

Fixing the Institution of Marriage

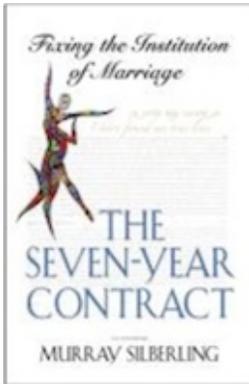


אני שמחה כי מצאתי את אהבי
I have found my true love

THE SEVEN-YEAR CONTRACT

Cover Art by Raeh Rudin

MURRAY SILBERLING



Half of marriages end in divorce, and those who remain together are not better off. Look around you and ask, "Is this marriage appealing to me?" We can do much better at marriage, and that belief is the foundation for this book. The Seven Year Contract takes a radical, proactive, and innovative approach to renewing and revitalizing marriage. It will teach you how to contract intentional communication and renewal every seven years.

The Seven Year Contract

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The Seven Year Contract
Fixing the Institution of Marriage

Murray Silberling

The Seven Year Contract

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Introduction

There's a good reason why so many young people today are opting out of marriage (around 50% of 20-30 year olds, according to some reports). It's because the institution is broken. People can't trust it. They can't trust one another not to have the kinds of changes that bring an end to marriage. The abiding form of the institution—for better or worse, till death do us part—has not proven to be a reality. Chances are that marriage is not going to be for better *or* worse, but simply the latter, so why take the chance?

Half of marriages end in divorce, but the news isn't necessarily better for those who stick together. Look around you. Take note of every marriage you come into contact with and ask, "Is this marriage appealing to me or the kind I would want to have?" How often do you say yes?

I would estimate that 30% of intact marriages could be defined as failed marriages. The partners decide to stay together for the children or for other reasons, even though their relationship is more platonic or abusive than a happy one. Who, then, wants to enter into a lifelong commitment—one with serious emotional, financial, and legal ramifications—when the failure rate is so high? Is there any doubt as to why increasing numbers of young people don't see marriage in their future?

Even religious people are not having better luck staying together. The divorce rate is just as high among rabbis, pastors, and other clergy of all ages. They, too, often realize they're staying together simply for their ministry or congregation more than anything else.

Today, 39% of Americans say marriage is obsolete and there's a lot of truth to that viewpoint. The old model of marriage, where the main goal was raising children, was the

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product of old agrarian societies. Today, the concept of a family doesn't have to include a husband and wife. Single parents abound. More and more people remain unmarried. Many different kinds of family structures are accepted in today's society, and these new choices have changed the parameters of marriage.

And yet, despite these changes, most people who have never married say they would like to marry someday (including many who say that marriage is obsolete). And marriage, when it does work, can be one of the most fulfilling experiences in life.

I was married for 32 years, have two happily married sons and four darling grandchildren. Although I have been thoroughly blessed in so many ways, I have also gone through the ups and downs of a long-term marriage and the pain of a divorce, and I have learned many things.

After my first marriage ended, I went through an intensely introspective and life-changing period of reflection. I wanted to understand what happened and learn valuable lessons from the pain, turmoil, and angst. When the smoke finally cleared, I felt that I had gained new insights into marriage and I wanted to write this book. I was ready to put together all I had learned in a new and fresh way. I present my ideas to you, not as one who knows all the answers, but to share my hard-earned thoughts about the most important institution in our society. I want to be honest with you about marriage and ask that you be honest with yourself on this subject, whether you're planning to get married, have been married a few years, or are in the home stretch of a long-term marriage.

The Seven Year Contract will help you reassess, revitalize, and renew your marriage, through a process that will become almost second nature to you. The process I describe will not instantly change your life or marriage, but I hope it will give

you ways to journey through life and relationships with greater joy, freedom, love, and satisfaction.

Couples can use the tools described in this book to bring problems out into the open and deal with them proactively and effectively, so they never get to a place of feeling helpless, stuck, and frustrated. This is a process you can put in place *before* you ever get to the point of seeking counseling, which for many couples is a final act of desperation. By the time most couples seek counseling, they're already looking at separation and divorce. *The Seven Year Contract* will help you address patterns in your marriage before they become too difficult to handle.

A Preventative Approach

A recent transformation in the health care field, designed to fix that broken system, provides the model and blueprint for *The Seven Year Contract*.

In the old model, depicted by a pyramid structure, emphasis was placed on “acute care” and took up the largest segment at the bottom of the pyramid—the most money, time, and resources. The smallest segment at the top of the pyramid was “preventative medicine and wellness,” which was allocated the smallest amount of time, money, and resources. The old health care model devoted most of its efforts to *treating* trauma and acute sickness, and very little time or effort to *preventing* illness and keeping us healthy.

The new wellness health care model turns the pyramid upside down and reverses priorities. More time, money, and resources are spent on preventative medicine before the acute stages of illness develop. The long-term goal is to promote and maintain as much health and wellness as possible, minimizing

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the need for acute care, while saving money and enhancing our quality of health.

Marriage is broken because we're stuck in the old model of treating illness. We blindly say "I do," hoping everything will work out. If it doesn't, we'll turn to acute care if and when we need it. But by the time we go to the counselor or therapist, there have been too many years of pain, infection, and disease (if I may continue the metaphor) to restore the patients to health. Too many angry words have been spoken, and feelings of frustration have been endured for too long.

