

Marriage Is a Loaded Word



By Kenneth Weene, PhD.

We got engaged on April Fool's day. That was a propitious start. At least she couldn't claim that I didn't have a sense of humor about the whole thing. Prior to that, I'd only agreed to getting engaged-to-get-engaged one evening at the restaurant called Big Chicken Fry (honest).

Before you get the wrong idea, I loved her, I was committed to her. In my head we were going to grow old together. My concern was the word – marriage.

I've always been about words; not just what they mean, but what they imply. Throughout my career as a therapist, my concern about the word "marriage" has been borne out. The word creates expectations. It changes and codifies roles. It imposes mental burdens where before there were none.

To come to terms with these burdens, some couples live together before marriage. They think it will give them a good sense of what their lives will be like after they tie the knot. If they're satisfied, they then marry. Then, things immediately go downhill. Celebrity couples are no exception.

David Arquette and Courtney Cox is one couple that comes to mind; Lisa Bonet and Lenny Kravitz is another.

"What happened?" they ask me, their new marriage counselor.

It just took that one word. Suddenly the humor and spontaneity was gone. In its place were those burdens and those darn expectations. It started in the little things: "Why isn't my laundry done?" "Didn't you take the garbage out?" It then escalated: "Why do you need so much cash in your pocket?" "Whose parents are we visiting for Christmas?" And

then it reached fever pitch: “Shouldn’t we start thinking about kids?”

Sadly, having children often creates the expectation of marriage, an expectation that is often a mistake. Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz obviously shouldn’t have married, as they’re now getting a divorce. To their credit, Naomi Watts and Liev Schreiber have children and haven’t changed their marital status. They seem happy to this day.

And then there’s the expectation that marriage is forever. Forever is such a long time! (My approach was to consider it a three-year contract with option to renew.) That expectation leads to one of the easiest mistakes to make, which is investing in one member of the couple. Don’t put your spouse through school. There, I’ve said it. That’s a prescription for the spouse’s mid-life crisis. Marriage is too fraught with obligation as it is. Don’t add more.

“Marriage” is a word loaded with meaning and danger. Maybe that’s why some couples never marry. Oprah Winfrey and Stedman Graham lived together for many years without calling it marriage. Yet, it can be wonderful. My engagement was 43 years ago, and my wife and I are still together and in love to this day. The key is to rethink it by giving the word meaning with which you can live comfortably. For me, it’s all about humor, symmetry, and equality – not responsibility, obligation and expectation.

A New Englander by upbringing and inclination, Kenneth Weene is a teacher, psychologist, and pastoral counselor by education. He is a writer by passion. A poet and fiction writer, Ken’s novels, Widow’s Walk (2009), and Memoirs From the Asylum (2010), are both published by All Things That Matter Press.