

HAPPILY EVER ... FUHGETTABOUTIT!

I am married to the nicest, kindest, smartest, most conscious man I know. Plus he's funny. And he has a great body. And he's a wonderful lover. And he cares about the environment and spends his days working to save it. And he's good to his mother. And he's often urging me to make sure I'm having enough fun – “Treat yourself like an empress today, baby!” And he adores me, and thinks I'm beautiful, and tells me both these things often.

And I want to smack him. Sometimes.

I suspect he's had the urge to haul off and smack me more than once as well, but I'm pretty sure I'm angry oftener.

I had to laugh when I came across this quote by the 20th century French philosopher Jean Rostand, who wrote: “Never feel remorse for what you have thought about your wife; she has thought much worse things about you.”

There was a time in my life when I'd hear this or that famous couple were getting a divorce, and I'd think, “oh, what went wrong?” But these days, when I hear that a couple has been married for decades, and they still actually seem happy together, I wonder “What's their secret?”

Don't get me wrong. I love my husband, and I think we've got a pretty good marriage, but it's not a cakewalk. I take some comfort from Mark Twain, who wrote “Love seems the swiftest, but it is the slowest of all growths. No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century.” At fourteen years, we're only a little more than half-way there, so I'm jazzed that the best is yet to come.

Marriage is hard. Maybe because once we've found our mate, and are bound to them with a legal contract, we feel free to let our guards down, so whatever negative character traits we may've successfully been hiding from the world and ourselves rise to the surface, since we're no longer worried about scaring off a potential mate. And too, once our guards are down, we're so much more easily wounded by any real or imagined slight.

Only motherhood has done more to puncture holes in my overblown self-image than marriage has. I used to think I was the soul of kindness, patience, generosity, and love. Not so. Ask either of the guys I love most in the world. Oh, I have my moments. In fact, my son often tells me I'm the best mommy in the world, but he is a love, and very forgiving, and even more frequently he tells me “Mommy, you don't have to talk to me that way!” as I bark at him impatiently, every day, often surprising myself at how quickly I'm moved to anger.

When I was a little girl, and I'd visit the small town in West Virginia where my father grew up, and where my grandmother and aunt still lived, folks there who knew my father would call me “Little Jack,” because I was the spitting image of him as a kid.

Now, he was a good provider, and he loved us fiercely, but he was a hard man to live with. He was easily angered, overbearing, self-centered, and hyper-critical, especially of my brother and my mother. I remember more than once sitting at the dinner table with my stomach in knots as he laid into my mom until she was reduced to tears. They were married 59 years, until his death in 2005. I often wished they

would divorce. It was painful being around their mutual antagonism. But in spite of what seemed to me to be decades of endless bickering, they insisted they loved each other.

I don't know if impatience and anger are genetically passed on or not, but when I think now of my Dad, I realize I am that too.

Do you know of anyone whose parents were good role models for marriage? I don't.

One of my all-time favorite New Yorker cartoons showed a huge auditorium, with one lone, happy, expectant-looking person sitting in the audience, surrounded by a sea of empty seats, and the banner over the top of the auditorium stage read "CHILDREN OF FUNCTIONAL FAMILIES CONVENTION."

Happy, healthy marriages are rare. And very little in life prepares us for successful relationships. Between witnessing our own parents making a hash of it, along with being fed the myth from a very early age that you just need to find the right person and then you'll live happily ever after, most of us are ill prepared for the tough work that being in relationship requires.

Don't you think the state should require more than a blood test to get a marriage license? An in-depth course in communication with at least 100 hours of lab practice might be a good start. And a crash course on daily forgiveness wouldn't hurt either.

Because that's how we most frequently wound each other, with our clumsy, thoughtless communication.

And we are so easily wounded. It surprises me, sometimes, how easily the slightest criticism from Peter yanks my chain. I go from hurt to anger in a microsecond, so quickly I don't even realize in the moment it's the hurt fueling the anger. But it is. Hurt. And/or fear. "How could you find fault with me? I'm working so hard. I'm doing my best!" or "Maybe he's right that I'm wrong. I really am inadequate! Oh no!" And I hate feeling inadequate, "So he's to blame, the jerk!" When all he said was "every surface on the kitchen counter is covered. Could you just put things away after you use them?"

But of course, he's not simply asking if I could put things away, he's blaming me for a messy kitchen. And like every other human being, I get triggered when I get blamed.

I've been much more accepting of how easily I get triggered ever since I read Pema Chodron's description of human beings. I've mentioned this in a previous service, but the image has been so valuable to me, it bears repeating.

If you're unfamiliar with her, Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun and author, and she says that human beings are like both the naked, blind, squawking baby bird, begging to be taken care of, and the Mother Bird, devoted to taking care of her young.

Baby bird lives in a world of danger and scarcity. And is hungry. Greedy, really. A bottomless pit of need.

Mother Bird knows her job, her privilege, is to take care of those who depend on her. She is in tune with the Oneness of the Universe. Her babies are part of her. As she feeds them, she's feeding herself.

