

Opinion

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Love and marriage in later maturity

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Opinion

The first 37 years were the hardest.

--Suzanne Braun Levine, PBS Interview, LifePart2

Remember, sustaining a pleasurable, long-term marriage takes effort, deliberateness and an intention to learn about one another.

In other words, marriage is for grown-ups.

--Cokie Roberts, From This Day Forward

I left my wife on a Monday night. My friend pulled his VW Van up in front of the tiny, Spanish style house we were living in at the time, and we just started loading my things. I can still remember those two somber faces—my four-year-old son and my wife, thirty years his senior—as they sat on the couch and watched us go in and out of the house. Oh, I didn't take much in the way of material things, my clothes and my stereo, but what I took were pieces of our hearts. I hurt my wife a lot that night. Perhaps not more than she had hurt me over fifteen years of marriage, but who is to say who did what to whom, or who hurts the most in a failed marriage. My son was a little too young to understand all that was happening or what it was to mean for him, so he just sat in his mom's lap and watched my passage without a word. They both sat and stared in silence, and I guess I'll never forget those stares or the pain of that evening.

Leaving is always hard. Harder still if it means leaving those you really care about. I was so angry and so determined that night that I couldn't allow myself to consider their feelings. It had taken me an agonizingly long time to make the decision, and I wasn't stopping to reconsider. That night changed three lives forever. I wish I could tell you it was for the best, but after 33 years, I still don't honestly know. Some men—and some women as well—never look back when they leave their spouses and children, but I must confess that I have looked back a thousand times without an answer. Every moment of joy since that day has been tinged with the guilt and sadness that my son's life was never as secure and, perhaps, as fulfilling as it could have been if I had stayed. Every time my son went with his mother, I silently cursed myself for putting him in the position of having to adjust to life in two homes, and with two families. Every scene of a family having fun together, laughing and playing and just enjoying each other, left me empty and ashamed. Because I'm the one who decided to leave, I chose to carry this guilt squarely on my shoulders, and it has been a very heavy weight. I know that it is not healthy to feel guilt for this long, and would tell my clients the same, but like you, I'm still a work in progress.

What made me so unhappy that I had to leave? Why was I so dissatisfied? Was it me or was it her? I can think of many ways to answer these questions, but none of which assuage my guilt. I know now that I was asking my wife to be something she was not capable of being. I wanted her to love me freely and without reservation, but am now aware of how impossible that must have felt to her. I hoped she would be happy to see me when I got home and eager to find time to bring the baby and have lunch with me, but this disrupted a schedule she felt she had to adhere to. I wanted her to plan for fun times and

Merrill C Hubbard

Claremont School of Theology, USA

Correspondence: Merrill C Hubbard, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, USA,
 Email budhub@verizon.net

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commit to working through the difficult times, but planning, and committing, and working through our issues, was really not something she felt capable of doing then. I yearned have other children and enjoy raising them together, but she did not share this goal. These were the things I wanted and needed from my marriage, grew to believe they would never happen, and so made the decision to leave. I'm sure that if you asked her you would get similar responses of unmet needs and unfulfilled dreams.

It took me some time, but I did recover from the devastation of separation and divorce, and set about to start my life over at forty. With the help and encouragement of friends, I met some women, got onto a dating website, and started, tentatively, building new relationships. Most of these lasted less than a year. Eventually, I had a long-term relationship which, unfortunately, did not end with my goal of remarriage. I had mixed feelings about getting married again; both desiring to have another partner and worrying about how this would affect my son. He was always my first priority, taking much of my time and attention, and as the years passed the window of opportunity to remarry began to close. I discovered that many of the women I met did not want to get married again. Although I am currently in a stable and fulfilling relationship, I remain single by choice—hers. I have learned a lot about myself and about intimate relationships in the past 33 years; one in particular is that love and sex can be just as wonderful as they were when you were young. There are some differences to be sure, mostly in the physical arena, but the ability to give and receive love can actually be enhanced by experience, seasoning, and maturity.

Although romantic love can be experienced just as fully in later maturity as in younger years, does this apply equally to marriage? Can the commitment of marriage to one person remain exciting and vibrant through the years, or does it inevitably fade over time? My editor, who's been married almost 25 years, thinks it can. She recently told me that she feels the same rush of excitement when she sees her husband after a day or two away, that she felt on their first date. "It all comes down to picking the right person," she says, "and not having unrealistic expectations." What are realistic expectations?

