordlessly, being such a good father? See how I understand my wife’s needs?—this, ever before she is pregnant or he a father in fact.

Then a long time passes before the child is born. When the child arrives, more time passes while the wife waits for him to cut back his work, as he had promised. And in that time this husband has

- 1) been promoted in his job,
- 2) forgotten the intensity of his feelings in making the promise so long ago,
- 3) used up the credit it earned him in her eyes, having already enjoyed her gratitude and praise (what more adoration could he earn by actually cutting back at work?), and
- 4) noticed that she isn’t as alluring as she was before the baby came. He’s also less inclined just now to sacrifice on her account, and the home isn’t as pleasant either, what with a tiny human making noises and smells and demands. In fact, this home is less inviting, now that it needs him more than he needs it.

So what? So precisely when his pledge ought to come due, when most she needs to depend on him (having planned this baby on the strength of his promise!), he defaults.

“Honey, I had no idea what would happen at the office. How could I read the future?”

But that is exactly the purpose of a promise: to assure stability in spite of the uncertain future. To make that future certain and readable after all. Of course he had no idea what tomorrow would bring. Neither did her—until he made his promise. But because he caused a trust which he also betrayed, she will be doubly suspicious of the future, twice as isolated, and full of doubt. The opposite of trust is doubt.

And doubt breeds doubt. If your spouse can’t depend on you to keep your promises (truth in your actions), he will soon doubt the truthfulness of all your talk, whatever its topic. Doubt breeds a general separation; and one who is undependable forces another to be

fiercely independent.

Do you see, then, that dependability is, first of all, a personal and spiritual labor? It is a struggle, in fact, against being self-centered; against thinking you have the right to follow your own immediate moods, to satisfy your own feelings. (Children may sometimes shirk duties for a present pleasure—"If it feels good, do it"—but you gave up childhood when you married and vowed faithfulness!) Now your previous pledges must shape your activities, your schedules, your priorities, and your labor. Dependability requires that you will sometimes sacrifice the unforeseen opportunity, that you will decline certain personal advantages, that you will not be blown about by every whim or new event. Rather, you yourself will control the day's events according to the marriage's expectations upon your promises—not because your spouse commands you, but because those promises do. Is this submission in marriage? Obedience? Yes. Is it the submission of wives to husbands or of husbands to wives, so that one might dominate the other? No—but of either partner to the pledges which he or she made both to and for the sake of the spouse. It is the purer submission: submission to relationship.

And this is the blessing it provides: that when one is dependable even in the small things (making a bed every morning, for example), the spouse is inspired to trust in all things. So a whole world may be founded on the head of a little deed—and cosmic peace upon a little promise kept. What an astonishing return upon a penny's investment!

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The Clear Mirror

Who are you? What are you—what kind of person? How do you know these things?

Identity, as we've said, is discovered in relationship. Simply, as other people look at me, acknowledge me, make space for me in their days and their lives, I am persuaded that I am. I have existence. I become conscious of my self. But among others and against them, I become conscious of my self's limits as well, my boundaries and my shape: I learn my definition. How other people look at me communicates what I am—not only what worth I have, but also what characteristics I truly possess.

If I walk down a crowded street and no one looks at me; if I work in an office where no one greets me; if, when I return home, my family takes me for granted, then something of me vanishes. If I do not exist for them, I die a little in myself. I look in a mirror and see nothing. I lack significant evidence of my own being.

On the other hand, every smile turned toward me shines on me; I live in its light; it illuminates my being. When friends touch me, I literally feel my being in that touch. A hug, a simple warm embrace consoles me with existence. It says, "You are, and you are here, and you are dear."

Eagerly, then, and persistently I seek myself in others' eyes. Both shrewdly and unconsciously I read my character in the curl of their lips, the bend of their bodies (to me?—away from me?), in the tone of their conversation with me. I do not truly know that I am funny until someone laughs. I may not know that I am brutal until someone cries.

In the fifth grade a girl whispered to a boy as he walked through a classroom, “He walks funny!” Was she telling the truth? It didn't matter. The boy heard her. He saw himself in the reflection of her giggled sentence. In his mind, he was one who “walked funny.” That girl, eleven years old, had given shape to another human being.

