

# BUILD YOUR MARRIAGE

By Carri Taylor

For me, the picture says it all. This is a visual metaphor for the difference between a Wedding and a Marriage. In the photo, first you see the front of the house tastefully done — exterior details completed and landscaped. Then behind the finished facade, you view the remainder of the house, still under construction. The beautiful front represents the Wedding. The rest being built signifies the Marriage.



Photo by John Yu

Paul notes, however, that couples give little attention to planning for the marriage itself, and she says,

and so on. The homeowners-to-be determine if they have the resources to pull this off.

In building a house, if a couple can gather the resources, and the plans are agreed upon, they hire skilled people to carry out the construction process. Even if one or both of the partners have some of the skills to do the building themselves

(the do-it-yourselfers), they will more than likely depend on other specialists to come alongside. In building a couple relationship, similar principles apply.

I have often thought; what would happen if a couple spent as much time, money, and energy planning for and investing in their Marriage, as they do on their Wedding?

*“The most common time for a marriage to end in divorce is in the first five years. And of those early divorces, about one-quarter end within two years.”*

In her book *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, Pamela Paul, an editor at American Demographics, says: *“Weddings have morphed into massive extravaganzas, costing from \$20,000 on up. . . Couples devote 1 1/2 years to planning the wedding. They often choose a wedding planner. . . A recent issue of Bride’s magazine was the largest consumer magazine ever. It weighed in at 4.9 pounds.”*

Think about how it goes if you build a new home. First comes the dream. The ideas of what this will look like start in the mind, move into a discussion, and finally get translated to paper. Since a house is very tangible and takes specific skills to bring it into existence, many people hire professionals — an architect and a builder. Then the plans get discussed, re-discussed and finalized. This is a valuable process to find out how realistic the ideas and desires for the house are. Also, the realities surface regarding time, materials, costs,

Whether for a house or a marriage, Murphy’s law states (my translation) that plans will get changed and rearranged to accommodate new realities not foreseen ahead of time. Issues arise of differences in temperament (flexibility vs. rigidity, for example), of disappointments that can easily lead to disagreements or arguments (showing patterns of handling conflicts), and of abilities (or lack) to collaborate and proceed (get to a win-win resolution). These bring to light a few of the construction skills needed to build the Marriage.

I haven't met many people who would move into a house before it is completed and able to protect the people or possessions who will inhabit the structure. In fact, the law requires permits, licenses, and inspections along the way — for our own protection.

What about Marriage? A relationship is not tangible like a house, yet it is a psychological, emotional and spiritual structure that people enter, anticipating it to be a safe haven to protect them. Most couples do not spend much time preparing for and designing their relationship before the Wedding. Nor do they put many resources into “relationship professionals” ahead of the event. But, after they have gone flying into it without proper preparation, they can face enormous costs when their faulty Marriage structure fails to protect them. They expect it to do things for them that they have not bothered exploring, outlining, or discussing.

### **Focus on the Front**

What if, for a new house, a couple spent all their time, money and energy on the front of it — on the walkway, the landscaping, the front entrance, front windows, and siding or paint? That's how it is for the Wedding. Upon arriving, all the guests are in awe of the beauty, the music, and they are caught up in the promise that the lovely facade holds. As the couple enters the front yard . . . proceeds on the walkway through the grandeur of the lush landscaping . . . approaches the stately double-door entry . . . then passes through the front door of the Wedding to enter the Marriage, the assumption

and hope are that the Marriage will be as grand as the Wedding.

Once the couple walks through that front door into the Marriage, sooner or later they discover that what they have built to this point seems more like a Hollywood set for a home — beautiful on approach but underneath only lean-tos are holding it up — than it does a real home. Things look great for the camera at the Wedding, but they are inadequate to support the Marriage. The plans work for the dialogue while shooting the scene, but they do not fit when the couple leaves the set (the Wedding).