In a therapy session a few months before my retirement, a young married woman exclaimed through her tears that “*you wouldn’t hurt someone if you loved them.*” After a period of silence I asked her to consider another point of view; that if you loved a person, were you not more willing to forgive them when they hurt you? We both looked at the possibility that if you wanted to be married for a long time, or for all time, it would be very important to learn how to forgive and how to ask for forgiveness. And that conversation made me think more about the thirty seven years as a marriage therapist and all the boomer couples I’ve counseled along the way (you do a lot of reflection as you are about to retire). Are boomer marriages better or worse off than those of other generations? Are the divorce rates still as high for boomers today as they were during the late sixties, when they got so much publicity, or have the years helped the boomers see marriage in a different light and find the value of maintaining a long-term commitment?

I recently had the opportunity to talk with a former client about her 31-year marriage. Both Joan and her husband are boomers who have created a happy marriage through mutual effort and shared goals. She stated that honesty, integrity, communication, and trust were the keys to their success. They have a swing on their porch that is designated as the place to talk about their relationship, and frequent conversations keep resentments from building. They were a little older than the norm when they got married and so they both had a chance to develop lives of their own. Now they are able to do things apart without it being a source of conflict. Because they are both self-motivated, there is not a lot of arguing about “who does what.” But, above all else, she credits her husband for keeping them together, saying that “I would have left on many occasions if Ed had not been the one to give in and make changes for me.”

Joan’s evaluation of her marriage parallels the results of a 2014 study at the University of Rutgers. The researchers analyzed data collected from 394 couples, of which at least one member was 60 or older, and their average length of marriage was 39 years. Their findings indicate that the old maxim, “happy wife, happy life” remains true. The study showed that the more content the wife was in their relationship, the happier the husband felt, and this was in spite of his feelings about the relationship. Further, the participants on average rated their general life satisfaction high (5 on a scale of 6), establishing a definite correlation between a highly rated marriage and quality of life. The quality of marriage was shown to be very important in providing a “buffer” against the inevitable stressors and health issues of time and age.

Commenting on the changes in women of this generation and their doubts about staying in long-term marriages, Suzanne Braun Levine writes, “Does a new lease on life mean having to walk away from a marriage of twenty or thirty years? Sometimes it does. Some women choose to leave-to escape constant conflict, deficient affection, emotional or physical abuse, simple emptiness. But for others of us, making changes in our lives can energize and transform marriages that we can no longer live within, but don’t want to live without.”¹

There is no clear statistic as to how many boomers stayed in long-term marriages. There are statistics on the number of boomers who’ve married and subsequently divorced. The Fertility and Family Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau used this criterion in a 2001 survey and determined that the highest rate of divorce in any age group was 41 percent of men between 50 and 59, and 39 percent for women in the same age group. Well over half of boomer couples decided to stay in their first marriage. Although it is impossible to know if these marriages were happy or satisfying to each of the spouses, it

can be said that a larger proportion of boomer couples honored their commitment to the institution of marriage at time when such a commitment was being seriously challenged.

To get some perspective on the failure of love and marriage for the boomers, we have to go back a few years and examine the particular history of our generation. It’s been over 45 years since Woodstock, that hippie/boomer celebration of music, protest, and rebellion against established authority, beliefs, and societal norms. Boomers were just entering their twenties, with the oldest of them being twenty three or twenty four, and were shocking the country with their anti-establishment views and behaviors. With reckless abandon and total disrespect for the restrictive social conventions of their parents, they advocated “free love,” protest marches, and the use of all kinds of illegal drugs, sometimes all during the same weekend. They supported civil rights, were anti-war, and, most importantly, the women’s movement, openly attacking traditional gender roles and the institution of monogamous marriage. We boomers not only questioned what made a marriage successful or even tolerable, but whether marriage was viable in a time of social upheaval.

The divorce rate skyrocketed in the ‘70s, as the “leading edge” of the boomer generation began to leave their partners in large numbers in search of their own self-fulfillment. Many were fueled by the promise of free love and sexual explorations not possible in marriage. Second wave feminists regarded marriage as one more instrument of Patriarchal oppression, and set out after a new kind of freedom. The institution of marriage was on the way to becoming at its best, optional, and at its worst, yesterday’s news. As Pepper Schwartz, the love and relationship ambassador for AARP, and professor of sociology at the University of Washington recently wrote, “In many ways, divorce rates are the boomers’ legacy.”² This seems a sad legacy for the generation that believed so much in the promise of love and the largest generation in U.S. history (somewhere in the neighborhood of 79 million).

