

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

50 Years On

From time to time, when my parents took a trip, they left my sister and me with our grandparents. To get to Grandma and Granddad’s place, we never went “over the river and through the woods” as the old song goes. We took the New York State Thruway; exiting somewhere around Schenectady and driving south to a speck of a town called Esperance. Bea and Red (as others called them) retired there after a life near New York City; buying some land and building a pretty, yellow ranch home on a hill with a long view of the valley below. It was a quiet, out-of-the-way spot that felt like Mars to me each time I landed. And though I complained there was nothing to do during these visits, I now see how lucky I was to be bored; a condition that allowed me to slow down and see things I’d never forget.

It’s been thirty years, but my memories of their house are vivid. My grandmother had extensive gardens and, come summertime, her sunflowers craned toward our car to greet us as we pulled into the driveway. The yard was perfectly kept thanks to my grandfather, who seemingly spent half his time with a lawnmower and the other half with a rake. When the front door opened, I always smelled something funny: a faintly sweet and comforting scent from cigars, pipes and cigarettes; although admittedly I failed to recognize the source back then. It was just the way Grandma and Granddad smelled. Looking back, I’m sure I inhaled enough second hand smoke to bring a class-action lawsuit against them, but the other things I breathed in while visiting more than made up for any damage to my lungs. To my great benefit, I got to observe, up close and personal, the real life functioning of a lifelong marriage. This was no small thing and the lessons I learned by watching their well-oiled machine of matrimony were many.

For starters, it’s absolutely critical to marry someone whose strengths complement your weaknesses. For instance, my grandmother was quite excitable. She could go from zero to DEFCON 1 in an instant if a crisis arose; such as the discovery of low levels of milk, fruit salad or flavored icy pops. My grandfather on the other hand was a calming presence who could diffuse such a situation by reminding my grandmother of the extra icy pops in the basement freezer or by insisting he wasn’t in the mood for fruit salad that night. This kept her happy and prevented any number of aneurysms.

Another thing I came to truly understand was the importance of a solid transportation plan in a relationship. My grandmother couldn’t drive or, more accurately, *wouldn’t* drive after the “incident” in ’64 which she steadfastly refused to discuss. My mom said it involved ice, snow and a department store Santa Claus, but the details were sketchy. Fortunately, my grandfather was licensed to operate a motor vehicle in the State of New York and enjoyed firing up his Nash Rambler and ferrying Grandma back and forth from Price Chopper, where she could stock up on frozen corn niblets, more icy pops and enough canned goods to survive a nuclear holocaust.

Couples, I concluded, must stick together in sickness and in health, but particularly in sickness. My grandmother had a lot of illnesses. By her own count, she’d had 23 major operations and she took a special pride in showing her grandchildren the damage that surgery and time had wrought. For me, this meant witnessing her mastectomy scar (on several separate occasions), her false teeth, and her psoriasis, among other things, and hearing in-depth tales of Scarlet Fever, arthritis, cataracts and loosened stool. By God’s good graces, my grandfather knew the way to the hospital and possessed a special affection for waiting rooms where he could pretend to read magazines like *Redbook* and *Ladies Home Journal*. The fact that Grandma was battling three or four diseases at any given time and had a nightstand full of enough prescription medication to make Elvis blush never seemed to faze him. He just kept taking her to the doctor.

At the same time, although devotion and togetherness are wonderful, it’s important not to lose yourself in a marriage. This means maintaining your own interests; something my grandparents managed to do quite well. Adhering to the old adage about standing side by side like pillars supporting the same roof, they could go hours without talking to each other; my grandfather listening to Dixieland in the living room while my grandmother sat at the end of her bed watching a nine-inch black and white portable TV, pausing only for meals. My grandfather relished being left alone and, lucky for him, my grandmother respected and honored that wish. Of course, there were exceptions; like if there was a fly to kill in the bedroom or something big like that, in which case she’d holler for my grandfather like she was on fire. But for the most part, she only did that every 10 minutes or so and the rest of the time she left him in total peace.

Money can be an issue in a marriage so you have to agree on a mutually satisfactory fiscal path. My grandfather didn’t believe in credit cards and, by coincidence, my grandmother didn’t have any; so they were well-matched on this account. Cash and carry was their policy; one that turned my grandmother into a first-rate haggler. To my grandfather’s great satisfaction, his wife could acquire her entire winter wardrobe in an afternoon at Two Guys with nothing but a twenty dollar bill and a coupon for kitty litter.

And speaking of wardrobes, it is a mistake to subject your spouse to any kind of extreme makeover; wasting money on things they’ll never wear. Instead, you must develop an appreciation for your better half’s unique sense of style; a rule my grandparents abided by assiduously. Although my grandmother’s clothes were a campaign of shock and awe comprised of brightly-colored, loose-fitting, floral tablecloths with openings for her appendages, I never heard my grandfather heap anything on her but praise. Even copious amounts of costume jewelry in a shade completely unrelated to the rest of her outfit drew nothing but an approving smile. To him, she was beautiful.