Who realized how much would be needed to put this Marriage together? The dream resides inside each of the partner's heads, but without the required preparation, the relationship has a good chance of disintegrating, according to divorce statistics. Taking time to look at the foundational issues (that will hold up the Marriage) and the various rooms (idiosyncrasies of each partner) is important at the start.

### **Unpack Your Bags**

Now what? Out come the bags the couple brought with them. As the unpacking begins, here comes the “stuff” they brought. This includes the belongings they thought they left behind — the “red-flagged items” that were overlooked (not wanting to see reality clearly because it might spoil the dream), or rationalized (he or she will change later), or denied (saw it, but gave it a different spin). The unpacking also includes articles they swore they would never bring with them — the modeling of their

parents. They even remember telling themselves they would never be like their parents.

Not all the bags hold negative contents. Both partners may be unpacking some very good materials with which to build this new home. But those items seem to get lost as the rest of the stuff becomes the focus and starts taking more space.

As the couple unpacks, they do not find the needed tools (communication and conflict resolution skills), or they become aware of how inadequate their tools are. How can people who love each other have so many misunderstandings? How do they fix their disagreements? Since these tools are the only ones they possess at the time, necessity forces their use as they continue construction on the house.

After a while they realize they are making a mess rather than building the home of their dreams. Then the blame-game begins. It is so easy to see the other person's negative baggage and inadequate tools, but not their own.

Wounds are inflicted — hopefully not at a physical level, but at an emotional and psychological level, for sure. The lovers begin the process of becoming enemies. This home not only doesn't protect them from the elements, it isn't even a safe place to be with each other.

### **Some Leave**

For some couples, one or both may decide to leave. The discouragement and despair can be overwhelming and the mess too large to want to live in, live through, and

clean up. Pain surrounds them and things seemed better before the Marriage took place. Many walk and blame, leaving the unfinished place for others to live in and clean up. If children are involved by now, the broken pieces will become part of the baggage the couple passes on to them to carry through life.

Many in the blame mode believe that life with another person will make the difference. This may be true as long as they do not bring the same person — themselves (their previous beliefs and attitudes) — to the new relationship. In simple terms, changing partners will not solve the problem. The new partner may have different ideas and different tools (skills), but is that person any better at building a house (Marriage)? Have both learned to use relationship tools (skills)? Changing themselves makes the difference. Taking responsibility for one's own part of the adventure is essential.

### **Keeping Up the Front**

For others, this may be the time they decide (not necessarily consciously) to live in the mess and keep it under cover the best they can —unwilling to admit their short-sightedness and failures — too embarrassed to ask for help. All energy continues to be spent on the front yard and facade of the home; keeping it well groomed and painted so it looks well maintained. The amazing thing about this choice is: even though the couple believes that their front has hidden the rest of the house behind them, most people see through it pretty clearly, like the picture at the beginning.

### **Another Way**

At any point, a couple can stop, take stock, and determine to get the tools to build or re-model what they have put together thus far. For couples who have not yet reached the front door (the Wedding), they have a great chance of doing a superb job, if they get the right help from a relationship professional before they enter.

Others, already through the door, decide to remodel and rebuild, hopefully correctly this time. This is definitely a fine way to proceed, but danger can lie ahead with this choice without good help from architectural and building specialists. As in any remodel, one correction can lead to another and another and another. As the issues are uncovered, the dry rot, termites, lack of insulation, roof leaks, plumbing failures, and so on, begin to surface. The unspoken or even spoken agenda may be to point out how the other has done it wrong. The realization that this is going to be longer, harder, and more expensive can increase the discouragement level.

What is needed? It takes personal responsibility instead of blame, acknowledgment that they made the mess together, willingness to invest the time, energy and finances necessary to accomplish the goal. What goal? What kind of a house (Marriage) does the couple want to live in anyway? Has a realistic design for this Marriage ever been discussed? What resources do they bring? What tools do they require to do it right? Who would be the one to help?

