



# The 10 Biggest Things We've Learned Since We Got Married

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*101 THINGS I WISH I KNEW WHEN I GOT MARRIED:  
SIMPLE LESSONS TO MAKE LOVE LAST*

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## Chapter 1: Commitment isn't a prison; it's a means to greater freedom.

CHARLIE: When I shared this observation with my single friend Howard, he looked at me as though I had taken permanent leave of my senses. I don't blame him for his reaction. Not long before that, I had the same association with the dreaded "C word." It wasn't until after Linda and I had been together for several years that I stopped feeling like I was stuck in a trap and began to experience the liberating nature of true commitment. Before that, the problem was that I was not really committed in the marriage. Sure, I tried to keep the promises and vows that we agreed would define our relationship, but that was more a matter of honoring the word than understanding the spirit of our agreements. Most of the time, it felt more like going through the motions than really embracing the essence of the covenant. I hadn't surrendered my resistance, which manifested itself in second-guessing my decision to marry, envying other men who weren't tied down, and feeling resentful for having missed out on more time to sow my wild oats. These thoughts often left me feeling sorry for myself. In those days I often found myself criticizing Linda and picking arguments to blow off my self-created dissatisfaction.

Thanks to a combination of perseverance, good help, supportive friends, understanding from Linda, and the maturity that comes from staying with something long enough, I eventually grew beyond my feelings of being trapped. I began to appreciate the many blessings and benefits of sharing a relationship with a loving, supportive partner. I came to value the security that comes from sharing a life with someone who knows you at your best and worst and who will not withdraw her support when you're having a bad day. I came to trust that I could not do anything to jeopardize Linda's love. This freed up vast amounts of energy that had formerly been locked into patterns of approval seeking that showed up not only in my primary relationship, but with others as well.

As our capacity to love each other grows, we become increasingly able to rest in the knowledge that we are loved for who we are, not what we do. Over time, we come to develop a previously unknown well of self-love. Feeling loved and really letting that in provides a fantastic freedom: freedom from fear of loss and freedom to be ourselves fully.

## Chapter 2: If you think you're too good for your partner, think again.

Fran and Erik married when they were both very young. Fran had been a “Daddy’s girl,” always doted on and indulged by a father who treated her as if she could do no wrong. Erik adored her and did everything he could to try to make her happy. Unfortunately, Fran was never quite satisfied with Erik’s offerings. She was often cold, aloof, and unresponsive to his many overtures of affection. One Christmas, Erik spent a lot of time deliberating over what to buy Fran as a gift. He went to nearly a dozen stores and finally chose a red dress he knew would look beautiful on her. He watched with eager anticipation on Christmas morning while she opened the gift, hoping that she would be as pleased with the dress as he was. As she lifted the dress out of its box he knew by the look on her face that he had failed again. Although Fran politely thanked him, Erik knew that she would be returning the dress. As she placed the cover on the box, he asked if she was even going to try it on. “It’s just not my style,” she said coldly.

Erik was hurt. The event was a microcosm of their marriage: Erik giving the very best he had and Fran expecting him to know what she wanted, then judging him as failing to suit her expectations. Less than a month later, Erik asked Fran for a divorce. She was shocked. Although Fran suspected that sooner or later they would divorce, she never thought that Erik would be the one to initiate it. This hit her hard and provoked a process of painful self-examination that eventually led her to see how her impossible expectations had set up the marriage for disaster.

Erik went on to marry someone else by whom he felt appreciated. Over time, Fran came to understand and regret the pain she had inflicted on Erik through her inflated image of herself. She learned a hard lesson through the loss of her marriage. The red dress became a symbol in her future relationships that reminded her to not lapse into her old sense of entitlement. Fran gradually relinquished her throne of superiority, and she eventually remarried. She became a kinder and more generous person in her second marriage. She learned the real meaning of the word “humility” and found that it didn’t require a sacrifice of her personal power or self-respect. She learned that it wasn’t wise to look to her marriage to make her happy, but rather to use her relationship to become a more loving and fulfilled person.