We might assume that this is all past history, given that the Census Bureau reported that in the 1980s the divorce rate had started to flatten out and then decline. The numbers were wrong. When the American Community Survey came out in 2010, it became evident that the Census Bureau has been terribly shortsighted in its collection of divorce data over the last three decades. The data now indicate that the divorce rate for boomers, who are now 50 and older, doubled between 1990 and 2010. Over 600,000 boomers got divorced in 2010. Boomers were no more likely to get it right the second time: the rate of divorce for those in second marriages was 2.5 times as high as those in first marriages. The numbers of people ever divorced, currently divorced, or married at least twice are highest among those aged 50 and older, and one in three baby boomers is unmarried today--the majority of whom are either divorced or never-married, with only 10% widowed.

What this means is that our generation, which accounted for unprecedented divorce statistics through our youth, continues to lead the nation in unstable marriage and divorce. Apparently, we continue to search for a form of happiness that our marriages are not providing.

We were all having so much fun making love and not war: what happened when that notion of love came smack up against the realities of marriage? Researchers suggest many possible reasons for late-life divorce. Some categorize boomers as being narcissistic, incapable of making the compromises and self-sacrifices that contribute to the longevity of earlier generations’ marriages. In this view, boomers define themselves as individuals first who show limited regard for the impact of their actions on their families. When a marriage feels empty and personally unfulfilling, boomers seem to find it easier to walk

away than to stay and try to work things out—or perhaps our ancestors just suffered silently for the sake of propriety. Perhaps they had fewer idealistic illusions about marriage, or preferred staying married to the stigma of divorce. Indeed, the boomers as a generation see less shame in divorce. If a couple has grown apart, why shouldn't the individuals look to divorce as the best solution?

Other researchers look at the changes in the society in which the boomers grew up, citing the fact that women began to have more economic autonomy and could support themselves without being married. They no longer had to stay in unhappy or abusive marriages just to survive or ensure that their children were cared for. At the same time lay-offs and downsizing had left many men unemployed, underemployed, or hating the jobs that they had, leading to a general life dissatisfaction that was apt to leak into their perception of their marriages. When you look at the interaction between the changing economics of the times and the social upheavals of the 60s and 70s, it's not too hard to see why the institution of marriage became less important to boomers than it was for our parents.

Societal pressures played a significant role in my own divorce. So many of my peers were questioning the value of their marriages and then deciding to leave their spouses, that getting divorced almost felt like a rite of passage. Far too many of us supported one another in initiating divorce rather than asking for help, and few if any of my peers had extended family to which they could turn for advice. However, I cannot put the blame on outside pressures, for my divorce was a failure on both of our parts to look beyond our own needs and fears and understand that accepting your partner and giving freely without demanding something in return is the way to a successful and fulfilling marriage. It took me many years to learn that there is no specific way to happiness, you must find it in yourself.

So here we are, many of us divorced or remarried, single by choice or circumstance. Have we given up on love or are we still seeking it? Do we have realistic standards or are we still holding onto idealized notions of what it means to be in love or married?

Research and interviews with men and women of the boomer generation indicate that of the leading edge of this generation, women fared much better than men. At that time, divorce seemed a springboard for many women who were discovering who they really were, while men felt a sense of failure and were often reluctant to return to single life. But as the second wave of boomers, referred to as "Jonesers," began to experience divorce, the differences in the sexes in terms of how they adjusted, also began to change. The American Community Survey (ACS), conducted in 2010, indicated that 30% of middle-aged and older adults were in remarriages, although the odds of divorce were roughly 40% higher than for those in first marriages. Further research of unmarried boomers highlighted their vulnerability as compared with married boomers: they were disproportionately younger, non-white women, who tended to have fewer economic resources and poorer health, and to live alone (Lin & Brown, 2012). As both the leading edge of the boomer generation and the Jonesers grow older, they will face some significant issues.

