

## The “Forever and a Day” Series on Marriage

# Expectations

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**It is normal** for each of us to have expectations in all areas of our lives. I expect the checkout person in the supermarket to handle the transaction efficiently and to treat me civilly. When that doesn't happen I am immediately stressed and can become quite grumpy. On the road I expect other drivers to stay in their lane and to signal lane changes. When they don't the result can literally be a wreck. In a marriage husbands and wives also have expectations of their spouse. When unmet, those expectations can lead to tension and even a wreck, that is, a fight. These pages will help you to gain some insights into the ways expectations operate in your marriage and ways to make them useful in promoting growth in your relationship.



### Bob

In our interactions with others, we have expectations. I believe that I will behave in certain ways and the other person will also behave in certain ways. When Rita and I were married, I expected that we would have children and that she would stay home to care for them while I was the breadwinner of the family. I don't know that we ever had a discussion about that, but I would have been amazed if Rita had suddenly decided that she wanted to keep working after our first child was born. Fortunately, in this case, Rita's expectation matched mine and we did what we both expected to do.

It is not unusual for husbands and wives to have different expectations in many areas of

their lives. One of the great sources of tension in a marriage is a mismatch between a husband's expectations of his wife and the reality of her actual behavior, and vice versa. The tension can only be resolved by adjusting one's expectations or changing the reality, when that can be done.

We talked a lot about sex before we were married. We were both interested and looking forward to it. I expected that Rita would always be ready when I was and that we would do it the way they vote in Chicago – early and often. That's the way it went for a few weeks, then Rita started teaching and suddenly, even though she was still interested, she was tired at night and fell asleep early. I was in graduate school and my schedule tended to be later than hers. I also needed less sleep. Reality no longer matched my expectations. This caused some tension between us, but I eventually learned to adjust my expectations to be closer to our reality.

A similar situation recurred in our marriage every time a child was born. The demands of

*We are often unaware of an expectation until it isn't met.*

nursing and caring for a newborn took a toll on Rita and sometimes on me. When we recognized the differences in our expectations and talked about them, she made an effort to

give me a little more and I tried to ask for a little less from her. In this situation, we were able to make some adjustments in both our expectations and the reality in which we were living.

In our lives we never seem to find an exact match between our expectations and reality. It is worth the effort to try, and then we learn to live with the lower tension that remains.

When Rita went back to teaching after twenty years at home with kids, we recognized that she would have less time to take care of the children and the house and that I would have to pick up some of the things she had been doing. By this time we were aware of the importance of

*Some expectations will never be met, some will be more than met and some will need to be adjusted along the way.*

our expectations and recognized that it would take multiple discussions over time to work this out. I started to do more of the cooking and often did the grocery shopping. I also made more effort to get to things like kids' soccer games when she was busy at school. At first, doing cooking and shopping seemed like intrusions on my time, but I agreed with Rita that it was necessary and eventually adjusted my schedule to accommodate the extra demands on me. After I retired, I picked up even more of the household work and sometimes did the laundry, which Rita had always done.

When I went back to full-time teaching, I knew that it would be more difficult to maintain my exercise schedule but I expected

*Revealing an unmet expectation cannot raise the expectation of an immediate change – it just opens the topic for discussion*

that we could find a way. Through the year, I found myself backing away from that expectation, but I didn't give it up. As we went into each year I continued to hope that we could maintain the exercise schedule we have in the summer. I am mindful that more discussions and compromises lie ahead.

Expectations aren't just associated with the activities of our lives. We also expect certain things in our personal interactions. In any situation I am usually an optimist, I look at things from the bright side and expect that the resolution will be favorable. For example, if I have a disagreement with a colleague, I tend to assume that it is over and that in the future, life will go on as before. In that kind of situation, Rita is more likely to worry and fret about her relationship with the colleague until she has some reassurance that the disagreement has been resolved. Even after forty years, I want her to respond in the same way I do and I become annoyed with her when I see what I interpret as her negative response. I would like to convince her that she should look at the bright side. I know that I cannot expect her response to be the same as mine and have learned to avoid making an issue of it.

As a result of our many discussions, the word "expectations" has become an important word in our vocabulary. On a Saturday morning it is not unusual for Rita to say to me, "What's the POA—Plan of Action? What are your expectations for today?" It opens a discussion that allows me to be frank about the things I intend to do or need to get done that day and allows her to let me know her plans. We work

*Avoid making judgments about your spouse's expectations. While some expectations may be unrealistic, on-going discussions will help each of you be more realistic.*

out the schedule of our day together and avoid assumptions and expectations that could turn out to be wrong and lead to more stress in our lives.