The Seven Year Contract presents a radical and innovative framework for fostering and maintaining health in marriages. My goal is to start couples on the road to health and happiness *before* they get married, and to show them tools and procedures for dealing with all the vicissitudes of marriage in a preventative mode. After you get married, my goal is to help you identify and solve problems *as they arise*, a renewal process that will become a natural part of your relationship and that will keep the marriage healthy in a proactive way.

Viewing Marriage in Seven-Year Cycles

Why do I look at marriage in terms of seven-year intervals? Because every seven years has a unique effect on the relationship, with particular stresses and challenges:

Years 1-7: Getting to know each other and having babies.

Years 8-14: Young kids, soccer moms and dads, and the anxieties of finances.

Years 15-21: The tension of an alien teenager in your house.

Years 22-28: The kids are gone, leaving behind an empty nest.

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Years 29-35: Change of life and mid-life crises.

Years 36-42: Retirement, loss of career identity, and the stresses of aging.

Psychologists note that most marriages will start to have problems after seven years. There really is some truth to “The Seven Year Itch,” as popularized in the 1955 movie with Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell. Research confirms that first marriages start falling apart after seven years.

If you get through those first seven years, every seven-year period that follows is a critical time of unique challenges. If you commit to renewing your marriage every seven years, you’ll never get stuck in a place where you can’t communicate or where you just accept the status quo, until the marriage finally blows up and disintegrates. You will be able to maintain the health and wellness of a self-renewing relationship.

Although I look at marriage in seven-year periods, any couple can use this book at any stage in their marriage. While the issues you negotiate may vary, the process is the same, whether you got married at age 20, 40, or 60.

You’ll experience total re-negotiation, re-communication, and renewal for every seven-year period you’re together. It will be like getting married again for the first time. You’ll have the chance to discuss all the things that bother you, the way you feel, and the way your partner makes you feel. Every seven years you’ll decide if you’re going to stay married. And if the answer is yes, you’ll know why you’re staying together, what it looks like, and what changes need to happen to make the marriage happier, healthier, and more fulfilling for the both of you.

Purposeful and Intentional Renewal

The Seven Year Contract is really a how-to book that requires you to ask some hard questions. What does it really mean to be married? Why do people want to stay married? How can you renew a faltering marriage? When is it possible and when is it not?

The foundation of this book is teaching you to have an ongoing discussion about what you really want. Do you want the marriage to go on? Do you value it enough to work through the problems and fight for the relationship? Do you really love your partner, at least in the sense that you want to be with and for that person? And if you conclude that, with all its drawbacks and pitfalls, you still want to be in the marriage, that conviction gives you a renewed strength and ability to work together to make it better.

The Seven Year Contract teaches you how to purposefully and intentionally work on renewing your marriage (or ending it in a conscious, non-destructive way, if that is the outcome of your process). It will help you make sure that you're both really committed to the marriage and want to move forward. It will help you recognize stumbling blocks, the places where you're stuck, the areas that are painful and difficult to work through together, and your differences as well as similarities. You will be able to control and direct the growth of your marriage, just as a skilled gardener prunes a tree to make it expand and flourish in certain directions and not in others.

The Seven Year Contract will enable your marriage to continually grow and evolve, but you need to be creative and diligent in applying the negotiation process to your marriage. If you're reading this book, you're looking to build something positive and renewing into your relationship. You're willing to take creative steps to do so. But it requires real strength and

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sincerity to commit to taking those steps, wherever they might lead you.

I hope you use the radical, pro-active, and preventative approaches in this book to create a happy and fulfilling marriage for both partners.

Murray Silberling
Northridge, California
July 1, 2013

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Chapter One

Marriage is Broken (And Band-Aids Won't Fix It)

How do we know that marriage is broken? Statistics tell part of the story—the number of divorces, the number of singles not getting married.

Consider these trends:

--Among those ages 25 to 29, the never-marrieds increased from 27% in 1986 to 47% in 2009.

--In 1960, 65.9% of women were married; by 2009, the percentage had fallen to 50.6%.

--According to census data, barely half of adults ages 18 and older are married— 51% in 2010, compared with 72% in 1960. This decline is especially notable for young adults: 20% of 18-to-29-year-olds were married in 2010, compared with 59% in 1960.

--The age at which men and women marry for the first time continues to rise. In 2011, the median age at first marriage was an estimated 28.7 for men and 26.5 for women. That means half of men don't marry until about age 29, and half of women don't marry until about age 27. In 1960, the median age at first marriage for both men and women was the early 20s.

The facts speak for themselves. Fewer people are getting married. For those who do marry, the odds of staying together do not appear to be very good, no matter the size of the wedding or how many bridesmaids or groomsmen participate. Half of marriages end in divorce, whether religious or secular.

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While statistics tell part of the story, we also know marriage is broken in a much more visceral, gut level way.

My first wife and I were at a local restaurant one Valentine's Day, celebrating our love, passion, and commitment. As we looked around the room during our dinner, we noticed something peculiar. Almost every couple sat in awkward silence. The tension in the room was palpable. Were they so familiar with each other that they didn't need to verbally communicate? Had everything between them already been said? Had their desire to know one another been satiated?