The secret to a better adjustment following the shock of divorce seemed to be the amount of social support rather than financial status (this excludes those who were left in virtual poverty). Women, both during marriage and after divorce, placed a much greater value on their friendships with other women, while divorced men had few friends and were less likely to have the support of their children. Many men, however, finding that the ratio of unmarried women to men was in their favor, set out to find new partners. Dating websites began to flourish and it was much easier to get a date or get into a

serious relationship. This was a major factor in the significant increase in remarriages for those in later maturity. Though boomer marriages often ended with bitterness and recrimination, many survivors of these failed marriages resumed their search for happiness. Deirdre Bair in her book, *Calling It Quits*, reports that "The word they all use, in one form or another is 'happiness.' They speak of the 'quest' for it, the 'pursuit' of it, the 'desire' for it, and usually a statement like this one follows: 'I am entitled to have it.'"³

The strength of that pursuit has led to changes in the nature of the relationships themselves. Although "living alone together" (referred to as LAT by the statisticians) has been part of the life style of the very wealthy, it has now become an acceptable option for those of lesser means. As a regular demographic category, it refers to those couples in a committed relationship who choose to maintain separate residences and only stay together by mutual agreement. The LAT, is another statistic that can be added to the boomer legacy.

One positive finding that can be teased out of all the statistics on boomer divorce is that 70% of those who remain married are in first marriages, and that once these couples get beyond the 18 to 20 year mark, the generally remain married for the rest of their lives. These marriages are not without problems, but it is the couples' commitment to each other and to their marriage, that sustains them through rough times. As Laura revealed in our interview, it was her husband who made the necessary changes to keep their marriage together. It seems incumbent upon men to learn more satisfying and effective marital skills, and for women to let go of their unrealistic standards. In a PBS special called *LifePart2*, Terrence Real, marital therapist and author of the book, *The New Rules of Marriage*, said this about the boomers' quest for love and fulfillment:

"I believe that both sexes, but particularly women vocally, are saying, I want

this marriage to be a marriage I want to be in, not one I need to be in. I think

we really want to be lifelong lovers. We want to have great sex, 20, 30 years

into our marriages, we want to be emotionally connected and intimate. I don't

think what people really get is that these are brand-new demands on marriage.

We want the same things that you would have gotten in an early-stage relationship,

in an affair, in a novel. And we want it for the rest of our lives.⁴

Real goes on to say that men have responded to these new demands by calling them unrealistic and expecting their wives to accept less. He suggests that this isn't a solution but that women are going to have to be empowered in a way that both helps themselves and helps men rise to the occasion. This will take relationship skills up to the level of our new ambition, and as he mentions, no one teaches girls or boys these types of relationship skills. My work with couples over the years has led me to agree with Real's assessment that the institution of marriage has been in crisis for the past 50 years. I met with men running from the women they saw as overly demanding and incapable of compromise. I met with women unburdening themselves of men they perceived as controlling and abusive, as they refused to be victimized anymore. But, there were fewer couples with whom I met who were willing to do the hard work of trying to understand the other, working through their resentments, facing their fears, and

taking responsibility for their own failures in the relationship. These are major factors in the escalating divorce rate among middle-aged and older adults.

Further, I think that men need to learn how to support one another in finding a new model of strength—based on personal responsibility, compassion, and cooperation—that we can bring to our marriages and committed new relationships. In conjunction with those changes, I think that women need to reclaim the softness devalued over the past half century, and change their idealized expectations and demands into a loving form of guidance, both for their men and for their children. The Women's Movement is incomplete if it doesn't come full circle and work together with men in creating a new paradigm for love relationships, whether within the institution of marriage or other types of partnerships. I would like to suggest this as a new boomer legacy.

For the men and women who courageously campaigned and fought for same-sex marriage, I applaud and support your efforts. While it is beyond the scope of this book to go into detail, it is extremely important to recognize your accomplishments. Many in our country vehemently oppose this movement toward equality, but I feel that the risks that have been taken for the sake of love and commitment may be just what the rest of us need to re-examine our own willingness to stand up for what we believe. Perhaps boomers of all sexual orientations can come together in solidarity to give new life to the institution of marriage.

So here we are: the youngest of us in our 50s and the oldest starting our 70s, and many of us still want to have more fulfilling relationships with our existing partners or to get married again. What are the qualities that can make marriage remain vital and exciting through the years? As a marriage therapist for so many years I've seen many bad marriages and a few good ones, but certainly none that were perfect. The reality is: if you want to have the relationship of your dreams, you have to work at it. To this end I am going to present some ideas adapted to the specific needs of couples in later maturity. I will try to stay away from the advice of the Beatles that "all you need is love," as well as the "10 things that will make marriage better" lists that populate the internet these days.

