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Laughter is the glue for a long marriage

By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D.

Anne Bancroft, originally known only as a dramatic actress, had a disastrous first marriage and divorce. After being in therapy for some time, she suddenly told her analyst, "Let's hurry it up. I've met the man I'm going to marry." He tried to understand her connection to wild and wacky comedian Mel Brooks, perhaps to dissuade her, and she said, "He makes me laugh."

I just came back from a short trip with my husband of 30 years and we still have the power to crack each other up. On one long car trip, we even played Twenty Questions of weird trip moments of the past. We never run out of material.

You've got to love a man who keeps tossing you softballs to hit out of the park and whose own quirky sense of the world is an endless source of amusement.

Real life is not a sitcom and it's not even fake Reality TV. There are many important and serious matters at hand every day. But beyond all the hard work and the daily routines, humor is the essential spice that makes it all worthwhile.

In one of our first major fights, my husband insisted on whatever it was. I countered with why I thought his position was wrong and mine was right. He reiterated his argument, albeit louder. I restated mine. Also louder. After his third time, I said (and this is why being married to a psychologist can be tricky), "We're getting nowhere but louder. Your argument starts with what you think is a valid assumption but I disagree. I think my assumption is correct but you disagree. Now what?"

My husband looked at me, leaped out of bed, and proclaimed, "You forgot one thing?" Oh and what would that be?

"I am," he said, "the King."

"Okay, King," I replied, "Heel."

We've solved a lot of petty issues with this royal treatment.

How and why does humor work when people are so angry? Because it can take some of the

air out of the hot balloon. If used judiciously and not maliciously, it acknowledges each person's position while attempting to put the conflict in perspective. When we merely get angry and loud, we're not listening to the other person; we're just gearing up for our next blast in the tirade.

If something gives us pause, especially laughter, we can regroup and try to be more rational. Marriage is not a sprint; it's a marathon. Obviously, a lot of people don't realize that so they don't pace themselves for decades of matrimony. When the bloom is off the rose, and roses don't actually last that long, people feel disillusioned. It doesn't feel like love any more. It feels like work.

Most couples, if they're honest, have thought about quitting more than a few times. The reasons we stay include religious or moral beliefs, financial concerns, maintaining the family, propriety, social position, and fear.

But if we've decided to stick it out, we might as well find ways to enjoy one another. Both shared and separate hobbies are good. An equitable division of responsibilities. A good mix of time together, time alone, time with friends and family. Emphasis on the couple even during the peak child-rearing years. Those precious progeny are very important but we need to invest in one another as well in the kids. They cannot be the only things holding the marriage together.

Since they do spend a lot of time with us, I do think that teaching children to use humor to defuse tension is also important. My daughters knew that if they made Mom laugh, they had a real shot at escaping punishment.

Traveling can be a particular marital or family sore spot because we're often tired and hungry and in places that, while exciting, are also unfamiliar. We have such limited resources (time, money, energy) that to spoil a vacation with discord does all of us a disservice. One way we install humor at the front end is I give my husband a nickname specific to our destination which will be a theme for the inevitable vicissitudes of the journey.

We just came back from Charleston, Beaufort, and Savannah. As we left on the trip, he asked if he would be Rhett Butler, Jefferson Davis, or Beauregard..." That's it!" I exclaimed.


"Beauregard?" he asked.

"Not Beauregard ... Colonel LowRegard." And with that nom de plume, we laughed our way through every adventure and misadventure, including his quest for book darts. Don't even ask.

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