Only a few years later I would find myself in the same situation, dreading St. Valentine's Day. It's not a happy place to be.

Unprepared for Change

Ending up in that situation was the furthest thing from my mind when I got married at age 26. I married my soul mate and best friend. We had known each other for a long time and were very much in love. We felt our union was "meant to be," that someone of higher authority had brought us together for a significant purpose. Two children and twenty years later I still felt that way, and joyously lived in my dream world of fulfillment.

And yet my marriage ended, and not because I married the wrong person. She was the right person—for 20 years she was the best person in the world. But people change.

For example, you think Jack is a great husband, but if Jack goes through a midlife crisis and falls into a depression, his whole personality will change. That's what depression does to a person. Your marriage begins to flounder and Jack doesn't want to work on it. He wants to move out and "find himself." You sit there asking yourself: "What happened to our

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marriage? Everything seemed so perfect. Why can't Jack find himself and stay married to me?"

He simply can't do it—not when he's going through a deep depression. He's too lost and feels too badly about himself. Because of his mid-life crisis, there have been major changes in Jack's personality, needs, values, and desires.

Many changes in our lives take place quietly and we tend to take them in stride, until we realize their impact on our marriages. By then, the situation is usually dire and we are already in need of help. We are often oblivious to periods of transition in our lives. What seems like a normal transition to the husband may have severe consequences for the wife. We're often not cognizant of the sub-conscious effects of change. If things get bad, we think we'll go see a counselor, but the odds for success are not very good. In my experience, counseling has about a 15% chance of saving a marriage.

Couples often tell me that they feel like they have been married to several different spouses. No, they are not bigamists, but the many changes in their partners, over time, made them feel like that. We're not in control of how our partners might change. We can only experience, feel, and react to those changes. Because of change, every relationship finds itself in constant movement.

John and Patricia were very typical of the problems that often bring disturbance in a marriage over time. John has spent 14 years becoming engrossed in the academic world as a professor of Anthropology. Patricia was never comfortable with the world of academia, and found that their worlds had become so very different. She felt that he was no longer the man that she had married so many years before. It wasn't that he went from "good" to "bad." Rather, his world and her world were no longer compatible. They tried to fix what was broken, but despite many talks, counseling sessions, and attempts to

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“work harder” on their partnership, they finally came to the conclusion that they were putting bandages on mortal wounds. The pain, frustration, anger, and self-loathing were more than the two of them could bear. They both suffered in silence. Not even their children suspected what they were dealing with. Their painful impasse was completely hidden from family, friends, and community.

Every relationship will come to a place of major change. Or, to put it another way, every relationship *as we once knew it* comes to an end. It will always come to that place of change and you have to be prepared to deal with it. You then have choices—remain stuck, end the relationship, or renew it.

The more you can use the Seven Year Contract to assess and engage change in your marriage, the more capable you will be to weather the changes, no matter how radical they may be.

Examining Our Marriage Assumptions

Years ago, our expectations for marriage were quite different. Social boundaries kept people together. You either worked on your problems or resigned yourself to living with marital dysfunction. You didn’t have the option of asking: do I want to be married to this person? You already answered that question when you said, “I do.”

Those days are long gone. We are living in a world of exponential change, experiencing the loss of significant relationships and the obliteration of family ties. The frenetic nature of the world today, our busy and fragmented lives, changing gender roles, the pressure to survive financially, and our geographic and career transience have had a huge impact on what we want from marriage and from life.

Not too long ago women weren’t part of the workplace, had few rights, and had to be satisfied with the status quo. I

remember talking once with my mother about married life. She replied, “You do what you have to do.” Not quite a ringing endorsement of matrimony. Her expectations were that the man made money and provided for her, and that was about it. Today, the expectations are a lot higher, as they should be. The question is: can these expectations be met, and, if so, how?

If we accept the premise that marriage is broken, then we have to take a hard look at what a “successful” marriage really is.

Redefining the “Successful” Marriage

As a rabbi and marriage counselor for over 38 years, I have worked with couples on all aspects of marriage—pre-marriage counseling, broken marriages, divorce, and everything in between. I’ve seen enough problems to add the word “marriage” to the expletive list. As I struggled with my first marriage, I began to assess all the marriages that I knew, to see if they were really “successful” in my eyes. I evaluated what I saw through the criteria of love, respect, honest communication, and personal growth. With each marriage I encountered, I asked myself: would I want a marriage like this? Most of the time the answer was no.

What disturbed me was the emphasis that married people put upon their vows—for better or worse, in sickness and health. The value of marriage is too often derived from the partners sticking together, not from the quality of the partnership. No matter that they hardly speak unless necessary, or that the marriage is abusive or destructive for one or both partners. I even know a couple who haven’t lived in the same country for decades, but stay married to maintain a ministry and feel good about themselves.

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A marriage is not successful because it's still intact. The majority of the marriages I observed were either stuck in a polite power struggle or broken beyond repair. As in my first marriage, we all began with the naïve, idealistic view that we were different than other couples and would only have to "work on it" to make the marriage continually get better. But what I observed told another story.