### Chapter 3: Even people with great marriages sometimes wonder whether they might have married the wrong person.

CHARLIE: Temporary doubt isn't necessarily a reflection of something seriously wrong with the relationship. In a moment of anger or disappointment, disturbing thoughts can pop into anyone's head. The thoughts "This is not what I had in mind," "I made a mistake," or "I married too early" are based on the usually mistaken notion that somewhere there is a special someone with whom we would never argue, struggle, or feel disappointed, a soul mate with whom we would be spared all pain, suffering, and stress.

Sadly, such dreams are the stuff of fantasy and rarely materialize in the lives of real people. Still, the hopes of perfect harmony die hard, and the fear of having made the wrong choice can shake us to the core. It's common for people to withhold these thoughts not only from others, but from themselves as well. Withholding tends to intensify rather than diminish doubt.

Until I joined a men's group I rarely heard my married male friends acknowledge that they had misgivings about their marriages. While there was plenty of grouching and grumbling, few of my friends admitted that they ever wondered whether they might have made a mistake in marrying their wives. I never admitted it either. Like the others, I assumed that since no one else was talking about this, I must be the only one feeling this way. The only time I ever heard anyone admit these feelings was after their marriage had fallen apart, and then it was often all I would hear.

When the members of my men's group, several of whom had solid, long-term marriages, all acknowledged periodic misgivings about their partners, I realized that these thoughts did not reflect bad marriages, but rather the truth of complex and dynamic normal committed partnerships. Wanting to collect a broader base for my informal research, I brought the question to other men and women in my life, particularly those who enjoyed what I considered to be successful relationships. The responses were nearly unanimous. Almost everyone had experienced questions about their choice of a partner, and most of them felt guilty thinking that they were the only one or that this was some form of disloyalty to the marriage. The honest acceptance of these kinds of occasional thoughts when they occur will strengthen rather than harm our marriages.

The challenge at these times is to determine whether these doubts are reflective of some deep flaw in our relationship or whether they are merely indicators of an underlying condition that temporarily requires our attention. In using these questions to enter into

an internal inquiry, I usually uncover some unexpressed or unacknowledged feelings with which I need to come to terms, either by taking some action, communicating something I've been withholding, or simply letting go of something I cannot change. Chances are that I can do one of the above, and when I do, the doubt seems to dissolve or at least fade far enough into the background of my thoughts to allow my heart to open once again, in gratitude and appreciation for the woman I married.

## **Chapter 4: One of the greatest questions you can ask your partner is, "How may I best love you?"**

One afternoon's back-to-back appointments demonstrated that different individuals can need strikingly different things in order to feel loved. In the first session, Claire sobbed that she didn't feel loved by her husband, Matt. He, in turn, expressed bewilderment and frustration, stating that he just couldn't understand why she was carrying on this way. After being questioned further, Claire, still sniffing, said, "You never tell me that you love me."

Matt had been under the impression that making a good living and supporting the family, along with all of the other actions that he took, were sufficient to demonstrate his love for his wife. He knew how much he loved her and assumed she knew it too. He was introverted and shy and unaccustomed to speaking openly about his feelings. During the session, with awkwardness and effort, he finally did manage to say "I love you." The words were music to Claire's ears. She hadn't heard them for years.

The next couple came in grappling with the same issue. Jeanette stated that she did not feel loved by her husband, Patrick. She said, "You are always telling me that you love me, but I wish you'd show it with your actions. I hate having to pick up after you all the time. I wish you would pick up your socks, put your dirty dishes in the sink, and stop leaving your wet towels on the bed. You say you love me, but you don't seem to hear a thing I say!" Words were definitely not what she was looking for. She wanted action.

We all have specific ways that we want to experience being loved. We tend to give what we want to receive; we can't help being subjective. Wise lovers remember to ask each other, pay close attention, and generally act on the input they receive.

