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The Secrets of Great Marriages

This is episode #91 of Stay Happily Married, "The Secrets of Great Marriages."

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Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen. I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I am here by telephone with Linda and Charlie Bloom. They are both master's level therapists and psychotherapists that are trained in treating couples.

They are the authors of a book *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love*. It was published back in February 2004 and it has just -- wow -- been -- what a success. It's in its 13th printing. And I'm dying to dig into it and talk about those secrets that make for a great marriage. What are those 101 things that they wish they knew?

Linda, Charlie, welcome to the show.

Charlie Bloom: Thank you.

Linda Bloom: Thank you for having us.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited. I want to know what motivated you to write the book. How did it come about?

Charlie Bloom: Well, it came about quite by accident when my sister was getting married in Los Angeles about 10 years and she asked me to read something at the wedding. And so I was looking through some of my books and trying to come up with something that I thought

would be inspiring and, I don't know, I just couldn't find anything I felt good about. And I just thought about writing something myself.

And I thought about some of the things I wish I knew when I was about to get married and just started writing down a few one-liners. And that turned into a bigger project than I thought that it would. And at the wedding I read the one-liners and they were pretty popular there.

Lee Rosen: It worked, huh?

Charlie Bloom: It did.

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Charlie Bloom: It did. We got the job done. And then on the drive back from L.A. we -- Linda and I -- started coming up with a bunch of others. And by the time we were done on that trip, we had -- I don't know. How many did we have, Linda?

Linda Bloom: A couple hundred.

Charlie Bloom: We had -- yeah.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Charlie Bloom: And we ended up with actually more than that so we had to reduce it to 101 because we didn't want to have a book that was 800 pages long.

Lee Rosen: Right. I want to dig into some of the 101 but I'm wondering, if you had to put the number one most important thing you wish you had known before you got married, what would you say it is? What's the biggie?

Linda Bloom: The very first one in the collection is that great marriages are created. And we led with that because we wanted people to get the message right away that you don't just luck into a wonderful relationship. You pick somebody who's got great raw materials but there's some work that needs to be done. And we wanted to emphasize the importance of being proactive, responsible, get your communication skills up, get your negotiation skills and your conflict management skills up, because you really have to develop yourself throughout the marriage. You don't ever get to put it on cruise control.

Lee Rosen: Do you feel like you learned more from having a successful marriage or from watching other people in your practice struggle with their marriages?

Charlie Bloom: Well, I would say neither.

Lee Rosen: Okay.

Charlie Bloom: What I'd say we learned the most from was struggling ourselves --

Lee Rosen: Yeah.

Charlie Bloom: -- and going through some of the inevitable challenges that practically all couples go through. And we learned a tremendous amount from working with couples. And then we've been doing this for over 35 years, so we've seen a few couples in the process and really been inspired by some of the -- the way that they have demonstrated the kind of commitment and courage really that it takes to hang in there. But there's nothing like your own personal experience to teach you lessons that really get embedded in your consciousness.

And so between what we learned from working with couples and observing them and then going through our own challenges, which we talk about in quite a bit of detail in the book, we were able to I think come up with some pretty powerful teachings.

Lee Rosen: Right. And I'm curious -- and it's a risky question I'm going to ask you, though -- but I'm curious, how have things worked out for your sister?

Charlie Bloom: Well, of course you'd have to ask her. But my observation is that she is living in a marriage that is beyond anything that she had even hoped for.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Charlie Bloom: She's really -- she got married at a relatively -- she wasn't that young when she got married. She was in her mid-30s. And she was a career person. And so I had some questions about her making the adjustment and it's been unbelievable. She's got three beautiful kids and a husband that adores her and she loves her life.

So I wish I could take some credit for that, that it's because of what I read at the wedding --

Lee Rosen: Maybe so. Right.

Charlie Bloom: -- but I think it's really got to do with her commitment and her intention to create that kind of a family and that kind of a life for herself and her husband and her kids. And that's one of the points that we try to make in the book, that your intention and your commitment is probably -- they're probably the biggest variables in terms of what kind of a marriage you have.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Charlie Bloom: Commitment is really key.

Lee Rosen: Right. You know, I'm wondering -- when I think about your book and this time of year, you know, we're all working on figuring out gifts and that sort of thing. Your book is an obvious gift for a couple that is planning -- so many couples are engaged now and getting married in June or whatever, and I think it's the perfect gift for those folks. And it's obviously something that people go out and buy for people that are headed toward their weddings.

Who else is using the book? I assume you see a lot of those folks. But who else is using the book and reading it?

Linda Bloom: We've been gratified to find that there are many couples who have been together for years that are using the book and I really wanted to reach them, as well as saving the young couples just starting out some trouble. I wanted to reach some of the older couples who've been together for a while because sometimes people get a little complacent in their relationship. They get into kind of well-worn patterns and it can get a little boring, a little stagnant.

And so when I hear from the couples, like the mid-life couples -- 35, 40, 45 -- who are reading these stories to each other for bedtime, for instance, and how enlivening it is for them because they're taking some time and attention to have these discussions with each other, catalyzed by the one-liners in the stories -- well, how do you really define commitment? What does that mean to you? Or what does deep intimacy mean for you? And what is a fair fight; how would you define that? And one of my favorites is, how may I best love you?

Lee Rosen: Right.

Linda Bloom: People assume they know and they usually have some clues, but they want to give love the way they like it shown to them. And your partner really -- the gifts may not mean as much to them. Maybe they like touch. Or maybe you give touch but they want the acts of

service. So to really be specific about the ways you feel deeply served, deeply nourished in your soul, that's so important.