The Seven Year Itch

As a marriage counselor, I discovered something valid about "The Seven Year Itch," popularized by the 1955 Billy Wilder movie with Marilyn Monroe and Tom Ewell. Why do most marriages face problems after seven years?

One of the biggest blind spots for young couples is the assumption that love and camaraderie will always keep growing. Newlyweds assume that any changes that take place in their lives will always be for the better. Generally speaking, the marriage commitment made on that glorious wedding day goes through a very lovely honeymoon for about three or four years. But once the kids come along you begin to make choices that put them first and the relationship between husband and wife way down on the priority list. Even without children, most marriages begin to bog down a bit after the first few years. After a few more years of trying to "figure out" how to fix things, we come to the understanding that something is truly broken. By the seventh year, we find our marriage "stuck" and we don't know how to get it unstuck. We assumed the marriage wouldn't change, or at least not for *worse*. We have a hard time accepting the reality that change is a constant force in people and in marriages, and presents real pitfalls.

Any time you feel like you're in a helpless situation that can't be changed, you're stuck. My first wife and I racked our

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brains trying to negotiate, resolve our differences, and compromise. When we realized we couldn't do that, it was over. You get to the place where you intuitively know that further changes are impossible.

Usually one of the partners will ask the question, "What can I do?" That simple question is a huge part of the renewal process—giving your partner the freedom to tell you what he or she needs in order to continue the relationship. If your partner can answer that question (and if you can ask it in the first place), then you have common ground to negotiate and come together. You no longer have to hide from the issues that are keeping you apart. You no longer have to use your differences as a weapon to beat the other person to death. The issues are now out in the open—you are sensitive to them and aware of them, rather than stuck in them. You've redefined the successful marriage—it's based on anticipating and facing problems, not avoiding them.

The hard part is getting to the point of hearing the truth of what your partner has to say. It's very hard to see oneself, and it's especially hard to see or hear about difficult or objectionable aspects of who you are. In many marriages the partners are often uncomfortable with being seen or have given up seeing each other. But taking the risk of allowing yourself to be fully seen by your partner has the potential for tremendous rewards.

When young people get married, they're told they will have to work hard on the marriage. They might commit eagerly to doing that, but they don't really know what that means. The vast majority of married people don't know what it means. Most men assume that buying her flowers and giving her gifts will keep her happy. The woman thinks he'll be happy if she lets him be the boss and make all the decisions.

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This keeps the peace for a while, until the couple faces the demands and frustrations of daily living. Problems will surface if they haven't learned how to work on the marriage themselves, in an effective way. By the time most couples go to a counselor, they've been stuck for so long that the relationship is irreparable. Counseling sessions lead to venting, which usually causes more resentment and discouragement. We should be attending to our marriages all along so we don't get to that place.

Some people feel they're not allowed to get a divorce for religious reasons. But Jesus says in Matthew that the divorce certificate (the "get," as it was called) was available to couples because of the hardness in people's hearts. Jesus intimates that we need divorce because of human nature, but that we also need to be working on that which causes divorce—the hardness in our hearts. We need to be working on ourselves. The problem with marriage isn't about how hard or easy it is to get divorced, or about society's boundaries for marriage, but what people have in their hearts for one another. The institution itself is broken because we don't know how to negotiate and renegotiate its ups and downs. We don't know how to work on ourselves within the marriage partnership. We don't know how to negotiate and renegotiate in order to get what we really want.

Entering the renewal process, you might feel the marriage is hopeless. You might discover that you can't change certain attributes or habits. But that's the moment when you find out whether the person you married is really for you or not. You may have behaviors and attitudes that are very painful to your partner, but when you face these issues directly with that person, and he or she still wants to be in the marriage and work on your problems, you'll feel empowered by that commitment in a deep way. And when that happens, it gives you the

courage, strength, and motivation to lose weight, show greater respect, more fully share your partner's interests, or change some other behavior that has caused conflict between you.

Being Stuck

Before we move on to discussing how the renewal process works, we need to explore in greater depth what “stuck” looks and feels like. To do this, we have to be truly honest in assessing our marriages. How did we get stuck? How does being stuck affect each partner? How have we contributed to the problem?

One of the biggest signs of being stuck is “walking on eggshells.” When you're afraid that the things you do or say (or don't do or say) are going to prompt an annoyed or angry reaction from your partner—the rolling of the eyes or that clicking sound of disdain—then you're really stuck. For one or both of the partners, that reaction comes to define the marriage. Some people can live like that for a long time and not say or do anything about it. Denial seems a lot safer than dealing with it.

Many women live in fear within their marriages. They're afraid they're going to make their husbands mad and that their husbands will leave them. They feel dependent on their husbands and often are. The husband is the main breadwinner and source of financial support. The husband makes the wife feel secure. Many women don't feel they can survive on their own, and that fear keeps them from facing and addressing problems that are important.

As a result, they live in a state of denial. They'll stay in the marriage no matter how horrible it is. They're afraid to get out. Many women have given up careers or the ability to make a good living. By the third or fourth year of marriage the husband has gotten very used to the situation and negative

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behaviors have become a part of the relationship. By then the woman is feeling trapped but doesn't know how to leave. A lot of women are in this sad place.

