

Four Inspiring Stories

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We human beings love stories because not only do they entertain us, they teach us about life. From the ancient Greek myths, to Shakespeare, to the modern novel and movies, stories have shaped out thinking and helped us understand the world since the beginning of mankind.

Stories don't always have to be epic works, however. Sometimes we learn more from simple stories because their messages are clean and concise. Like a Zen koan, sometimes a simple statement can be truly enlightening.

Following are four Zen-like stories that gave me insights into lasting love. I offer them not so much because they contain great eternal truths, but because they represent the kinds of everyday insights people gain and that almost go unnoticed. Yet, when we pause and reflect back on them, we realize they contained an important message. Hopefully the mini stories that follow will trigger thoughts of similar events in your own life.

The first involves two of the happiest people I've ever met, true lovebirds who were still gazing adoringly into each other's eyes after 63 years of marriage. Doubtless, there were many things contributing to their happy union, but the one they both cited as key to their success was the following: on the day they married, they made a pact and honored it until the day the husband passed away at age 85.

Most people I tell this story to envision their agreement to be something the size of a book, but it was only one sentence long. Perhaps because of its elemental simplicity, and the fact that both never failed to honor it, it became the seed from which their long years of happiness together grew—they agreed never to go to sleep until every disagreement between them had been resolved.

Another couple started their marriage with everything imaginable going against them. The husband had just immigrated to the United States from Korea and his wife had recently arrived from Finland. Socially, culturally and economically, they were as different as night and day, and the only language they had in common was English, which neither spoke very well. Even simple things such as preparing a meal they could both enjoy presented significant challenges. And to top it off, they were penniless. Yet they have enjoyed many happy years together.

Once, in a late-night conversation with the husband (who was then director of a hospital) I caught a glimpse of the reason for their success. As my friend and I shifted from topic to topic, at one point I asked him how his marriage was going. After a long

pause, he replied, "Lately, it's been going well." His use of the word "lately" caused me some concern.

"Sounds like you hit a rough spot recently," I commented, hesitantly. After another lengthy pause, the man answered, "No, not really. The last few months have been fantastic."

"A few years back?" I pressed. He paused again.

"No. It was good then too!"

"Well then, when *did* you have problems in your marriage?" I demanded, determined to get to the bottom of the issue.

This last question sent my friend into an almost meditative state as he mentally reviewed the decades he and his wife had shared together. After another uncomfortably long silence, he looked up at me, eyes wide, and said, "Come to think of it, it's *always* been good!"

His words seemed at sharp odds with what he'd implied just a moment earlier and I pointed this out to him, saying, "If that's true, then why didn't you simply say so when I first asked you?" To this he had a quick response.

"Oh," he said, waving his finger, "I never assume that just because my marriage is good today that it will be good tomorrow. In fact, I make it a point every morning when I get up to ask myself what can I do to make our marriage better!"

The third story, almost a one-liner, came from a man I knew in Hawaii who was complaining to his then current girlfriend about his two failed marriages. "I don't know what I could have done to save them," he moaned, "I always put in my half."

Upon hearing this, the woman, ten years his junior, erupted into laughter, saying, "Well, duh! No wonder they failed. You only put in half, and a half times a half equals a quarter!"

The last, and perhaps most Zen-like story of the four, involved a friend who told of an incident that occurred while he and his new wife were celebrating their honeymoon on Catalina Island, off the coast of Southern California.

One night he noticed a man and woman also celebrating their marriage at the hotel, except that this couple was celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. Curious, my outspoken friend approached the woman, introduced himself as a newlywed, and complimented her on her successful marriage.

"Is there a secret to having a long marriage like yours?" he asked, half-jokingly.

The woman's smiling face turned suddenly solemn at the question. "Yes there is, young man," she said, with unexpected gravity, "and I will share that secret with you on one condition, and that is that you promise not to laugh when I tell you!"

My friend, embarrassed that the woman had taken his question so seriously, turned equally somber and agreed to her terms. But the woman said nothing. Instead,

she held his gaze for several awkward moments to make sure her words would have their desired effect. Only after she was convinced she had his full attention, did she reveal her collected wisdom of half a century. "It's simple," she said. "Don't get divorced."

I believe nuggets of wisdom like these cross our paths regularly, and they don't always involve people. Sometimes, they can be nothing more than a slogan on a billboard, or the lyrics to a song. The important thing to remember is that at the same moment when our problems seem insurmountable, in some form the universe is sending us messages to help resolve them. We just need to look for them.