If the couple determines to work together designing or redesigning

their relationship, they will have to identify the cost and determine their priorities. I would venture to say that in most cases, if they are willing to invest as much money, time and energy on their Marriage as they do (or did) on their Wedding, there will be hope. It may not even take as much. But, for the Marriage to move forward and the relationship to receive nourishment, both partners must commit to the process.

### **COUPLE COMMUNICATION**

How do they begin? One place to start is to find a Certified COUPLE COMMUNICATION Instructor. This is someone who is trained in teaching couples how to use tools — communication and conflict resolution skills — which apply to building, maintaining, and repairing the relationship. The instructor works with couples who anticipate Marriage or who already are Married and contracts with them for building their relationship.

Many COUPLE COMMUNICATION Instructors also use instruments to help the partners discover the areas of strength, which are resources, and the places that need attention in the relationship. Administering and interpreting a relationship assessment, such as the PREPARE (before Marriage) or ENRICH (after Marriage) Inventory can be very valuable to a couple. Another option for couples prior to Marriage is to use the RELATE instrument.

These assessments help the partners see who they are and the contexts from which they each have come that will impact the home they are planning together. The couple learns the strengths and the

growth areas (places that may take special building tools) of their relationship.

However, if a couple only discovers the items in their bags and the kind of house they desire (from an assessment and discussion of it) without investing in the new tools (communication and conflict resolution skills), their front door may become a revolving door. The ideal approach is to gain tools to build the house that fits their particular situation.

### Goals

What can happen when a couple finds a Certified COUPLE COMMUNICATION Instructor? For the couples who work with me, the following items represent the goals:

1. They each take a good look at the items they brought themselves — negative and positive.
2. They each develop an understanding of themselves as individuals in a new way.
3. They each begin understanding and appreciating the other in a new way.
4. They each learn communication skills that enable them to deliver themselves to one another in clearer and more loving ways.
5. They also learn communication skills to hear one another in a new manner.
6. They learn together how to clean up messes as they come up (resolve conflicts in a collaborative manner) so they can live “clear.” What does that mean? The answer is that when any static or irritation occurs, they know how to develop an action plan to tune in to one another and move forward proactively.

The relational spills get cleaned up before dry rot sets in.

7. They design a maintenance plan — a whole new way to live together — a Marriage lifestyle that keeps the relationship fresh.

### Other Certified COUPLE

COMMUNICATION Instructors may begin with the second point above, unless they offer a relationship assessment instrument. Each of them, however, helps the couple gain the tools to make a well-constructed home. This is a place in which a couple will enjoy living.

In my experience, as a couple commits to learning how to use new tools and build or remodel their Marriage, new results begin coming in quite quickly.

Satisfaction in the relationship develops, and the partners find that the house they construct together is the home where they want to be.

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Quotes from:

*The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony*, by Pamela Paul, Villard Books Division of Random House, New York 2002

### Author of “Build Your Marriage,” Carri Taylor, says:

On a personal note: I am married to a man who is very different from me in many ways. We could easily drive each other nuts and on a few occasions we have done just that. The elements that I believe make our Marriage a “nice place to live in” are: honor and respect for one another, appreciation for our differences, a desire to communicate clearly, listen intently, and stay “clear.” My husband is not perfect, nor am I. Yet I do believe he is perfect for me as I am for him. We bring to each

other’s lives the elements that challenge us to grow and expand ourselves. My hope for you is that you will tackle building or remodeling your Marriage so your relationship will be a “safe home.”

Carri Taylor and her husband, Gordon, are each Certified COUPLE COMMUNICATION and PREPARE/ENRICH instructors working in Los Angeles and Orange County, California. To find them or another instructor, visit:

[www.couplecommunication.com](http://www.couplecommunication.com) and then go to “Instructors Near You.” Once there, click on your state. Or call 800-328-5099 and ask for a brochure and referral to an instructor in your area.

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