Some women are the opposite—they are the strong ones who keep things together. It's the husband who's wimpy or weak. She feels like she can't leave because he needs her. He won't be able to take care of himself and it would be her fault. She denies her feelings and becomes a martyr.

Either way, a large number of marriages are in this place—the difficult place of eggshell walking and fear.

The goal of this book is to teach you how to communicate within a marriage so that neither partner gets stuck. When you do get stuck, you will know how to get unstuck. And if you decide the marriage can't go on, there is life after divorce. It is possible to have a wonderful marriage after you've had a failed one. My second wife Rosie and I have a great relationship. We're very connected to one another. At our wedding, people got up and said, "Whenever Rosie and Murray are together, there's no one else in the room." We have a very electric relationship. We're so close that we're enthralled by each other's presence. We don't go to restaurants and sit on opposite sides of the table. We sit side by side. Sometimes this puts a spotlight on other people's marriages and makes them uncomfortable. Many of them have been married for 30 years and don't want to be anywhere near each other.

This means something to me, because I've been through the same problem other couples face—the failure to sustain closeness and intimacy in marriage. Because of that painful experience, I want to help you develop, nurture, and maintain closeness in your own.

Where We Get Stuck

Over time, we all go through many changes that affect our relationships. There are physical changes, family system changes through death or birth, communal changes, financial changes, geographic changes, and vocational changes, just to name a few of the more obvious ones. But since we're working with marriages that span seven-year increments, changes can be much more subtle, internal, and not recognizable until a crisis point is reached. For example, mid-life crises and menopause can bring on personality changes. Changes in educational, religious, or social communities can slowly alter a person's values, ambitions, and perspectives.

When people change internally, you often don't see that change. If you don't see it, how do you bring it up? How do you work on dealing with those changes, so your marriage doesn't self-destruct?

The questions partners ask each other during the renewal process are designed to uncover those kinds of changes. You can directly ask your partner: what changes have you seen in me? How do those changes make you feel? You're probing your partner: I'm getting this feeling from you, or I've been getting this sense from you. The renewal process involves asking a broad set of questions to address every area in the marriage, to bring your "sticking places" out into the open.

Through this kind of questioning, you can begin to discuss the perceptions you have of one another. That will help you bring internalized changes to the surface so you can look at them and work on them together.

A number of major issues commonly affect all marriages, but they are rarely identified, much less discussed. These issues are not germane to all chronological stages of married life, but most couples encounter them at one time or another. They need

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to be brought out into the open before we can look at the process of addressing them through the Seven Year Contract.

These core issues are:

- Love and Respect
- Desires and Needs
- Children/Parental Roles
- Changes in Values/Lifestyle
- Communication
- Physical and Sexual Attraction or Performance
- Personality Traits
- Finances
- Shared Time/Social Activities
- Career Changes
- Aging Issues

Love and Respect

In my experience as a marriage counselor, I've found that men and women differ on the two most important aspects of a relationship. The man's biggest need is to feel respected, and the woman's greatest need is to feel loved.

Most issues we cover in this book are non-specific in terms of gender. Not so in this case. The male ego demands respect. The woman's emotional need is for love.

If the woman doesn't realize how important respect is to her male partner, she's neglecting an important part of his needs. I have a rabbi friend who was having difficulty with his wife. They went to counseling to work on their problems. One night she revealed to him that she didn't respect his competence as a rabbi. This was devastating to him. It affected his work, his self-esteem, and how he saw himself, because up to that point he always thought that his wife valued his calling.

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It completely undermined his sense of security in the marriage, because a man's identity not only affects his own self-esteem, but his relationship with his partner.

A man needs that personal sense of respect—that his spouse sees him as personable, capable, intelligent, caring, and loving, confirming his self-image. She needs to learn to communicate in this way: “Of course I respect you. You’re making a living and supporting the kids and me. You’re a good father and husband.” Or, “You’re so good at doing that, you’re so smart.” It’s important for a man’s abilities to be recognized and noticed. When a man feels he’s something special in his wife’s eyes, he wants to do more for her.

Once she shows a lack of respect for him, it will impact every area of the marriage. When she doesn’t respect him, he loses his self-respect. It’s more devastating for a man to be told he’s not a good father or that he’s a narcissist rather than to be told he isn’t loved. If attitudes continue in this manner, the outcome will most likely be a separation and/or divorce. The only way to circumvent this outcome is for the woman to become uplifting, encouraging, and appreciative, rather than critical. Over time, trust will again develop from this changed attitude and communication.

The man needs to talk about how he perceives his wife’s feelings for him, her sense of respect, and how they relate socially. For example, a woman may say, “I really respect you, honey,” but then mock and denigrate her husband in front of other people.

While men need respect, women want to feel that they’re loved, taken care of, and secure. They want men to show that they care about them, are thinking about them, and want to be with them. Women crave expressions of love, like flowers and chocolate, but their needs go much deeper than that. It’s important that the woman be able to define love for her

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husband and what she needs to feel loved. The man thinks he shows love by working hard, making a living, and bringing home a paycheck. But women don't see it that way. Men often don't understand what love and intimacy mean.

If a woman has to say on St. Valentine's Day, "Honey, you need to show me more love," he's already failed at doing so. If he has to say, "You need to show me more respect," she has already failed. It's become a demand instead of something genuinely given. It doesn't feel genuine if someone is showing respect and love because they've been told to do so.