My first and most important piece of advice is: WHEN YOU DON'T NEED IT, IT WILL COME TO YOU! Think about this for a minute. Try to understand that whenever we try to coerce or manipulate our partners to provide what we need—validation, comfort, sex, compliments—we always get resistance, and this in turn leads to anger and hurt feelings, and statements like "you never..." or "if you loved me..." Learn to take care of your own needs first and what you want from the other person will be more likely to come to you without asking. One of my clients credits this principle with saving his marriage. All his efforts were in trying to get his wife to behave in ways that met his needs. When he was able to focus on meeting his own needs and not being dependent upon her, the intense pressure that had developed between them was reduced and she felt that she could give him what he wanted by choice and not by coercion.

The boomer generation rebelled against the tyranny of the marital patterns they saw in their parents. Now it's time to practice the skills that our parents did not have. When this husband took responsibility for his own needs, his wife saw him as much more attractive as well. Marriage is no longer two people becoming one in mutual dependence. That's the old model. Marriage can now be between two independent people who choose to come together out of love and mutual respect. Fortunately, I was able to help this client work through issues from his past so that he could present to his wife a more mature, more independent version of the man she had married. That is why some of my best marital therapy was done individually.

Stop trying to convince your partner of your point of view and start learning how to tolerate and/or understand theirs. Spouses don't have to agree on everything or see everything the same way. My experience with boomer couples is that many of their disagreements turn into an argument over "who's right and who's wrong." From my perspective, boomer marriages have become more of a power struggle than the marriages I saw earlier in my career. Unfortunately, there is no resolution for the right/wrong argument, because *we all feel that we are right and our partner is wrong*. With this mindset, communication amounts to waiting, impatiently at best, for our partner to finish speaking, so we can state our side of things one more time. Listening to one another and trying to understand what your spouse is really saying has somehow been lost. Women are speaking up in powerful ways now, and so listening skills are even more important than before; when a man could dominate a conversation or, on the other hand, hide behind the paper. Finding statements that communicate you are listening to your partner and are interested in what he or she is saying, clarifying when you don't understand, and staying calm when you respond, are skills that we all can improve on. Years ago, a man said to me, "What could a woman possibly say that could interest me." I knew that man was in deep trouble. That attitude, from either a man or a woman cannot fly in today's marital climate.

The rules of fair fighting apply to all couples everywhere. These are rules for communication during an argument or conflict. Basically, they implore us to avoid name calling and other aggressive behaviors, to be specific and stick to the matter at hand, not bringing up other issues or old battles. They advise us to stop pointing the finger at the other person in generalizations that are apt to cause defensiveness, such as "you never" or "you always," and instead to simply state what you want or need. They demand that we stop interrupting our partners, and call a time out when things get too heated. I always advise couples to take a walk or do something different for a brief period of time. But always, always, come back and finish the discussion in a more peaceful way.

Don't leave the quality of your marriage to chance, because if you do you may just recreate the marriage of your parents. If you do not feel like going to a marriage counselor, then read books and articles about successful marriage.

Learn to work as a team, having open communication about important mutual issues, such as money, in-laws, your adult children, grandchildren, and so on. There are more outside pressures on marriage than ever before, especially when both spouses work. Family schedules can become overwhelming and a potential source of resentment. What one partner perceives as an unfair division of the workload is a frequent cause of stress. With the current demands on our time, it is important to have a mutual agreement as to who does what, when, and how often, and a designated time and place for weekly communication over this and other ongoing issues. Even more than that, though, is the need to share your deepest feelings, hopes and dreams about your marriage and about life in general. This is what builds real intimacy.

Work toward a delicate balance between being close and allowing one another space. Today's couples, especially those in later maturity, have more independence for their own interests, sometimes even going on separate trips and vacations. The time apart and then reuniting can bring renewed vitality.

Make affection and sex a priority. I advise couples to have a weekly or at least bi-monthly date night. Some of us in later maturity just allow our sex lives to diminish, and with it the expression of affection as well. Earlier generations may have just accepted that marriages

become sexless with the passage of time, but as boomers, we can do something about this. With the advancement of medications for ED, and the use of hormone replacement therapy, couples can expect to be sexually active into their later years. This can be both a blessing and a curse, as spouses may have differing desires or physical limitations. Being creative and resourceful in keeping a sex life active and enjoyable may require the assistance of a physician or a therapist. It also may require an agreement to remain affectionate but not engage in sexual activity. This is why it is so important to have intimate conversations about our sexual relationships, so that a loving solution can be reached.

