

Upfront

July 5th was my parents' 60th wedding anniversary. This is news both great and sobering. Great...for obvious reasons. Sobering because, as their first born, I'm quickly closing in on 60 years of age.

I texted them both, separately (hoping they wouldn't deduce that I was prospecting for this column): "What do you think about 60-years anniversary? It's a lot of years." (Grammatical inelegance mirrors the original text.)

My father is untethered to his phone, so he didn't respond in time to accommodate my deadline. My mom, as I might have predicted, offered a simple-yet-perfectly-precise insight with her (always) quick reply: "Lot of years!!" (The double-exclamations are transcribed as she wrote them.)

Cautiously, I probed for more: "What do you think about it?"

Within minutes, she sent: "What do u mean! I think time really flies by, and we have two great kids and three grandkids who make us happy!!!" (Triple punctuation this time.)

My mom's response IS my mom. Her instinct is that this thing that IS about her – this thing (I characterize it as an accomplishment) that is increasingly rare in today's world – in her omnipresent humility, is actually about someone else...in this case, her kids and her grandkids. Maybe that's how you stay in a thing for 60 years: Because you decide, consciously or unconsciously, that the thing is as much of a priority to you as you are to yourself. And you direct your actions to realize that accepted truth.

Which sounds, at once, straight forward and exhaustingly hard. Yet there they are, my mom and dad, in their impeccably clean house. She, with the tv replaying old tennis matches. He, napping in his soft, reclining chair. Eating dinner together, which she makes with less enthusiasm than she once did, usually no later than 5:30, unless they go out to one of a few oft-visited places, about which they will often later complain (parking, service, cleanliness, food).

Since they aren't inclined to say much about it, (We've never proactively celebrated their anniversary. Embarrassingly, I don't have the date committed to memory, and how hard is it remember July 5?! The literal day-after-Independence, which seems cleverly apt but, knowing my parents, just a happy accident.) I will. Even if we wish to deny it, we inherit so much of our core belief system – our way of facing the world, either through emulation or by doing the opposite of what we observed – from our parents. I haven't perfectly replicated my parents' path to marital stability, but I have drawn from it and fully appreciate it and understand why it works. One great thing about their "system:" It's simple. In no particular order, it goes like this...

1. Division of Labor. French scholar Emile Durkheim first used the phrase in a sociological context, and it later found relevance and popularity in economic theory. Durkheim didn't frame division of labor as a conspicuous quest for efficiency, driven by an appetite for abundance. Rather, he saw it as natural response to changes in social structures caused by increases in the size and density of population and correspondingly intensifying competition for survival. Division of labor functioned to keep societies from breaking apart under these stressors. In other words, she has her domain and he has his. Each meddles minimally in the others. Each trusts the other to handle his or her respective business. Yet, despite the "division," they are together, even if it's passive connectivity, a lot.

2. They share a common enemy...which is...everyone else. Which sounds harsher than it is, so I'll elaborate. Truly, they are very nice people, each in his or her way. And those who know them tend to like them, and vice versa. However, they are fiercely loyal to one another. Pick on one, the other frames you squarely in his or her sites. My dad might say or do an outrageous thing that infuriates my mother (not a rarity), and she'll tell him...stridently, without reserve. However, watch an "outsider" criticize him for the same thing and my mom turns instinctively and viciously (in a non-violent way) protective of her husband. As for my dad...he's even less complicated than that: To him, my mom is unceasingly awesome...I don't think I've ever heard him criticize her to anyone, and he wouldn't stand for anyone else doing so.

3. They are able suspend ego in service to the collective (when it's required). My dad's an only child, and – sometimes, oftentimes – it shows. My mom is one of 13, so her orbit of awareness extends well beyond the boundaries of her own skin. They are both prideful, in healthy ways. But not for the sake of self-aggrandizement. They are purposeful people...and they share purpose rather than operate at...well...cross-purposes. They might be stubborn, and they might disagree. But, to each of them, success is largely defined by our family continuity. To them, that's bigger than anything else.

4. They share common values. It's not important to detail what they are here. The point is, they are both very honorable, and they honor each other in the process of honoring their own moral and spiritual foundations.

5. I alluded to it in number 2, but this one might be most important of all: He adores her. He is proud of her. He remains in awe of her. He feels fortunate to have found her. And she appreciates – genuinely and completely – him, and what he has meant to her and our family.

So, here they are. In their mid-to-late-80s. Six decades removed from their cross-country elopement and subsequent honeymoon donkey ride from the rim of the Grand Canyon to its central depth. What began as a long-and-harrowing ride continues, and it has formed me, and I could never thank them enough.



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