

Setting the Curve

It's strange, I know, but I've always kind of enjoyed test-taking. From second grade spelling to college blue book exams to magazine personality quizzes, to me there's always been something oddly energizing about pulling out a sharp #2 pencil, writing down what I think I know, and seeing how it stacks up. Will I get a gold star for my spelling? A "Nicely argued" comment on my blue book essay? A "You're the life of the party" assessment of my personality?

So when Jeff and I walked into the parish office to take our pre-marital inventory several months before our wedding date, I had my sharpened pencil in my purse and my thinking cap on. This was a test I was going to get an "A" on, and, if I had anything to do with it, so was Jeff.

I carefully considered the dozens of questions on the inventory, painstakingly filled in the bubbles, went back and used my eraser a couple of times, and confidently turned in my answer sheet. We'd get our

results at our next pre-Cana meeting, and Father Dalbey suggested we not talk about the test until then.

"Who doesn't talk about a test and compare answers after they take it?" I thought. Nobody I knew, except, it turns out, my husband-to-be. As Jeff drove me home, I tried to ply his answers out of him. No such luck. "You'll find out next week," said the Patient One. "Next week? There's no reason for me to wait for an answer, when you can tell me now," said the Impatient One. Perhaps that should have been my first clue that the inventory might find an area or two where we weren't quite as in synch as I thought.

Walking into Father Dalbey's office the following Thursday night, I could see he had our test results on his desk. He ticked off all the categories where the inventory indicated we showed mutual agreement. "A long list," I thought. "I knew we'd score high in compatibility." But Father Dalbey wasn't done. "I do have some concerns," he said. "Your answers on finances and raising children show areas of potential disagreement."

Jeff says you can always tell what I'm thinking by the look on my face, which I guess is why Father Dalbey was quick to reassure me that the operative word was "potential" not "disagreement." He explained that uncovering those potential problem areas before you're married gives you valuable information to build your marriage on.

"Hmmm," I thought. "It doesn't sound like we were going to get a star on the pre-marital inventory."

The drive home that Thursday night was a little quieter. It wasn't so much the money and parenting discussion that had me worried; what was more troubling to me was why we had different ideas about them in the first place.

Jeff grew up with his mom and dad and eight brothers and sisters in a small town with aunts and uncles and grandparents nearby. My mom raised three kids on her own in the suburbs with just a handful of friends she could depend on. There was no doubt that my mom had as much love as two parents, but there was no partner for her to rely on and no marriage for us to learn from.

How could I get an "A" in marriage without having seen one work? The Patient One said not to worry; he was confident that our different backgrounds wouldn't be a stumbling block.

But that wasn't really something I wanted to leave to chance. So like any diligent test-taker, I studied. I read articles on compatibility and checked out books on bridging differences. I read the advice of relationship experts in brides' magazines, and listened to Phil Donahue talk about making marriage work. Subsequent pre-Cana meetings offered some ideas, too. But the best advice came when I wasn't looking.

Jeff and I had traveled to his hometown one weekend to do some wedding planning. The big old house was a bustling place, with four kids still at home, grandchildren visiting, and lots of family activities. You

could always count on laughter, noise, even some chaos, depending on who happened to be home when you arrived. You could also count on a warm welcome. My soon-to-be in-laws were happiest when all their people were around, but they could also make you feel like you were the most important person in a crowded room.

When we arrived that Saturday, true to form, they were on the porch to greet us before we even got out of the car. "I love that I always know what to expect from these two," I thought to myself. A warm welcome, hot dogs for Saturday lunch, hamburgers for Saturday dinner, some Cardinal talk with Chuck, a competitive game of cards with Harriett, and lots of laughs.

Later in the afternoon, Chuck was sitting on the bench next to the long picnic-type table (the only practical way to feed a family of 11). He had a large pot that he was filling with potato after potato. It would have taken me hours to peel that whole bag, but Chuck was a peeling pro. While he worked on dinner, Harriett was taking on a different task. A door knob needed repair, and she was using her handy screwdriver to fix it. She was a pro, too.

It was a scene I hadn't expected, remembering the traditional division of duties I often saw between husbands and wives of the 60's and 70's in my friends' homes and on TV. I mean, the Brady Bunch parents had some pretty defined roles; plus, they had Alice.

After dinner, I asked Harriett about it. "Marriage can't be about one job being only yours and one job being

only his,” she told me. “When you see something that needs to be done, you do it. And you trust that the other person will do the same for you.”

Listen, act, and trust. That was her advice. Maybe I didn’t have an example of a strong marriage when I was growing up, but God was making sure that what I missed as a child I would witness as an adult.

That was a lot more reassuring than a gold star. I put away my research and my worries about Father Dalbey’s “I do have some concerns” comment. Instead, I decided to view the rest of pre-Cana as a workshop rather than a test—an opportunity to listen and learn instead of being quick with an answer.

The months of marriage preparation flew by. We went back to Jeff’s hometown for our wedding. Surrounded by his large family, my small one, and hundreds of friends, I excitedly walked down the aisle confident that with Chuck and Harriett’s example, Jeff’s patience, and God’s grace, we’d build our own marriage by listening, acting, and trusting. “No worries,” I thought. “We’ll work through the differences. We’ll be just fine.”

I made my way to the altar with my mom and my brother, kissed them both, and grabbed Jeff’s hand. The priest, a cousin of Jeff’s, welcomed everyone and then cleared his throat. “I do have some concerns about this marriage,” Father Ryan said. “What? Not this priest, too,” I thought. “These two families have some pretty dramatic differences,” he continued.

Jeff and I looked at each other and then at Father Ryan. “On one side, we have Lisa’s family. They’re Cub fans,” he said with a grin. “On the other side, we have Jeff’s family. They’re Cardinal fans. That is not a match made in heaven.”

I could hear Chuck and Harriett laugh in the front row. Jeff smiled and squeezed my hand. “Listen, act, and trust,” I could hear my mother-in-law saying. “Oh yeah, and don’t forget to laugh.”

—Lisa (and Jeff)

Jeff and Lisa had the privilege of watching Jeff’s parents celebrate 54 years together. Seeing it helps you know it’s possible. Chuck and Harriett might not have gotten every answer right, but on the test of marriage they definitely set the curve.