This understanding of how men and women view and need love and respect can be the foundation for the seven-year renewal process. The more you can each anticipate and meet your partner's needs in this area, the stronger the relationship and the more easily you will be able to communicate. If you don't think your wife respects you, or if you don't think your husband loves you, you won't want to heal your relationship. If respect and love are missing, the relationship will fly apart in pieces, like a centrifuge out of control.

A large part of the process of renewal is not letting a negative perception develop too far, or if it does take hold, to change it before it's too late. Once we start using labels, we get stuck in our perception of our partners. That's a very dangerous place, one that's difficult to escape. Once that happens, it becomes the fire in the room that can't be put out. Many perceptions we hold about our marriage partners aren't real. They are either mental exaggerations or things that can be changed. We may have the perception of not being loved or not being respected, but that perception may not be aligned with the truth. If the man is able to explain his definition of love—how he feels about it and how he believes he expresses it toward his partner—this gives her the sense, if nothing else, that he is trying to be loving in his own way. When she

explains to him her definition of love and what she needs, it offers him a whole new set of opportunities to fulfill those needs. As he begins to change and adjust his actions according to what he's learned about her perceptions, he has the power to change both the way he sees himself and the way she sees him.

When couples negotiate and renew their contract, they need to spend time examining the way she perceives him in terms of respect, and how he relates to her in terms of love. After that, you can move into other aspects of the marriage, such as finances, security, sexuality, and childrearing. But the foundation for renewal is negotiating love and respect.

Desires and Needs

The seven-year renewal brings desires and needs to light, exposes what they are, and determines whether they can be brought into alignment.

You will not believe how many people I counsel who say, "My husband/wife doesn't meet my needs." From the outside it looks like a solid relationship, but deep down their needs aren't being met. And they go looking to meet those needs outside the marriage.

The seven-year renewal allows you to meet your needs by making sure they're heard and not suppressed. This, by itself, IS a very big thing. When you hear your partner express his or her needs, you're going to want to respond. You'll either want to try to meet those needs, or, if you can't, allow your partner to fulfill them in another way. Not in sexual terms, but let's say your partner has artistic interests that have not been fulfilled. If you can help your partner fulfill that desire, you then become part of the solution.

It's important to recognize that your partner is not going to fulfill all your needs. It's important to spend some time apart

and have your own interests. That's often looked down upon, as if spending time apart means a couple is not compatible. But some people need more alone time than others.

Children/Parental Roles

I love to watch young married couples. They think they have all the time in the world for playing with each other, socializing with friends, and taking lots of vacations. That changes completely once a child comes along. They suddenly no longer have the time or finances to go out and do things for themselves. They don't have much time to be alone together, to put in the time to keep the marriage healthy. Instead, they're working on their children, changing diapers, losing sleep, and adjusting to a vast new reality.

Having children changes the marriage forever. It changes our lifestyles and our identities within the marriage and family. It changes the way we relate to one another. It changes our value systems. It changes who we are. We become less self-centered and more able to sacrifice and give up things of our own. We see ourselves in our children. We want them to become like us and take on our values, and sometimes we struggle with that. For all the joy, there is a great deal of unexpected change and stress.

It's not surprising that a great number of marriages fail in the first seven years, after the children come along.

Changes in Values/Lifestyles

Charles and Judith were united in their values, vision, mission, and love of life. They had gotten married young, went to school together, worked as a pastoral team in several congregations, and raised three lovely girls. For 21 years they

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felt like they had the perfect marriage and the perfect life, down to the perfect dog. But after being married for a number of years, her husband went back to school for his graduate and post-graduate degrees, and finally obtained his Ph.D., and became a professor. Slowly, and unrecognizably, he changed during this period in many essential ways. He became much more comfortable in the academic community than in the religious community where they had spent so much time.

After getting counsel from some congregational friends, he was encouraged to take the risk and tell her how unhappy he was, while she had no clue. He had kept his dissatisfaction a total secret. He never said a word about what he was thinking and feeling. She didn't pick up from his moods or actions that he was unhappy. Later in the marriage, when he said he wanted a divorce, she was taken by surprise and felt like a brick wall had fallen on her.

Changes in a person over time can be subtle and hidden, under the radar. To this day it's still mysterious to her that she wasn't aware of the changes that her husband was going through. Intrinsic changes are often the most difficult to see, until it's too late. This is an issue that will crop up in different forms, in every seven-year period of your marriage. The Seven Year Contract will help you bring these changes out in the open, so there are no surprises for either partner.

Communication

Communication between couples seems to wane as time goes on. What are the reasons for this change?

When we first get married, we think that we know the other person pretty well. As the marriage continues, we begin to find out that we really don't know our partner at all. Then, after a few years, we feel like we know our partner perhaps too

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well. We get stuck in our perceptions of our partners, and don't really see chances of much change. As in my first marriage, we're usually aware of outward, visible changes—those involving finance, career, the family—but remain unaware of internal, personality, or values-based changes. We're unaware because we don't know how to really communicate with one another.

I had a young couple in my congregation who fell in love and got engaged. After an appropriate courtship and marriage counseling they felt they were ready to wed. They were both very good communicators and seemed a great fit in every way.

