

**“REMODELING THE MARRIAGE”**

**By Carri Taylor**



Photo by John Yu

I've often thought; what would happen if a couple spent as much time, money and energy planning for and investing in their Marriage, as they on their Wedding? The visual I have shared with many of my clients is represented in the picture. The beautiful, inviting façade of the house symbolizes the Wedding. The remainder under construction represents the Marriage.

In a USA TODAY article written by Karen S. Peterson, she quotes Pamela Paul, an editor at American Demographics. Here are some of Paul's findings that are included in her new book *"The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony"* (Random House).

*"The most common time for a marriage to end in divorce is in the first five years. And of those early divorces, about one-quarter end within two years.*

*Many unions crumble like stale wedding cake in less time than it takes to plan them. These couples devote 1 1/2 years to planning the wedding, this huge party, and don't give a thought to the idea they will be with this partner for 50 years.*

*Weddings have morphed into massive extravaganzas, costing from \$20,000 on up. "And while couples may choose a wedding planner, they don't know anything about planning for the marriage.*

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And in a WASHINGTON POST article, Paul is quoted:

*And what about the wedding industry? Did you know that a recent issue of Bride's magazine was the largest consumer magazine ever, weighing 4.9 pounds? American culture focuses on the wedding day, but you never hear about what marriage is like after you walk away from the altar."*

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How true!

When designing a new home, first comes the dream. All of the ideas of what this is going to look like, including every detail, have to come out of the mind, into a discussion and finally get translated to paper. Since a house is very tangible, and takes specific skills to bring it into existence, most people hire a professional – an architect. Then the plans get discussed, re-discussed and finalized. This is a valuable process to find out how realistic the couple's ideas and desires for the house are. Also, the realities surface regarding time, materials, costs, etc. Do they have the resources to pull this off?

If the answer is “yes” and the plans are agreed upon, skilled people are hired to actually do the building. Even if one or both parties in the couple relationship have some of the skills to do the above (the do-it-yourselfers), they will more than likely depend on other skilled people to come along side.

Murphy's law states (my translation) plans will get changed and rearranged to accommodate new realities not foreseen ahead of time. Then come the issues of temperament (flexibility vs. rigidity), disappointment that can easily lead to anger (what are our styles of fighting), and ability to collaborate and proceed (win-win resolution). These are a few of the “construction skills” needed to build the Marriage.

I haven't met many people who would move into a house before it is completed and unable to protect the people or possessions intended on inhabiting the structure. In fact, the law requires permits, licenses, and inspections along the way – for our own protection.

What about marriage? A relationship is not tangible like a house, yet it is a psychological, emotional and spiritual structure that people enter expecting it to be a safe haven and protect them. I haven't seen much time spent by the people I know and the clients I've worked with, in preparing for and designing a relationship ahead of time. I also haven't seen much time and money spent on “relationship professionals” before the event. I certainly have seen a lot of it after the fact, when the Marriage structure fails to protect the people that went flying into it without proper preparation, expecting it to do things for them that they didn't bother outlining, discussing, testing, etc.

The dream was inside each of the party's heads, but without the required discussions and re-discussions to come up with a design for how this Marriage will look, it's doomed to disintegrate. It's important to take the time to look at the foundational issues that will hold up the Marriage and the idiosyncrasies (that we all bring) that will decorate it.

All the time, money and energy get spent on the front of the house – the walkway, the landscaping, the front entrance, front windows, siding and paint. That's the WEDDING. Upon arriving, all the guests are in awe of the beauty, the music, and caught up in the promise that the beautiful façade holds. As the couple enters the front yard... proceeds on the walkway through the grandeur of the lush landscaping ... approaches the stately double door entry... and then passes through the front door of the Wedding and enters the Marriage; the assumption on everyone's part is that the Marriage will be as grand as the Wedding.

I've often wondered why people (including me) well up with emotion at Weddings and have a hard time fighting back the tears. Is it the hope that I identify with for myself? Is it the backdoor to the sadness, knowing that this glorious moment will have to crash and burn for the real Marriage to begin? Is there a moment of reality for all of us that we don't want to acknowledge, so we brush it away with tears of “joy?”

Once the couple walks through that front door into the Marriage, sooner or later (usually not too long if they are honest), the realization that what they've built up to this point looks more like a Hollywood set. Beautiful on approach but only lean-tos are holding it up! It looked great for the camera at the Wedding, but its inadequate to support the Marriage. It supports the dialogue while shooting the scenes, but there's nowhere to go when the shooting (Wedding) is over.

Who realized how much would be needed to put this Marriage together? The few sessions the couple may have had with a pastor, counselor, or pre-marital class have possibly created the lean-tos and some framing, but not nearly enough to support productive living conditions.