Admiration aside, like any twosome, Bea and Red weren’t always in perfect harmony. Some people think that when two people argue constantly their marriage must be an unhappy one. This is not so. My grandparents loved to bicker about pretty much anything and especially about the weather, what to eat for dinner, President Nixon and

the televangelist my grandfather thought was channeling God. The biggest blow-ups, however, stemmed from my grandmother’s status as America’s most notorious backseat driver. At any given moment, she would hijack a perfectly pleasant drive by screaming, “Watch out, Red!” at 200 decibels. This would occur about 12 times during an average twenty minute trip until we finally made it home. For some reason, these outbursts always made my grandfather thirsty; for as soon as we pulled into the driveway, he would mutter, “I need a drink.” For the most part, if any conversation in the car or elsewhere got too heated, my grandfather would take the high road by pronouncing my grandmother’s position, “completely asinine,” and then retreating to the garage to refinish a piece of furniture or build a dinette set; which brings me to another key point.

When tensions boil over in a relationship, it is helpful if each side has a place to escape to for awhile to regain their equilibrium and remember what it is they like about the other person. My grandfather went to the garage, but Grandma’s domain was her kitchen, an all-tangerine affair where she was free to smoke Carltons, drink Sanka and ponder the next porcelain figurine to add to her Li’l Stinkers collection. If she’d had cross words with Granddad, she could be found at the circular pine table where we ate most meals rubbing her hands together, worrying aloud about the price of butter and debating whether or not she had enough ribbon candy in the event of a Soviet invasion. Eventually, they’d both cool down and normalcy would resume.

Through it all, what I saw was that marriage requires sacrifice and devotion more than anything. Whatever my grandmother’s faults or eccentricities, nobody topped her in these two areas. A city kid from Brooklyn, she never shared my grandfather’s dream of retiring to the country but she embraced it for him without complaint and set about the task of making their home as warm and welcoming as any. She cooked and cleaned and sewed and, on occasion, when she heard a jazz song emanating from the living room that she liked, such as *Bill Bailey*, she would saunter in and start dancing like a flapper girl with one hand in the air and the other pressed against her stomach; shimmying forward and back and singing with a huge smile on her face; telling my grandfather in her own way that she was happy with him and happy with her life. She did loads of laundry and dishes, wrote hundreds of Christmas cards and thank you notes, took thousands of car trips, and ran the household day after day, year after year; always by my grandfather’s side.

In the summer of 1981, our entire family gathered at The Old Tavern, a restored inn in Grafton, Vermont, to celebrate my grandparents’ 50th wedding anniversary. Having met at college in the 1920’s, married in 1931, welcomed daughters in 1936 and 1940 and raised their family, they had done it all and this was to be their crowning moment. On a beautiful July evening, with the sun setting and everyone looking just so, we moved as a group to a converted barn on the inn’s property where appetizers and drinks awaited. There was talk and laughter and the frivolity that accompanies large groups of grandchildren. As we ate and drank, the evening progressed like any other at a family reunion until my grandfather asked us to clear the dance floor; a space that doubled as the cocktail area.

He had brought a portable tape recorder which he cued up with music he brought from home. Stepping aside to give them room, our eyes turned to Bea and Red. But at that moment, they only had eyes for each other. Leading my grandmother by the hand, my grandfather wore a handsome summer suit with a tulip in his lapel. She was dressed in a sunny, yellow pantsuit she’d made herself and a corsage; looking lovely and ready to follow her husband anywhere.

The music started and like Gene Kelly from a bygone era, my grandfather took my grandmother into his arms and led her the way a man is meant to lead a woman; humbly aware and fully certain that he is nothing without her. And as they danced, everything fell away; all the years full of joy and sadness, all the good and bad they’d encountered. It all vanished, leaving only the two of them; stripped down to nothing but what they meant to each other. Face to face they gazed intently as age and time ceased to matter and the world stood still. Everyone in the room stood silent and watched; honored to be in their presence and grateful to see firsthand what the fruit of fifty years looked like. It was the purest expression of love I’d ever witnessed and I wanted the song to go on and on.

Unfortunately, I soon learned that life doesn’t work that way. A year later, the persistent cough we’d all noticed in Vermont turned out to be something more serious. My grandfather had cancer and died just before Thanksgiving in 1982. He was cremated and, instead of a formal funeral, we sat in a circle in the same living room where he played his beloved Dixieland and smoked his cigars, and talked about how much we’d miss him. With one look at my grandmother, I knew she would never get over it. There are some blows in life from which you don’t recover. And for that reason, it was the saddest day of my life. She is gone now, too. But when I think of Bea and Red, I picture them on that dance floor; spinning, smiling and deeply in love – forever.

(Excerpted from the story collection How To Raise A Good Kid, by Starbuck O’Dwyer)

Starbuck O’Dwyer, a native of Rochester, New York, is a writer whose work has been described as “comic genius” by Kirkus Reviews. His novel Red Meat Cures Cancer (Random House/Vintage) won two national writing awards for humor and was a featured selection of the 2007 One Book One Vancouver reading program. His new titles, Goliath Gets Up, a novel about four underdogs trying to rise up and do something meaningful with their lives, and How To Raise A Good Kid, a collection of stories about growing up, are now available in paperback and digitally at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.