Another boy casually confirmed that shape. They were playing softball. He had hit the ball to left field—an adequate hit, the boy thought—and was running to first base. Someone cried out, “We don't mind if you carry the piano, just don't stop to play it!” It was funny. He laughed. But it was also defining—and he saw myself a most unable runner thereafter—even though he was pretty fast. This was who he was: physically inept.

On the other hand, his high school creative writing teacher returned a story of his with the comment: “You are a good writer.” He heard that, too. Surely he will not remember it today; but that single assessment made this man, shaped him, formed him in my own mind as a writer—and he committed prodigious energies to the craft on the strength of his fleeting reflection.

Even so does the careless world mirror the individual to him and tell him who he is. But that, precisely, is the problem. The world is careless, unconcerned for the truth, despite the incisive effects of its judgments. Therefore, we desperately need one human being whose truthfulness has been proven in dependability, whose truthfulness we can trust, who neither mocks us nor flatters us but reflects us accurately. Therefore Adam needs Eve in order to know Adam, and I need my wife, and a spouse needs her spouse.

Say it clearly, then. The blessing of—and the necessity of—truthfulness in marriage is no less than that one assures the other of his or her identity.

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A Safe Haven

The ability to trust creates a sense of security even within a chaotic world.

A house is built of wood and brick; within my house I am protected from summer thunderstorms and the winter's chill. But a home is built of trust and the assured stability of human relationships; within my home We are secure against the shocks of a haphazard, hateful, fraudulent world. Let one human, please, be truthful to me, that we might safely trust but one. No, we do not plead an endless praise of ourselves, but truth told in love. Inevitably, we will doubt the praise. But it is in trusting that we are consoled and find a place of peace.

You can see what uncertainty and mistrust do to people. When they cannot count on the systems of their community, when they see that the general motive of the world is selfishness, and when they suspect that nothing has to be what it says it is, that anyone might be deceiving them,

- 1) they fear the world, as though they were strangers in a strange land, and feel helpless. Or
- 2) they fight back; they themselves become selfish and uncaring on the premise that all existence is “dog eat dog.” In either case, the security of a trustworthy home could have protected them, strengthened them, and kept them virtuous in spite of the instability outside. People need to experience trust in order themselves to be confident and truthful. The dependable marriage is a fortress—not to keep them from the world, but to steady them, to strengthen them for entering into that world.

Do you see, then, how utterly necessary it is to be truthful to your spouse in all things? Even little lies destroy trust, turning this spiritual shelter, this home, into a house merely, turning your spouse out, as it were, into the cold.

The husband says he will be home at five. Instead, he comes home at seven. To his way of thinking, this is a small fault, hardly worth talking about. If he had been this late for a business appointment, he would have called his boss to explain; but he takes his wife’s understanding for granted. And he will see her soon enough. In fact, he sees her all the time.

Yet when he comes into the kitchen, he is astonished to find her crying. And when he tries to comfort her about the overdone dinner, he is further bewildered by her tone. She is angry!

She says, “You do this all the time.”

He denies the accusation. He truly doesn’t remember how often he’s broken the incidental promises, simply because he hasn’t paid that much attention to them.

But she begins to count off specific examples, and now he is shocked. How can she remember? Why should she take such specific offense over so minor a matter? “Isn’t she,” he says, “overreacting?”

No! She isn’t overreacting, and the matter isn’t minor. Neither is she merely angry, nor is it the ruined dinner that troubles her. She is frightened! It is not an exaggeration to say that her world is crumbling. Security itself is endangered by his carelessness, and she fears that their home is not essentially different from the rest of the careless universe. Her tears and

her instincts are perfectly right: if he is faithless in the little things, how can she trust his faithfulness in greater things? Or how can she trust him to know the difference?

“I promise I will be faithful to you unto death.” That vow was comprehensive, unqualified, and included faithfulness in everything. Every “little” promise kept is a new nail in the entire Structure of the home, to make it proof against an outrageously deceitful world, to build trust, and by trust to build one sure place of peace.

As much as your spouse needs refuge, even so much will you labor to be dependable.