Take responsibility for your own feelings and quit blaming your partner. If you want a healthy relationship, be the first to admit your part in an argument or disagreement and see what happens.

Try to follow the advice of Don Miguel Ruiz and “never make assumptions.” I experienced this so much in my work with couples. Something would happen that was annoying and one or both would interpret their partner’s motive, often in the worst possible light, never checking it out with them, believing their own judgments, and then feeling justified in becoming hurt and angry. In our session, they would be shocked to find that the way they saw the situation was a projection of their own beliefs and judgments. By then these assumptions may have led to a huge argument. Sometimes words were said that could not be taken back. Learn to check things out first. “Motives like stowaways,” wrote W.H. Auden, “are found too late,” and this is sadly true in marriage.

Accept your partner for who he or she is, not who you might want them to be, for this is not love. Love is accepting and kind, looking for the positive and not nit-picking the negative. Work toward becoming your partner’s biggest cheer leader, supporting their personal growth and care for their health. This also means not trying to fix your partner. I used to see this mostly in men who are hard wired to fix things, but now I see it in both sexes. Acceptance and support go a long way toward a happy marriage.

Be aware that you do not have a God given right to comment or pass judgment on everything your partner says or does. Learn when to remain silent and just listen for a change; you may find that your partner is very appreciative. If you really want to take a risk, ask them to tell you more, to clarify anything you didn’t understand, and even remark about your interest in their thoughts and actions. If you are truly interested in your partner, it will be reciprocated.

What about dating in later maturity? What are realistic expectations? With approximately 26million single boomers, and internet dating sites that enable us to check out potential partners around the world, dating after age50 is a real possibility. Having been married for fifteen years, and single for the past thirty one, I’ve developed some perspective on the subject. Although I still believe that marriage is the best option for the future of the human race, if I had to choose which was more interesting in terms of both love and sex, I would have to say the latter. The reasons I draw this conclusion are as follows:

Dating can be more fun when you are on equal footing with the opposite sex. There is not as much to prove in later maturity and not as much at stake with every date. Some dates work , some do not, but getting to know someone, even if just over a cup of coffee, can only help to improve your social skills. The balance of power in marriage is a little more unstable in my opinion, and requires more work to keep its equilibrium. Equal footing is a little easier to accomplish when both parties are putting their best foot forward.

Courting can bring a new sense of exhilaration and keep you young. Many boomers complain that it “too much like work” to establish a new relationship, but I think it is just a matter of choice.

There is much more emphasis on getting to know a potential partner as a person first. Studies have shown that a friendship is always the best basis for a lasting relationship. With new information about relationships in general, and with an awareness of what did not work in the past, dating can be a time to get to know a person in more depth before making a commitment. However, recent evidence shows that second marriages are more prone to divorce than first marriages, so apparently, not enough single boomers are using this time wisely.

Learning dating skills at a later age can make up for many of the feelings of inadequacy we all experienced earlier in our lives. Like many of you, I was intimidated by the opposite sex and the whole process of dating. If not for the church, I wouldn’t have had any girlfriends in high school or college. The church provided a more comfortable environment for meeting and getting to know the opposite sex. Now you can improve your dating skills with the help and advice of dating coaches, much as you might have seen in the movie *Hitch*.

Sex can be wonderfully fulfilling when you can take your time, explore new possibilities, and not take it so seriously. Of course, this is just as applicable to marriage, but single life provides opportunities to learn from different partners the art of timing and playfulness that can enhance the sexual experience. It also creates more interest and motivation to keep romance alive. My work with both single people and married couples-as well as my own experience--underscores that those in a dating relationship find sex more exciting when they know they will only see their partner for one or two nights a week, whereas married couples complain that their sex life is boring or they don’t have sex as often as when they were dating or newly married. However, each single person must decide what is morally and ethically acceptable for his or her sense of self-worth and integrity. Risk and reward are both high in this area of single life. Practicing safe sex, being faithful within a relationship, and never using anyone for your own sexual gratification are good rules to follow.

New “sexual enhancements” make it possible to have a sexual relationship much later in life. Boomers can utilize a variety of prescription drugs and natural supplements, lotions and toys, to have sex into their eighties-or maybe longer. Who knows what advances in this area are on the horizon? I can imagine that we will eventually have an “app” you can download to your phone which will guarantee better sex.