Now what? Out comes the baggage the couple brought with them. As the unpacking begins, here comes the "stuff" they knew they brought. Right behind that comes the belongings they thought they left behind - the "red-flagged stuff" that was overlooked (not wanting to see reality clearly because it might mess up the "dream"), or rationalized (he/she will change later), and denied (saw it, but gave it a different spin). The unpacking also includes articles they swore they would never bring with them – and there they are staring them in the face: the modeling of their parents. They even remember telling themselves they would never be like them!

Not all baggage is negative. Both may be unpacking some very good materials with which to build this new home. Those items seem to get lost as the rest of the stuff becomes the focus and starts taking more space.

As the couple unpacks their tools (communication and conflict resolution skills), they become aware how inadequate those tools are. How can people who love each other have so many misunderstandings? When will they get it – that LOVE ISN'T ENOUGH? Since these tools are the only ones they possess at the time, necessity forces their use as they continue construction on the house.

It usually doesn't take too long to realize they are making a mess rather than designing the home of their dreams. Whether its six hours, six days, six months, six years or even 20, at some point they admit it but rather than admit that they made the mess together, the blame-game begins. It's so easy to see the other person's baggage and inadequacies, but most difficult to see one's own. Now they pick up the pieces of lumber and start swinging at each other and make the mess worse by destroying what little they've assembled, however poorly.

Wounds are inflicted – hopefully not at a physical level, but an emotional and psychological level for sure. The lovers begin the process of becoming enemies. This home not only isn't protecting them from the elements, it isn't even a safe place to be with each other.

At some point a time may come when one or both decide to get out of the mess and leave. The discouragement and despair can be overwhelming and the mess too large to want to live in, live through and clean up. Too much pain surrounds them and things seemed better before the Marriage took place. Many walk and blame, leaving the mess for others to live in and clean up. If children are involved by now, this mess will become part of the baggage the couple passes on to them to carry through life.

Walking away isn't a solution; it's an admission of failure. However, many in the blame mode believe that life with a different person will make the difference. This may be true as long as they don't bring the same person – themselves (their previous beliefs and attitudes) - to the new relationship. In simple terms, changing partners won't solve the problem. Their new partner may have different ideas and different tools (skills), but have they broadened their own ideas and beliefs about building houses (marriage)?

Have they learned to use new tools (skills)? Changing themselves makes the difference. Taking responsibility for one's own part of the problem is essential.

For others, this may be the time they decide (not necessarily consciously) to live in the mess and keep it under cover the best they can – unwilling to admit their short-sightedness and failures – too embarrassed to ask for help. All energy continues to be spent on the front yard and façade of the home; keeping it well groomed and painted so it looks well maintained. The amazing thing about this choice is: even though the couple believes that the façade has hidden the mess they are living in, most people see it pretty clearly – like the Home Depot float. Their children will also take this on as their legacy. These people can get pretty angry when they see others walking away from messes (divorcing). I had that attitude myself in my first Marriage. It went something like this: “if I can stay where I am, what's wrong with you?”

Then there are those who decide to remodel, clean up the mess and rebuild; hopefully correctly this time. This is definitely the best way to proceed, but danger can lie ahead with this choice. As in any remodel, one correction can lead to another and another and another. As the issues are uncovered, even more surface – the dry rot, termites, lack of insulation, roof leaks, plumbing failures, etc. Even with professional guidance, the unspoken or even spoken agenda may be to point out how the other has caused the mess. The realization that this is going to be longer, harder and more expensive can increase the discouragement level and again the fingers get pointed at each other. The lumber gets picked up again and used against each other and the desire to walk away resurfaces.

If there is a commitment to remodel, the couple may receive negative reactions from others. Some don't want them to remodel because it may cause rearrangement or inconvenience in their own lives. They just may not enjoy coming over anymore. They were used to the mess. Others become uncomfortable because the remodel reflects the mess and shaky condition of their own Marriage.

What's needed? **Personal responsibility instead of blame;** acknowledgment that they made the mess together; willingness to invest the time, energy and finances necessary to accomplish the goal. What goal? Has a realistic design for this Marriage ever been discussed? Have realistic goals been defined? Has this Marriage ever taken the time to determine where it's headed and what the purpose of getting together was all about and will be all about? What kind of a house (Marriage) do we want to live in anyway?

I haven't encountered many individuals that have a plan or mission statement for their life, much less Marriage partners that have taken the time to determine this for their relationship. At the subconscious level, most of us are attracted to one another to fill emotional and psychological holes. Most people seem to enter Marriage to get something from their mate rather than to give something to the relationship. When both parties enter to take; the Marriage is strangulated, malnourished and raped. How easily they die when this pattern continues.

If the couple determines to work together redesigning their relationship, they will have to identify the cost and determine their priorities. I would venture to say that in most cases, if they are willing to invest as much money, time and energy on their Marriage as they did on their Wedding, there will be hope. It may not even take as much. But, for the Marriage to move forward and the relationship receive nourishment, both parties must commit to the redesigning process.