After about a year of marriage the young man lost his job and had difficulty getting employment. She was a schoolteacher and administrator and moved up in responsibility at work, taking on the lion's share of the couple's financial responsibilities. While he was out of a job, he became more involved as a drummer in his rock group. The band really started to take off, with many opportunities and much promise.

They drifted apart in their beliefs, use of time, and social environments, and their communication ceased. In just a few years the "together" couple became thoroughly disillusioned and the "model marriage" fell apart. How could two people who supposedly communicated so well become so distant in such a short time? How could two people who loved each other so much and were so similar in beliefs, goals, and lifestyles find themselves so far apart that they could barely speak to one another?

Again, the fundamental challenge and problem is that we change internally over time. We develop different interests, points of views, and attitudes. We develop a passion for a rock band that our spouse doesn't share. We no longer enjoy our spouse's vacation ideas.

Change is inevitable. It's a given. But when we don't know how to communicate about these changes in a loving manner and instead seem to be fighting for our "rights," our spouse becomes more of an adversary than a partner. The battles over finances, vacations, social interactions, and communal relationships become constant and wearying. Because we're incapable of communicating in ways that might lead to constructive change and compromise, marital bliss becomes marital fatigue.

Physical and Sexual Attraction or Performance

Physical and sexual attraction is a very important part of a marriage and must be renegotiated every seven years. We will look at the issue of sexuality in more than one seven-year time period, as each phase of a marriage creates a unique set of challenges and problems in this arena.

A lot of men and women think they don't have to worry about their physical appearance once they're married. But maintaining a good appearance—watching your weight, working out, and staying active—not only benefits you and your kids, but is also a fundamental part of the marriage contract. However, this can be one of the hardest issues to negotiate.

The wife models a new outfit and says, "Honey, does my butt look big?" When women ask those kinds of questions, the man's knees buckle. The problem is a Catch-22. If she doesn't look good, you're not going to say it. But if you speak honestly, you run enormous risks.

The wife also walks on eggshells if her husband gets fat drinking beer and watching football games. She's out doing yoga and bicycling and staying in shape, but his lifestyle has become sedentary. This arena has always been a difficult one

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for couples to discuss. There's a great lack of honesty in a marriage about what you desire and what you don't, what you need and what's difficult for you, in terms of physical and sexual attraction. But if you know beforehand that this is an important issue, and that both husband and wife have to commit themselves to being physically attractive to each other, then you enter renegotiation aware of and willing to work on that issue.

Other factors can bring about changes in a sexual relationship, such as medical or aging problems. Many couples have a good sexual relationship until they have a child. After that, sexual intercourse can be painful for women, sometimes for up to a year. It can be difficult to have any sense of satisfaction or intimacy if one partner is experiencing pain and the other one is causing it, even if unintentionally. The role of sex in the marriage can change dramatically from that point on.

Another part of physical and sexual attraction is the difference between loving someone and being in love. When you're first together you're in love and also loving the other person. There's the emotional attachment that expresses itself in intimacy. But over time that emotional attachment wanes as the distractions of married life and children make it more difficult to express intimacy. Sexual intimacy in particular becomes non-existent, or so rote and formulaic that it loses meaning, until the couple is just going through the motions.

It becomes so easy to feel that your partner doesn't love you, which is one of the most difficult challenges to sexual intimacy in marriage. If you feel like you're not loved, it's very hard to love back. It's very hard to have sexual relations and intimacy with someone you feel is just going through the motions out of obligation. While you can commit yourself to loving someone as a choice, and express it in a variety of good ways, you can't fake or pretend that you're in love when you're

not. Emotion and chemistry can't be faked. When your partner reads that you're not in love, whether it's true or not, he or she is going to respond in a negative way.

As the relationship and intimacy change over time, misperceptions can lead to problems. That's why the Seven Year Contract makes it mandatory for couples to communicate what they feel, what they like, what they don't like, and what their desires are, so they can renegotiate and renew sex and intimacy as they move into another seven year period.

Lack of honesty around these issues impacts everything—your emotional relationship with your partner, your desire to spend time with your partner, your recreational activities and avocations. You have to be able to say to your partner, “Honey, your being overweight is difficult for me in our marriage, in many different ways” or “I'm not happy with our sex life.” If you can't say these things, the problem will fester and put further stress on the marriage.

Couples end up separating and getting a divorce because when you get to the place where you don't have feelings for each other, it's too late. This, too, has to be dealt with when you renew your contract. In that case, the best choice might be to end the marriage.

Personality Traits

Josiah, an actor, married Tamara, an office administrator. She loved his whimsical, serendipitous, and fun-loving personality. He would break out in song at the strangest times, come up with crazy ideas, and was always the life of the party. He seemed to be exactly the type of man she had been looking for. But when he struggled in his acting career and couldn't make money, Josiah's mannerisms and foibles, once so endearing to Tamara, now seemed frivolous and annoying. He

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was breaking out in song while she was carrying the marriage financially. The very traits that initially attracted her ended their union.

It's not just that people change; rather, *the way you perceive them also changes*. If one partner is a little ADD, you may think that's great when you first get married. That kind of person can be spontaneous, creative, and lots of fun. Even after the kids come, it's okay for a while. But once the children grow older and get more demanding, a spouse with ADD will drive you crazy.