Later maturity can be a time to experience love and sex free from the fears that held us back before, or, if one is open, to work through old fears and wounds and love more fully and unreservedly. You no longer need to find a soul mate, just a mate who has a soul. If you have been single for as long as I have, you know that there is no one who is perfect for you, so you have to give up idealistic expectations or be constantly disappointed. Being single forces you to learn the art of bargaining and compromise, sometimes in working out the details of a first date.

I once called a woman that I had met online, to meet me for the first time. During that conversation a conflict came up that irritated me so much I said: “let’s forget the whole thing.” She immediately changed her argumentative stance and then began pursuing me for a place and time to meet. I would have never been so bold before, but being single has taught me a few things, especially how to keep good boundaries.

We finally settled on a mutually acceptable time and place, and actually had an enjoyable time together. Early on in the date, she told me that she had plans to meet her girlfriend later, and I agreed that this was fine with me. She later excused herself to “phone her girlfriend and cancel.” We talked and got to know each other, but this was one of those dates that did not lead to any further dating. What I learned was that I had the right to speak my truth, even if it was negative, and not be afraid of the outcome.

You can have separate beds and separate residences without all the guilt. You too can become a “living alone together.” When the morning comes and you have to go to work or want to do something by yourself, it’s nice to know that your relationship partner is equally happy to be on their own. Texting then becomes a technological miracle, keeping you connected through the week when you don’t have the time for a phone conversation. As mature adults, however, I hope that we all continue to use a phone for the purpose it was intended—to actually speak to another human being.

You don’t have to be quiet because of the kids. In fact, you don’t have to be quiet at all. So many boomers are living alone now, with their children raised and on their own, making it possible to experience the privacy to focus on one another without distractions.

When you feel too tired to go looking for someone, you only have to go to your computer to see who is available in the area of your choice. You might even enjoy learning the subtleties of online dating. I know that I felt challenged by what to write, and how to phrase what I really wanted to say. By trial and error I eventually found the right things to say to attract a woman, and this became a source of pride and a sense of accomplishment. Every once and a while my girlfriend wistfully mentions the fun we had writing back and forth. When I am inspired, I send her emails as if we were still in that early stage of getting to know one another, keeping the romance in our relationship.

You now feel infinitely more grateful for a good date, for good conversation, and if that date leads to sex, for a good orgasm. It is not nearly as easy to take things for granted. For many of us, this provides the opportunity and the impetus for self-improvement. Self-help books aren’t just for women, you know. I challenge both sexes to make single living and dating a time for personal growth as relationship partners, and as human beings living in this particular time of history. Loving and being loved is one of the most profound experiences of life. It deserves our complete attention and commitment.

One last personal note: the writing of this book and especially this chapter has caused me to revisit many events in my past, and not without considerable grief. During this time I have worked very hard to try to resolve some left-over issues with my ex-wife regarding our divorce. Through email, we communicated back and forth. Some of my emails were well received while others caused disagreements and periods during which she withdrew from contact with me. Feeling that this was very important to me, to my ex-wife, and ultimately to our son, I continued to reach out to her, apologizing for whatever wrongs I had done, even after all this time. I shared with her those events that were the most painful for me, hoping she would understand. Allowing a vulnerability I hadn’t seen since we were together, she apologized and took responsibility for her inner process during that time in her life. I found her words tremendously healing, and can honestly say

that after more than thirty years, I feel we have finally forgiven each other. Along with her apology she shared with me the following poem, written as part of her own healing process:

I was 18. You were 23.
So very young, carrying childhood
wounds we each thought the other
could heal somehow.
All we ever wanted in our heart of
hearts was to love and be loved.
That is the heartache buried so
many years ago under layers of
anger and fear, like concrete poured
over our dreams of romance, fun, and
the family life we each seemed to long
for since the beginning of time.
How could we have known? No one ever
taught us that all we had to do was leave
the past behind, and sing our Soul Songs
together like two Morning Doves greeting
each other in the new day sun
It never had to be so hard,
but how could we have known?

Bonnie Joyce Walker

I said earlier that these years would bring new challenges as well as new opportunities, and we might all need to embrace change as a way of life. Nowhere is this more true than in the area of love and relationships. For those who are married the challenge is keeping love alive and vital through the passage of time. For those who are single comes the opportunity of meeting someone who makes your heart beat just a little faster once more. The excitement lies in the choices we all have. “Grow old along with me,” penned Robert Browning, “the best is yet to be . . .”

Do you have the courage to make this a reality?

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