



It may not take courage to make a promise, but it can take a lot of courage to keep a promise. This is especially true for the promises we make on our wedding day. I remember when I was an altar boy serving wedding Masses. I recall seeing the nervousness and sometimes outright terror on the faces of the brides and grooms who knelt before the altar. I used to wonder why they were so nervous. Then, years later, I got engaged to be married and got my own taste of that fear.

For me, it was never the problem that I didn't love the woman kneeling next to me before God, our families, and friends on our wedding day. The problem was that no human could offer us any guarantees as to what was ahead of us. In fact, our friend Father Rich Simon, who presided at our wedding, presented us with a list of possibilities that didn't exactly inspire confidence—sickness, poverty, or worse. But in our decades of marriage so far, what we've found is that, most often, the courage we've needed has been to respond to the more mundane and everyday challenges that marriage brings. And the more we've had the courage to address these challenges, the stronger, more satisfying, and even holier our marriage has been for us. Here are a few of those everyday challenges we faced. You'll surely find your own.

The courage to say what needs to be said

I suspect that most marriages aren't harmed as much by what is said as by what is left unsaid. Withholding our truth from one another can kill a marriage. This can range from failing to express one's love (in words, in deeds, in conscientious responses), to not standing up for oneself, to failing to speak up when something's wrong in your marriage but you don't want to rock the boat.

In my own marriage, I am extremely grateful (though usually not at the moment) for the times my wife was able to raise difficult issues I'd rather have kept swept under the rug. And I am glad I have found the courage to speak up about feelings and concerns I had that I knew it would be hard for her to hear. Showing courage in those moments inevitably increased our intimacy, our respect, and our love. Pay attention to what you resist saying. A friend of mine says that when it comes to knowing what inner work we should do, "resistance always points true north."

The courage to do your own inner work

What behaviors of yours are robbing your marriage? It may be busy-ness, alcohol, anger, compulsive spending, or a whole long list of other distractions and cheap substitutions for the mutual self-revelation that marriage calls us to. Over time,

any one of these can kill a marriage. If in your marriage you find yourself doing what you know you don't want and shouldn't do, have the courage to get help. It's funny that people show disdain for turning to a counselor or 12-Step group because they feel it shows weakness, when in truth picking up the phone to make a call for help takes more courage than most things we'll ever do. Be courageous! The courage to welcome and let go

One of the greatest challenges of marriage is to find gracious ways to welcome this other person into your life—to make their wants and wishes and needs as much a concern for you as your own wants and wishes and needs. Marriage is all about welcoming—our new spouse, their family and friends, their quirks and foibles, even their maddening habits.

We need to do more than tolerate, we are called to welcome and cherish all of who this person is. It takes courage to open up our lives and invite another in. It takes courage to overcome our own habits of selfishness. And when we do, we swiftly learn that we also need to exercise the Christian virtue of letting go—letting go of old habits and new expectations. And oddly enough, if we are to keep our marriage alive and growing, we need to let go of how our marriage was last year or how we think it ought to be and grow into what our marriage requires of us today. You will change and so will your spouse. Each day, in effect, you need to say, “Once again, I choose you.”

Earlier I wrote that no human being could guarantee what our future might hold, and that's true. But on your wedding day, God makes you a promise. God promises to be with you every step of the way—for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, and not only until death, but beyond. And in reality, that is the guarantee that has meant the most to Kathleen and me. It is in the context of this living faith that marriage finally makes sense. It is in the faithfulness of God that we have found our hope to remain faithful to one another. It is in the reality of God's constant love for us that we have discovered the depth and source of our love for each other, for our children, and for the world we are meant to serve. May you have courage—the courage to be truly married.