Slowly but surely the remodel begins. This can happen more effectively if a professional is involved; a third party that both agree upon who is trained in the architecture and tools needed for a good Marriage and is employing those things in his/her own Marriage. The value is objectivity and accountability.

What can happen? For the couples that work with me, the following items represent the goals.

- 1 - They each take a good look at the baggage they brought themselves – negative and positive.
- 2 - They each develop an understanding of themselves as individuals in a new way.
- 3 - Then they each begin understanding and appreciating each other in a new way.
- 4 – They each learn new tools, communication skills that enable them to deliver themselves to one another in clearer and more loving ways.
- 5 – They also learn communication skills to hear one another in a new manner, which enhances their understanding and appreciation of each other and their relationship.
- 6 – They learn together how to clean up messes as they come up (resolve conflict in a collaborative manner) so they can live “clear.” What does that mean? When any static or irritations occur, they know how to develop an action plan to tune in to one another and move forward proactively. The relational spills get cleaned up before dry rot occurs.
- 7 – They design a maintenance plan – a whole new way to live together – a Marriage lifestyle that keeps the relationship fresh.

How can you begin? Below are some basic questions to ask yourself and then share with your partner. These questions are merely a starting point designed to open your mind to seeing things differently. I highly recommend working with a trained professional that can see into your Marriage with objectivity. Friends and family can be a wonderful support for a remodeling project and I also believe it’s important to remember that they will be subjective rather than objective. What happens to you and your relationship will impact your friends and family and that’s what creates subjectivity. Their own interests will be at stake.

A therapist is a good place to start – someone trained in identifying the issues and who understands how family of origin impacts relationships. But, without investing in new tools (communication and conflict resolution skills), therapy may become a revolving door. Most Marriages are still using their “toy” tools that they received in childhood to do the adult work of building this home. Communication skill training can provide effective tools to get the job done and keep things in order. In other words, moving the Marriage from the “sandbox” to the “Board Room.”

Since learning how to use new tools creates anxiety and use is poor at first, this can create excitement and discouragement all at once. Along with the desire to learn something new and improve oneself, comes the anxiety of knowing I may be performing poorly. Many times one or both parties will settle for the familiar discomfort (go back to the “toy” tools) rather than pushing on through the anxiety of learning to work with the new ones and grow up.

In my experience (personally and with clients), as a person commits and especially as a couple commits to learning how to use new tools and remodel their Marriage; new results begin coming in quite quickly. Satisfaction in the relationship begins and it becomes a nice place to be. Not without maintenance. It seems so obvious with the tangibility of a house that regular maintenance will be required to keep it in shape. It doesn’t seem so obvious that relationships also need regular maintenance: cleanup, cleanout, rearranging, new elements, etc. With that in mind, I challenge you to tackle the following questions.

Questions to Ponder:

First Step: (Answer by yourself without your partner's input.) Who am I? What baggage (positive and negatives) did I bring to this Marriage? What were my expectations? What part of the damage have I caused? What can I do that would build instead of destroy the relationship? What am I willing to do now? If I don't have clear answers to these questions, what am I willing to invest to find out?

Second step: Share the answers to the above questions with each other. Don't argue with your partner's answers. The goal is to listen and learn, not correct or judge. Take turns talking and listening.

Third step: (Answer by yourself without your partner's input.) What do I think are our couple strengths and weaknesses? Do I even know our couple strengths and weaknesses? What am I willing to do to find out? What common expectations do I think we share? What expectations are different? What areas do I think have created issues for our relationship? If both of us acted positively towards one another instead of negatively, how do I think that would change our relationship? What am I willing to invest myself and with my partner to remodel our Marriage?

Fourth step: Share the answers to the above questions with each other. Don't argue with your partner's answers. The goal is to listen and learn, not correct or judge. Take turns talking and listening. What items do we agree upon?

Fifth step: (Answer by yourself without your partner's input.) Where would I like to see our Marriage in one year? Five years? Ten years? Twenty years? What do I think our common goals are? What could block our goals? How realistic are our goals?

Sixth step: Share the answers to the above questions with each other. Don't argue with your partner's answers. The goal is to listen and learn, not correct or judge. Take turns talking and listening. Again, what items do we agree upon?

Seventh step: Give me a call. If you call or email me, I can also refer you to couples that have done this, who will gladly share their success stories with you.

On a personal note – I am married to a man who is very different from me in many ways. We could easily drive each other nuts and on a few occasions we have done just that. The elements that I believe make our Marriage a “nice place to live in” are: honor and respect for one another, appreciation for our differences, a desire to communicate clearly, listen intently, and stay “clear.” My husband is not perfect, nor am I. Yet I do believe he is perfect for me as I am for him. We bring to each other's lives the elements that challenge us to grow and expand ourselves. My hope for you is that you will “reframe” (embrace a new belief) about your spouse and the irritations; and then tackle remodeling your Marriage to design a relationship that will be a “safe home.”

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