A future edition or a subsequent volume in this missiological series needs to pay closer attention to such production deficiencies.

Gratitude must be expressed to the SVDs for sharing the fruits of their dialogue and mission efforts with the wider reading public.

James H. Kroeger, M.M.


The very title of the book is indicative of the author’s main message: The spouses must make the marriage work. Successful marriages do not just happen, by luck or chance. A romantic courtship, a superbly beautiful, very moving, carefully video-recorded wedding ceremony do not guarantee a successful marriage. The great number of unhappy and broken marriages, the almost world-wide legal recognition of single-parent families are proof that there is trouble in paradise. Many marriages obviously have not “worked”:

Reilly, with years of clinical experience in marriage and family therapy, puts the blame, in most cases, on the spouses. They failed to work at the single most important task of their life – their marriage.

To forestall undue guilt feelings it must be emphasized that some marriages could never work. From the start it was a case of “Mission Impossible.” It takes two normal, mature, responsible adults to make a marriage work. Marriage is not for children or disturbed people. Likewise a marriage entered into under great pressure, usually due to an unwanted pregnancy, can result in resentments and frustrations that sooner or later can poison the wells of love. They are marriages that never should have taken place. R. is not concerned with these which he calls “mortaly wounded” marriages. His focus is on those that are “critically wounded” but have great potential for growing into quality marriages. From his experience he believes that 75% of spouses who seek help belong to this group with such a potential. Quality marriage is his aim, not ideal marriages which he believes exist only “in the minds and hearts of our poets, songwriters, and storytellers” (p. 1).

R. divides his book into two parts. The first deals with the preconceptions and misconceptions that most people seem to have about marriage. The second part explores basic behavior patterns that spouses exhibit often leading to disappointments, hurts, quarrels, and even separations. To handle such problems, he spells out the basic skills, e.g., being a good listener, which couples need and can master without too much effort.
R. is a realist but not cynical, a reasonable optimist with a sense of humor. Couples meet and through a most mysterious chemistry fall in love with birds singing, bells ringing, stars shining. With an ideal, picture-perfect wedding they start life together on cloud 9. Then slowly, but surely, life returns to normal as they come down to earth, and the nitty-gritty, give and take of every day living. Soon they fall out of love, out of the emotional high octave love they have known so far. It is then that they must start working on their marriage as two responsible, loving, caring, sharing adults. It is a never-ending process as R. insists. The garden must be constantly cultivated or the weeds will soon start to spring up.

The mass media does little to foster the idea of such a mature, loving, caring sharing leading to a lifetime commitment in a very enriching and rewarding interpersonal relationship. Seldom does such an ideal flit across a TV or movie screen. So many of the modern generation are of the “me decade,” “I got to be me.” They are all too ready to abandon loyalty, fidelity, self-sacrifice, patience, prudence, perseverance for self-love and search for their real identity. The opposite, as R. notes, is “discipline, self-possession, emotional control, directed behavior, and of course, a set of values that include a commitment to grow a quality marriage, regardless of the sacrifices entailed” (p. 42). The reader cannot but notice how Christian and sound is the approach of R. Many a Catholic couple hears such thoughts from St. Paul (1 Cor. 13) in the liturgy on their wedding day.

A deep interpersonal relationship should be the goal of the spouses. It is very enriching for both and the reward is happiness, not an emotional high but a solid sense of satisfaction, a “spin-off of purposeful action” (p. 27). The goal setter, as R. notes, the doer, busy about his responsibilities, duties, interests, will find happiness which cannot be sought as a goal in itself, nor is it to be confused with immediate pleasure. Happiness comes from “a life of service, dedication, and devotion” (ibid.). The mature person knows that happiness comes and goes. It will return but we should not try to force it.

Unfortunately, many do not appreciate these aspects of happiness. From his years of experience, R. reduces the long list of reasons for broken marriages to one common denominator: Unhappiness. The realist will accept the fact that most of our life is lived in neutral. Not in high, much less overdrive, or in low. This neutral stage may not bring the spouses emotional, satisfying sensations, but neither does it cause the unsatisfying sensations that are called unhappiness. Working on enriching the conjugal relationship is the surest way to find solid, dependable happiness in one’s marriage.

As the primary cause of marital discord and strife, R. pinpoints value collision or competition. Competing couples are rivals in a competition, the very antithesis of the accommodation that love demands. In business and sports, winning or losing is essential but in marriage it is a disaster. No one likes to
lose! The contest could be about where to live, treatment of in-laws, the wife’s working or not working, financial arrangements, etc. But there should be no competing for a victory. The interpersonal relationship between the spouses must have top priority at all times. In marriage, “breaking even is winning!” (p. 110).

R. sees keeping silence, refusing to speak up to try to settle a conflict compatibly, as “severely self-defeating” in the long run (p. 117). Each spouse, as an effective listener, should be deeply convinced that the other has a right to think, feel and speak from his or her perspective. For R. there is no more effective tool for relieving the stress and anxiety of aloneness, for bridging the gap between the I and the thou, for maintaining loving contact with one another than the art of effective listening. “It is this communication still more than anything else that supports and enhances the us-ness in marriage” (p. 119). This emphasis of R. gives us much food for thought as we ponder the emergence of the feminist movement in the Asian cultural context.

R.’s overall approach is healthy and balanced in the crisp idiom of the modern spouses. Many a couple will see themselves at various stages of their growth in the many stories that R. shares from his own experiences as a marriage counsellor. He has a great sense of humor and notes that in any marriage “laughter is such a wonderful detergent” (p. 49). He observes that couples in quality marriages laugh a lot. They enjoy the little things in life.

There is no mystery involved in building a satisfying quality marriage built on a wholesome, enjoyable interpersonal relationship, but R. insists there is work involved mixed with a little magic here and there. But anything that is worth having is worth working for. Quality marriages are worth all the effort for the happiness that they bring to the spouses and to their children and, hopefully, to their children’s children.

Without stressing religion, R. has given us a christian approach to modern marriage. Occasionally his christian orientation breaks through as in his last few lines.

I’ll let you in on a secret. What this book is really doing is detailing and expanding a principle of human relationships proclaimed many centuries ago: ‘Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you’ (p. 161).

Gerald W. Healy, S.J.