## Rita

We all have expectations of ourselves and others. It is impossible to be in a relationship without them. The problem is trying to match expectations with reality. While I didn't name them, I'm sure I brought many expectations to our marriage. I expected that we would live happily ever after; that no matter what the situation we faced, we would be able to handle it. I likely expected that neither of us would change so that there would never be any problems in our lives. Most importantly, I'm sure I expected Bob to meet all the expectations I had of him and fill all my needs. I could go on and on, but the reality is many of the expectations I had weren't real. First of all, in order for an expectation to be met, both people in a relationship have to know the expectation is there. Much of what we have written in our book has to do with expectations and what we assumed each of us would or would not do. As we were discussing this subject before we put it on paper, we saw the correlation between expectations and reality and the playfulness in our relationship. I sat down on a pool chair to talk with Bob about what we were going to write. My elbow fell through a hole in the webbing. I said that I had expected the chair to support me, but in reality the webbing was broken. We laughed as we talked about expectations and reality and suddenly every trivial thing we did the next few minutes was somehow tied to those two things. While this example may not seem profound, the realization of the link between the two is very important. We have learned that each of us must recognize and state the expectations we have of ourselves and the other in real situations. If our expectations can't be met, experience has shown us that the expectations may be unrealistic and need to be changed. The following is an example that supports this.

I am a very organized person and have a need for order in all aspects of my life. I see this as very freeing and it enables me to do a variety of things, have many projects going at one time, make others comfortable and do most things I need to complete on time. My cabinets and closets are neatly organized. Laundry is folded to fit the space in which it is stored. When our

children were small, I made sure that all the puzzle pieces and

*Sometimes, for the sake of your relationship, you may have to decide not to meet some expectations of family, friends or others*

parts to a toy were put where they belonged. I leave my desk neat at the end of each day. I make a mental list of what I need to accomplish each day while showering in the morning. I know the number of things I want to do and keep track of what I've done. Post-it notes are my friend. At home, I generally know where things are, since my philosophy is that everything has a place and everything should be put in its place. I'm not a fanatic and I can go to bed at the end of a busy day without having everything cleaned up and put away. But I have said as we crawl into bed, "If I die tonight, promise me you'll clean up before you let people in our house."

Bob in general is very neat and tidy so my expectations in this area are most often met. However, there are two areas of our house, the den and his garage workshop, that I pretty much leave alone, especially his desk and workbench. While I encourage and often help with the organization, I never organize either of them without his being present and part of the project. While he knows that I like everything in its place, it is just something he never quite gets around to doing. About once a year we set aside time to put away the tools and file or throw things out in the den. I have learned to accept that it is unrealistic of me to expect that he will keep it that way. We laugh about how long the organization will last. I've accepted that the time of the organization is on his schedule, not mine. The reality for me is that his den will never be as organized as I would like. The most important thing is that I have learned to live with that. Accepting this has reduced stress and tension between us. We have merely closed the door on occasion when we have guests and he straightens it up when we've needed to use the den for a guest bedroom. We've come to accept that whenever I've been in the room, I will likely

put one thing away and close the closet doors on my way out.

*People and situations change.  
There is no ultimate solution.  
Frequent discussions help to  
keep your relationship open  
and keep you feeling close.*

On the other hand, expectations have helped me to grow as a person. It is one of the reasons I gave Bob the book, Great Expectations. Going back to when we were married, even though I wanted to be a teacher and had a college degree, I expected that when we had children I would be a stay at home mom. But as I wrote in the chapter, “When Dreams Come True”, even my own expectations can become difficult when I try to live them out. While I would not have changed being home the years that I was, there were moments when I missed adult companionship, the intellectual challenge of being in the classroom and just being in a world larger than our house. The challenge for me was to find ways to use the gifts that I had rather than what I expected. I volunteered in our children’s schools and in our parish. When we were in leadership positions in the Marriage Encounter organization, I learned some important things about myself and my abilities that I now use in my teaching career. Having to deal with reality and not what we

expected hasn’t been all bad. What I am trying to learn now is what real expectations I should have of myself and our life together as we age and when we no longer have a career per se. I will continue to have expectations, but I will have to accept the reality that aging will demand.

*Tension in a marriage likely  
indicates that expectations are not  
being met. A discussion about your  
expectations in the area causing  
stress allows you to voice them and  
make adjustments where necessary.*

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## Questions for Discussion/Dialogue

The goal is to have a loving discussion, not to prove that the other needs to change.

1. Where did I find me/us in Bob and Rita’s story?
2. How do I behave toward you when you don’t meet my expectations?
3. In what area of our relationship do I think I need to revisit my expectations?