## Chapter 5: Even the best marriages have irreconcilable differences.

Flossy and Gabe were the kind of couple that made you wonder how on earth these two people ever found each other, much less stayed together. Flossy is a relentless doer, always involved with dozens of projects simultaneously. She rarely gets or needs more than three hours of sleep a night. When she wakes up, she's out of bed and on the move within seconds. Flossy is a conservative Republican who not so secretly hopes someday to enter and win a local election. She adheres to a firm and structured model of parenting that holds that too much freedom leaves kids feeling insecure and uncared for. She can talk for hours about issues related to psychology, spirituality, and human relations. When it comes to money, Flossy is frugal; "Waste not, want not" is her motto. Sports and business bore her to death; her attention span in those areas can be computed in seconds.

While Flossy is almost always on the move, Gabe's idea of a good time is sitting home and watching TV after dinner. He relishes sleep and can't function on less than nine hours. Politically, he's a liberal Democrat. As a parent, Gabe is easy going and laissez-faire, believing that freedom helps kids to develop self-responsibility, and that excessive structure fosters unhealthy dependence. Psychology and personal growth don't show up on his radar of interest. He's loose with finances, believing that money comes and goes, and when it comes it should be enjoyed. He lives for sports, as a spectator and a participant. His passion is tennis, which he adores and plays at least twice a week.

One would think that two people with such conflicting interests and personalities would have a hard time reconciling their differences. Yet practically without exception Flossy and Gabe's friends would say that this couple has one of the most loving relationships they have ever seen.

Their secret? They both see the basis of their connection as something that is far greater than personal style, preference, or interest. The foundation of their relationship is respect and love for each other, and a commitment to extend that respect and love into the other relationships in their lives. They occasionally have disagreements, but those disputes rarely damage or diminish the quality of their love for each other because they value their common ground far more than their individual perspectives. And alongside their differences they share important values, commitments, and activities that bring fun and fulfillment into their lives, such as their beloved daughter and their mutual loves of dancing, sex, art, and music.

They are committed to supporting whatever will promote each other's well-being and happiness, not only because they love and want the best for each other, but because they know that their partner's happiness will flow into their own life.

Early in marriage, many of us try to make over the other person to become more like ourselves. It takes a while to realize that making room for differences to peacefully coexist is a better use of precious life energy. When we become wiser, with fewer illusions, we can use our energy more strategically. We don't waste as much time trying to "fix" the other person. It's not resignation that allows the differences to simply be; it's an attitude that we cultivate with practice over time. Fulfilled partners don't become homogeneous over the years; they become more uniquely themselves. Not everything can be worked out, nor need it be. We can learn to live with our differences. One of the keys to a successful marriage lies in accepting and respecting the differences — letting them enrich us, rather than trying to eliminate them. While this is easier said than done, cultivating the qualities of acceptance, tolerance, and understanding will serve you and all of your relations for a lifetime.

## **Chapter 6: If you think, "You're not the person i married," you're probably right.**

LINDA: My friend Sophie told me that she looked over at her husband Ray one day, with his "skinny little legs" sticking out of his bathrobe, and thought, "I should have done better than this." This was a challenging moment for her because she realized that she didn't get "the prize" after all. Ray was still the tall, thin guy she married, only now his hair was a lot thinner and gray, and he was sixty years old. He hadn't exercised much over the years, and she assessed him as not having aged very gracefully.

In the meantime, Sophie's career had taken off, and she was spending her workdays with dynamic, creative, and accomplished women and men. Her professional success had given her an inflated idea of herself. Looking at Ray now, he seemed aged and shabby, like an old, worn-out shoe. Indeed, Ray had changed. In their early years, he had struggled valiantly to compete and achieve in his career. He had done well, but he was no longer driven by the hunger for power and success that had possessed him for much of his adult life; it was time to wind down and enjoy life more. Now he immersed himself in the simple pleasures of home and family. He baked bread and muffins to share with Sophie. He loved working in their garden, cutting and arranging fresh flowers as a meditative practice.



Sophie, on the other hand, felt liberated when their children left home, and she dove headlong into her career. With time and deep reflection, Sophie realized that her choice was difficult for Ray at this point in the cycle of his life. He had been looking forward to slowing down so he could enjoy time together with his wife, and she was committed to working and flying around the globe. Sophie realized in her reflection that in some ways she wasn't such a prize either. In so doing, she was able to appreciate Ray more, without putting herself down. She saw that they were, both literally and figuratively, deserving of each other. Neither of them was superior or inferior to the other, simply distinct in their own uniqueness.