These personality issues have not been newly introduced into the marriage equation. They have not sprung up out of nowhere. They have always been there, like DNA, hidden and never addressed, until activated by an environmental stimulus.

Whether you like or hate your mate's traits, they have to be part of the renegotiation.

Finances

Finances can be a great source of conflict in a marriage. He may be more frugal than she is, so she sees him as cheap. This is an area where misconceptions and exaggerations can take root. Once she labels him as cheap, she can no longer see him as frugal. But in reality he isn't cheap. She exaggerated frugality into cheapness because his financial attitudes were affecting her. The more his actions affect her, the more her misconceptions take hold. That's why negotiating attitudes toward finances is another crucial part of the Seven Year Contract.

Shared Time/Social Activities

Couples need to have shared time together. This sounds obvious, but the demands of work, childrearing, and other responsibilities often make it difficult for partners to maintain closeness, togetherness, and emotional contact.

How couples socialize and the activities they enjoy can become sources of contention. Perhaps you don't share the same social preferences or activities. Perhaps those preferences change after you get married.

A friend of mine was married for quite a few years. He and his wife had different tastes in vacations, so they accommodated each other in alternating years. But as time went on, they became more adamant about their desires and less willing to compromise. They began to take separate vacations, which was more fulfilling for them individually but disastrous for their marriage. From that point on, their relationship was moving on a trajectory towards totally separate lifestyles, social activities, and friends. It became difficult for them to reconnect, and by the time they went for help they were living separate, platonic lives.

Sometimes that lack of closeness can crop in small ways that have a big effect on the relationship. Here's an example from my second marriage.

I like to sit in a Lay-z boy chair when I watch TV. Rosie has a giant couch that I found to be very uncomfortable. It always hurt my back when I sat on it. I put up with this for months and finally told her how I was feeling. But then we ended up separated from each other—she was on the couch, I was in my chair. And I felt bad because we used to always sit next to each other. Now we were sitting separately, which was psychologically difficult.

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We compromised. I began to spend part of my time sitting in my chair and part of my time sitting with her on the couch. That way we maintain a connection of warmth and closeness. Eventually we bought an oversized love sack that seats two, very romantically.

The Seven Year Contract will help you find ways to compromise, so you can share time and closeness and strengthen your bonds.

Career Issues

Marriage today often demands two wage earners. One might be the main earner and the other secondary, but it is very difficult for a young couple to make it on one salary. Therefore, career-related issues will inevitably come up. There might be tension over where you live or who gets what car to meet your transportation needs. Domestic household responsibilities always become a sticky negotiating point when both partners work. Who takes care of the small, annoying, time-consuming responsibilities? Who does the cooking? The dishes and cleaning?

There is often a continual process of adjustment needed to maintain peace in the house. Reality sets in, fights break out, deals are struck, and the process goes through another cycle. If one partner increases her salary, the balance can change. A young couple that I worked with years ago encountered this problem. She moved up in her company and increased her salary to the point of making a very good living while working part-time. He was in the construction field, worked sporadically, and was not bringing in as much money. During the good times she did the preponderance of the home chores, because he was usually out on a job and she was only working part-time. As her earnings increased and his “off” time

increased, she became very frustrated with the lack of equity in their relationship. They were in a bad place in their marriage for several years, until his fortunes changed.

Aging Issues

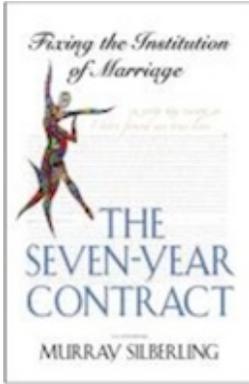
Although aging issues may not affect the marriage until later years, they eventually come around. People's personalities change as they get older—it is often the case that people either get bitter or better as they age. I know a woman who was soft-spoken, sweet, and caring when she was younger, but who became self-absorbed, demanding, and easy to anger over time. If she was shopping and the clerk didn't live up to her standards, it wasn't a pretty scene.

The physical changes of aging often become a major issue in relationships, such as serious illness or loss of mobility. As my mother's problems with diabetes made it impossible for her to do much walking, I saw my father's social life grow smaller and smaller. Although my father made the adjustment with sensitivity, care, and humility, many others become frustrated, angry, and sometimes abusive. Elder abuse is a major problem in our country, and will only get worse as increasing numbers of "baby boomers" move into their later years.

Each partner has enormous fears around these kinds of discussions, but once you enter the process you discover that you can negotiate these issues. You can have your needs met by your partner (or in some other way that is supported by your partner) so that you can reinvigorate your relationship. We've truly become stuck when we've suppressed our true feelings for the sake of the marriage. The way out of this impasse is

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through negotiation. If you're discussing these issues, you're cognizant of them. And when you're cognizant of them, you both can get what you desire and need.



Half of marriages end in divorce, and those who remain together are not better off. Look around you and ask, "Is this marriage appealing to me?" We can do much better at marriage, and that belief is the foundation for this book. The Seven Year Contract takes a radical, proactive, and innovative approach to renewing and revitalizing marriage. It will teach you how to contract intentional communication and renewal every seven years.

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