Now, Pema Chodron doesn't say "and one day you'll grow up to be the mother bird and leave the baby bird behind." No. We are both. Period.

It has helped me to not only be more accepting of my own weaknesses to embrace this notion, but also to accept Peter's. When he's squawking, he's being his baby bird self. His needs aren't getting met. Of course, I'm just as likely to get hooked and answer squawk with squawk, and then it's "the battle of the babies," as my friend Dale calls it, but sometimes, I can manage not to take it personally. Or at least in retrospect see what was going on – "Oh, we were just being our baby bird selves. What a couple of little birdbrains!"

The psychotherapist and author Jonathon Robinson also helped me understand how easily I get hooked by Peter in his book "Communication Miracles for Couples." He explains that blame is a way of inflating your own self-esteem at the expense of someone else's. He uses the metaphor of a self-esteem bank account, and he says when our bank accounts are low, when we're not feeling particularly good about ourselves, we tend to try to take self-esteem "dollars" from our partner's "account" and give them to ourselves by blaming our partner for something. The fact that this never works and only ends up making our partner pissed at us, blaming and insulting us back in self-defense, doesn't seem to matter. At this point we're both birds of very little brain and can't see that it's the worst possible way to get what you want from anyone. Robinson says:

"It's a little-known fact that human beings are equipped with a secret device in their brain called a "blame detector." When anyone tries to blame us or make us wrong, even in the most subtle manner, our blame detector alarm is triggered. When our alarm goes off, it automatically shuts down the ability of our ears to hear whatever anyone says to us."

The hard work is slowing down, and figuring out how to communicate your own wants and needs without blame. Robinson goes into great detail about how to do this in a really clear and helpful way. Peter and I are going to do a quick demonstration of blaming and non-blaming communication and where it leads. And by the way, Robinson's work is based on Marshall Rosenberg's Non-Violent Communication.

#### Role play

Normal

Peter

(walks over to chalice with water glass, looking around, evidently frustrated, for a place to set it down)

Kate What?

Peter

Every surface is covered

(gently, patronizingly) You know, if you get in the habit of putting things away while you work in the kitchen, it doesn't have to get like this Kate Hey, you're one to talk. On the rare day when you cook, the place looks like a tornado hit.

Peter

Well, you're talking about the old me. Pay attention next time, I've gotten better about that Kate Look, I'm trying to juggle dinner, homework, and a dozen other things, ok.

Peter

Just a friendly suggestion

(looks away slightly disgusted)

Kate  
Thanks a lot (sarcastically)  
(looks aside, boiling)

Better  
Peter  
(looks around like before)

Kate  
What's the matter?

Peter  
When I see all the counters covered at the end of the day I feel impatient because I'm feeling stressed about work and a sense of order helps me calm down and let go of my anxiety I want to feel that you understand and appreciate that Kate I get it, I see why you feel that way Here, let's tidy things up together

I'm not suggesting that communicating this way is easy. Being thoughtful and careful about what I'm saying is one of the hardest things in the world for me. Blaming Peter for my unhappiness comes very naturally. So often I just wanna squawk. But it never gets me the result I want.

Besides, I decided a long time ago that my work in this lifetime is to learn to love more perfectly. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or rude, love is not irritable or resentful, love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

To love is to earnestly desire the wholeness and happiness of the one who is loved.

God is love. When we love, we are in touch with our own divinity, and shining its light in the world. We are Mother Birds.

And, alas, we are baby birds who will, at times, be impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, rude, irritable, resentful, and wish ill on those we claim to love.

Bill Moyers wrote "In marriage everyday you love, and everyday you forgive. It is an ongoing sacrament, love and forgiveness."

I'm going to close now with a poem by Nancy Shaffer, a former school psychologist and now a UU minister in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It's titled "Because We Spill Not Only Milk."

Because we spill not only milk  
knocking it over with an elbow  
when we reach to wipe a small face  
but also spill seed on soil we  
thought was fertile but isn't  
and also spill whole lives and only  
later see in fading light how  
much is gone and we hadn't

intended it

Because we tear not only cloth  
thinking to find a true edge and  
instead making only a hole but  
also tear friendships when we grow  
and whole mountainsides  
because we are so many and  
we want to live right where black oaks  
lived, once very quietly and still

Because we forget not only what  
we are doing in the kitchen  
and have to go back to the room we were in before, remember why it was we left but also forget entire  
lexicons of joy and how we lost ourselves for hours yet all that time were clearly found and held and also  
forget the hungry not at our table

Because we weep not only at jade  
plants caught in freeze and  
precious papers left in rain but  
also at legs that no longer walk  
or never did, although from the outside  
they look like most others  
and also weep at words said once as  
though they might be rearranged but  
which, once loose, refuse to return  
and we are helpless

Because we are imperfect and love so  
deeply we never will have enough days  
we need the gift of starting over, beginning again; just this constant good, this saving hope.