Sophie decided to stay in the marriage with Ray, skinny legs and all, and went on to co-create a deep, loving connection with him, one that could include the flaws and imperfections they both possessed, as well as their great gifts.

When we marry, we are full of illusion and expectation. Generally, we haven't been together for enough years to know each other fully. As our partners grow and change and reveal themselves, we are challenged to adapt and accept them for who they are. To the degree that we can do this, we are likely to experience the same from them. This does not mean, of course, tolerating behaviors that are disrespectful or abusive, but accepting aspects of their personality that are not in keeping with our concept of the ideal mate. Change is the only constant in life. Marriage provides a great curriculum for learning to accept the inevitability of change in each other, ourselves, and the world.

## **Chapter 7: Getting help when you are unable to work things out isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign of intelligence.**

Linda: Most couples wait too long to get help. Unnecessary suffering occurs in secrecy and isolation when you are too embarrassed to ask for assistance. The time to get help for your marriage is when one (not both) of you feels the need for it. Putting this agreement in place before things deteriorate will support early intervention and prevent painful, time-consuming arguments later on.

I once heard Malidoma Somé, a healer and ritualist, tell a story about his homeland in Africa. He is of the Dagara tribe in Burkino, West Africa. In this community everyone understands that the wellbeing of the entire tribe depends on the success of each married couple. The whole tribe supports the couple. If a woman attempts to communicate something important to her husband and he is unresponsive, she goes to

her women friends. At first they advise her, and if her husband doesn't respond, they speak to him directly. By then he is usually motivated to take action, because if things don't work out after he speaks with the women, his wife's next recourse is to approach the other men in the tribe. Generally, the husband recoils at the prospect of being confronted by his male peers! Of course, it works both ways. The husband has the same system of support available if his wife is closed to something that is important to him. First he will approach the men for advice, then his men friends may meet face to face with his wife. As a last resort, he will turn to the tribal women.

For many in our culture, this tradition seems a terrible invasion of privacy. But I see great wisdom in this high level of community support. I can remember numerous times when I wanted desperately to reach Charlie and was frustrated in not being able to do so. I'm sure we wouldn't have gotten so stuck if we had had a system in place that allowed for the influence of family and friends. While their advice may not always be helpful, we all need the love and companionship of our friends, even when things are moving along well. We especially need their support when the inevitable stresses and challenges of life occur. Somé says that in our American culture, the couple begins at the top of the mountain and falls off. In his tribe, the couple starts at the bottom of the mountain, and the whole community pushes the couple to the top. It is the wise couple who solicits assistance from family, friends, and professionals. All of us have blind spots and, at times, can benefit from objective input and feedback. When life knocks us down, our loved ones can help us to climb back up.

## **Chapter 8: One of the greatest gifts you can give your partner is your own happiness.**

CHARLIE: Like many of us, I grew up with the notion that marriage requires self-sacrifice. I believed that successful couples put each other's needs ahead of their own and forego pleasures that their mate doesn't share. It's no wonder I wasn't exactly jumping out of my skin to settle down. In the shadow of my independent, commitment-averse self was the side of me that craved connection, affection, and (let's be honest) regular sex. So, at the age of twenty-five I got married. Given my beliefs, it's not surprising that my feelings were somewhat mixed when Linda and I tied the knot. In one candid wedding photo, my look of consternation exposes this ambivalence.

For me, the hard part of marriage was deconstructing the beliefs that I had been caught up in and creating a life in which I could experience real happiness. With time, effort, and support, this intention has been, for the most part fulfilled, largely due to the help I've received from Linda. She gave me the encouragement and trust that I was often unable to

give myself along the way. Linda helped me to see that I didn't have to become a martyr and sacrifice myself in order to make our marriage work. She showed me that my responsibility to create a fulfilling, joyful life for myself was as important as anything that I could do for her or the kids. "The greatest gift you can give us is your own happiness," she said. "We don't want a husband and a dad who feels unhappy and burdened, no matter what else you're bringing home." I had to hear that message many times and in many ways before I finally understood it.

