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Playing at Love

After thirty years of marriage, I've learned to blow off the mantras of modern relationship: Marriage is hard work. Communication is key. Real change is difficult.

If my husband and I had followed this logic, our marriage wouldn't have lasted a month.

Our approach is simple: If we're working too hard, we're doing it wrong. Communication can be the fastest way to wreck a good thing. Change is continual. Life can shift in a moment.

In the early years of our marriage, I tried the standard advice. Every Saturday morning, my husband or I would complain, usually about something to do with money, which was ridiculous because we always had enough, and the downward spiral began. The grumpy "You didn't tell me" morphed to the vicious "F--- you, jerk." How did we, educated, normally reasonable and loving people, take on the roles of an O'Neill drama?

I hit the books. I delved into his thoughts, my thoughts, the neuroses and habits of our families, the codependencies and neurolinguistic miscommunications, but routing around in our negative thinking seemed to create more.

I thought maybe I needed to meditate, to get centered in the present, but practice was required and it seemed a bit vague for me, a practical Virgo.

I thought maybe we didn't know how to communicate to each other. In the middle of fighting, I'd say, "I feel upset when you talk to me like that." He'd say, "Upset? Of course you feel upset. I want you to feel upset because I'm pissed. The least you can feel is 'upset.'"

I cried, hurt, frustrated, and confused. He was so mean to me! I couldn't take it any more. Were we heading for divorce?

I thought maybe we needed counseling, but our divorcing friends had been seeing the best therapist in town until he left his wife for a younger woman.

Then I discovered that on Saturday he wasn't getting his wakeup coffee.

Now I know that fighting over issues like who's taking out the garbage is usually more a matter of rest, blood sugar, and body rhythm.

When I find myself out of sorts, instead of focusing on my husband, I distance myself and reconsider my life. Maybe I won't take on the next volunteer project, work task, or dinner party. I pay the bills, clean out a closet, or work out. My head clears a bit and I'm back to the walk in the park of possibility instead of slaving in that coal mine of anger and confusion.

Our lens for looking at life has changed. Working at love feels backward, almost claustrophobic, while creativity feels expansive. Designing new approaches to life makes more sense. I take some risks, tweak a few things here and there, and watch what happens.

Now, when we fight—yes, we're still far from perfect—I catch myself. Then I mess with him a bit. I let my husband have the last word. He'll say just the right thing, as only those we love the most can, to make me want to snap back. But I don't. I keep my mouth shut. It's not easy, but I love watching how his words trail away with nothing to bounce off of. Then, of course, I think of that clever comeback that only surfaces when I can't say it. I bite my tongue.

I'm winning. I'm the conscious, aware one. I'm dying to say, "I won! I won! Na, na, na!" But I can't say a word, because then I'm not the conscious one, and I lose.

Now I'm biting the side of my mouth. Torture.

But I'm cool. And then, because he knows the game, he grimaces and laughs, hating to lose. He admits to his defeat, but I'd better watch out next time. He's on to my tricks and he's not the only one who fires the first shot in these battles.

And what were we fighting about?

Now we watch responsible, intelligent, and educated people struggle in the dark ages of love and marriage, their reasoning based on a complicated mass of information that expands, connects, and divides in Rube Goldberg fashion into theories that come and go as fads. Highly paid specialists, lots of time and complicated knowledge are required to locate and fix their problems. Improvement is slow and difficult.

Design is a far better approach. Together we imagine a more perfect life, a life with more time, love, fun, or money, a life that better suits who we have become. We toss around ways to get there. In the exploration, we open up to possibility and to each other. We find our way by feel.

Sometimes when I ask my husband what would make an aspect of our lives more perfect, he looks at me like I'm nuts--It's not his problem or his priority. So I do it myself. My thinking opens to possibility and then clarifies. The entire dynamic of our relationship changes in unexpected and, more often than not, good ways.

Our problem is never our marriage. It is our life. Whether in a car whose rearview mirror drops off in my hand, or in jeans that emphasize my soon-to-be-reduced midriff, or in a life that demands more than I can possibly put out, poor design creates problems. I can sell or discard the car and the jeans, but our life together happens in the moment, on the run. We are its designers, producers, and consumers.

My husband and I recognize the risk. The roles and rules are up for grabs and we each continually evolve. We could design ourselves right out of our marriage. But curiosity and suspense bind us as much as love and we're getting pretty good at this. I am betting that we keep on playing at life together.