I learned that my inner responsibilities to myself were as important as my outer responsibilities to others. I came to trust that the quality of my own life is no less important than the quality of my family members'. It is my job, not Linda's or anyone else's, to see to it that my needs are met and that I experience fulfillment in my life. This has probably been the most valuable lesson I've ever learned, and it's one that I keep relearning at deeper levels. I've come to see that responsibility, in the truest sense of the word — responsibility for oneself — isn't an obligation or burden, but a gift and a blessing.

Most of us come into a marriage looking for what we can get from the arrangement. Love, attention, security, pleasure, companionship, and distraction from unpleasant feelings or thoughts are some of the things that compel us into partnership. When we no longer hold our partner responsible for the fulfillment of our needs, everything changes. This is easier said than done, but it is perhaps the single most important thing we can do to ensure that our relationship will be mutually satisfying. Taking care of ourselves isn't selfish; it's the most generous and responsible thing we can do.

## **Chapter 9: It's never too late to repair damaged trust.**

There is no statute of limitations regarding hurt feelings or wounded trust. The bad news is that the pain of unfinished business can continue for years; the good news is that it's never too late to heal old wounds, even if they happened long ago.

Rose was sixty-nine and Harry was seventy-eight when he suffered a serious heart attack. For nearly two years, Rose devoted herself to Harry's recovery. They both agreed that her devoted care literally saved his life. However, in the process of being Harry's caretaker, Rose had overextended herself and was suffering from "compassion fatigue." Shortly after Harry's recovery, Rose fell into ill health and became depressed. She and Harry had been partners in a successful business, and now they were facing the possibility of losing it due to their deteriorating health. Not yet ready to transition into retirement, they both kept struggling to save the business, despite Rose's unhappiness, exhaustion, and growing resentment.

Harry welcomed the opportunity to reciprocate Rose's devotion, and he threw himself into caring for her as his strength slowly returned. Things, however, did not go according to plan. Rose didn't trust the depth of Harry's feelings for her. She feared that if she really needed him, he wouldn't be there for her. As a result, Harry often felt that in Rose's eyes he couldn't do anything right, and he was frustrated that his efforts didn't succeed in making her happy. Rose acknowledged that they had never created a foundation of deep intimacy in their marriage, and she feared it was too late. Together, they decided to seek couple counseling. Harry learned to be more responsive to Rose and more patient with himself. Rather than argue with her, which had fueled a power struggle, he committed himself to demonstrating his love and gratitude, regardless of how it might be received. As a way of showing his love, Harry came every week to either couple or individual therapy sessions. He also shopped, cooked, and told Rose that he loved her each day. He searched for prospective buyers for their business, took her to Hawaii, listened patiently to her distress, and became less reactive to her outbursts and criticisms. He even cooked chicken soup for the first time in his life!

Harry and Rose had not had an active sex life for six years. His snoring and tossing and turning had led them to sleep in separate rooms. They agreed to try a ritual of lying down beside each other in bed to be close before going to their separate rooms. Gradually, a feeling of kindness and gentleness came back into their marriage. Over the months, their intimacy grew. Rose eventually accepted Harry's efforts and softened into her love for him. The months of focused attention to their relationship paid off with a sweetness and trust greater than anything they had previously known. In their sunset years, they developed the love they had always longed for.

## **Chapter 10: The amount of joy and fulfillment available in a loving partnership is considerably more than you can imagine.**

CHARLIE: Abraham Maslow was a developmental psychologist who stressed that it was important to study not only those people who suffer from mental health problems, but also those who best exemplify the greatness that humans can achieve. He used the term "self-actualization" to refer to the highest level of functioning that a person can attain. He claimed that given the right conditions and sufficient motivation, a person can fulfill their highest potential.

To develop our latent capacities, we need "believing eyes." We need the people around us who can see the beauty, talent, and possibility that we cannot recognize in ourselves, people who nurture our best qualities and are willing to confront us about our less

developed areas. We need fertile ground to fully flourish. My friend Seymour speaks about each of us being a perfect diamond, covered with dirt; it is the friction — the agitation, aggravation, and conflict — of relationships that rubs the encrusted crud off the surface of the diamond.

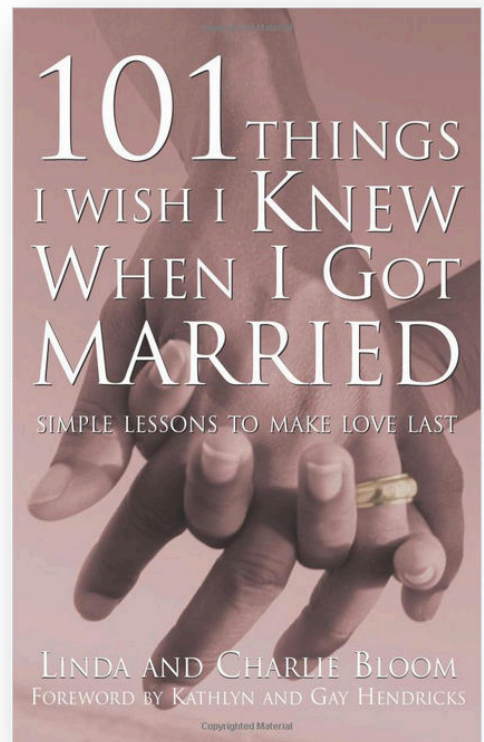
In this transformative process, we don't change into someone other than who we are; rather, we more fully embody our basic nature. Our partner can not only accompany us in this process, but they can assist us to move into states of being that we have not previously known. My life has taken on a quality of ease, trust, playfulness, and joy that was inconceivable to me only ten years ago. It is far beyond anything I thought I had a right to expect. The biggest challenge these days is in allowing these experiences to grow even deeper and to share them with increasing numbers of people. Now I can see that this is a possibility for anyone who chooses to embark on this incredible journey of awakening. It is available to everyone — not just those who come from happy families or are brilliant or gifted — as long as they possess an intention to learn about themselves and their relationships with others.

My most frequent answer to the question, “Why did you put up with so much pain and difficulty in the early stages of your marriage?” is “Because I knew it would be worth it!” I am convinced that there would be a lot fewer divorces if couples could somehow get a glimpse of the rewards available to those who hang in there and do the work necessary to cocreate an authentically loving marriage. The problem with many of us is not that we desire too much from marriage, but rather expect too little. More often than not, we greatly underestimate the possibilities for love, joy, freedom, and wholeness that two partners in this creative process can generate for themselves, each other, and the world around them. The real question is not “How much pain are you willing to tolerate?” but “How much joy are you willing to experience?”

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- **Jerry Jampolsky MD**, author of *Love is Letting Go of Fear*

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## About the Authors

**Linda Bloom, LCSW** and **Charlie Bloom, MSW** are the authors of the best-selling book, *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love Last* and *Secrets of Great Marriages: Real Truth from Real Couples about Lasting Love; Happily Ever After...and 39 Other Myths about Love: Breaking Through to the Relationship of Your Dreams*, and their latest book, *That Which Doesn't Kill Us: How One Couple Became Stronger at the Broken Places*, the story of Linda and Charlie's ten-year journey that took them through a series of ordeals that crippled their family and nearly destroyed their marriage.



Trained as psychotherapists and relationship counselors, they have worked with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations since 1975. They have lectured and taught at learning institutes throughout the USA, including the Esalen Institute, the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, 1440 Multiversity, the California Institute for Integral Studies, the Meridian University, John F. Kennedy University, the Crossings, Omega institute, the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, Sonoma State University, University of California at Berkeley Extension Program, the Hoffman Institute, and the World Health Organization. They have offered seminars throughout the world, including Bhutan, Cuba, China, Japan, Indonesia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, India, Brazil, and many other locations.

Linda and Charlie have been married since 1972.

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