Lee Rosen: It sounds like for those couples that are doing well, their marriage is going along, maybe they're in a bit of a rut, but the book serves as sort of a prompt for communication.

What about couples that really are in trouble? I mean, things aren't just percolating along and no one is sitting in bed reading to the other one. I mean, it's really not a happy place. Does the book help those folks or do they need to come and see a professional like you guys?

Charlie Bloom: Well, first of all, Lee, we try to make clear that we don't see the book as the answer to the challenges of marriage. We see it as something that hopefully will awaken people to some possibilities of more creative ways of responding to the inevitable difficulties that arise from time to time.

So certainly what I would hope is that a couple that's in the condition -- whose relationship is in a condition that you just described would see in the book, number one, the possibility of this can be fixed, that there's hope here. Because they're going to be reading stories about a lot of couples who have faced some very difficult and perhaps very similar situations who have found their way to get through those impasses that we can sometimes experience. And secondly, they may also, in addition to getting some hope, they may see what it might require for us to break through this pattern that we're caught in right now.

So I would consider it very successful if a couple were to out of the book make the decision, for instance, to get some good counseling, or they may see some things that they can do. The biggest difficulty that most couples have is the tendency to become an expert on what's wrong with the other person --

Lee Rosen: Right.

Charlie Bloom: -- rather than looking at themselves. So that's a theme that comes up quite a bit in the book is how much power there is in just redirecting the focus of your attention away from the other person. Instead of looking at what's wrong with them, how they need to be different, and looking at, "Well, how can I respond differently to this situation that might create a new possibility for us?"

Lee Rosen: You know, that sounds right on target. In listening to you earlier we were talking about where you really learned a lot of these lessons.

And in part you said you learned them from your own struggles in your own marriage --

Charlie Bloom: Right.

Lee Rosen: -- and that makes a lot of sense. And I'm guessing you're picking up things -- you're always learning from your clients. But what about the happy couples, where they're not going to see a marriage counselor because things are working? Do you feel like you don't have enough input from those folks or did you have to go out and seek that input out?

Charlie Bloom: Well, that's why we wrote the second book.

Lee Rosen: Okay. Well, then let's go to the second book. Now, that's just about to come out, right?

Charlie Bloom: That's going to be out in January. Right.

Lee Rosen: Okay. And that's *Secrets of Great Marriages: Real Truth from Real Couples About Lasting Love*. So you wanted to go to that -- you wanted to focus on those happy couples. Tell me more about that.

Linda Bloom: Well, you know, my husband Charlie and I have both been in the field specializing in working with couples for about 30 years, so we've heard a lot of struggle and stress and trauma and difficulty.

And it was in large part an antidote to all that struggling over the years that we wanted to see who are the happiest couples we can find? Let's go talk to them. We'll interview them and we'll let them say in their own words their secrets of success.

And we had a few ideas about what we might find, but we were happy to see that they validated a hypothesis that we had made that they didn't have life charming. They didn't have family of origin charming. They didn't necessarily get off on the best foot. They had to struggle in the beginning, many of them, to have good communication skills and to deal with their differences and conflict, just like we all do.

And so it kind of normalizes the struggles that are inevitable in relationship and if you've got that commitment that Charlie referred to, if you've got that intentionality, if you've got that hopeful vision in your mind, you just keep plugging away at it and you can create -- very ordinary people can create extraordinary, exemplary, delightful marriages.

Lee Rosen: Right. Does it typically take a certain amount of time to sort of figure it out?

Charlie Bloom: The short answer is yes. And it generally takes more time than you think it should. It's really easy to underestimate just how possessed so many of us are in this culture by the classical myth of "happily ever after," that when you find your soul-mate, when you find your life partner, then that feeling that you have in the early stages of romance when you're so totally in love with them you can't imagine even the possibility of ever exchanging a harsh word, that we have this tendency to believe that that's the way successful relationships are always.

And there were no cases that we found in our second book, or in any of our work with couples who consider themselves successful or unsuccessful, that there weren't times when they had to deal with disappointments and letdowns and hurts and wounds. So there isn't any way that this can be avoided because we're all human and we all have certain tendencies and we all have places where we're more tender than others.

So the real question isn't so much how can I find the person with whom I'm never going to experience suffering? It's how can I develop the qualities that will really allow me to sustain myself and to sustain the relationship when we hit some bumps in the road? And what are those qualities?

Lee Rosen: Right. These couples in book number two have figured that --

Charlie Bloom: Yes.

Lee Rosen: -- they've worked their way through that and figured it out.

Charlie Bloom: They have. They have. And usually we don't figure that out until we've been through some pretty rough times and we finally get the message that this is going to require some work on my part in order to become the partner of my dreams, rather than to try to convert my partner into the way she should be.

Lee Rosen: Right. It sounds like in part a lot of the lessons you've learned is that all of this requires a fair amount of work on yourself to make everything work out the way you want it to work out.

Linda Bloom: That's what it comes down to.

Charlie Bloom: It does, Lee. And I want to just underscore that the work -- and that word "work" is really loaded for most of us. You know, we see it as a grind, as an ordeal, as a struggle, as effort. There can be some element of that in it, but when we really take it on with a clear intent and we begin to take responsibility for our participation in the relationship rather than focusing so much on the other person, then the work becomes easier. It becomes less daunting. And it becomes something that we just integrate into our lives the way we do any other habit that serves our well-being, so brushing our teeth or washing the dishes in the sink, or doing things that need to be done to maintain a high level of well-being. It doesn't continue to feel like a grind and a drag.

Lee Rosen: The two of you had been married a long time when you were working on book number two and interviewing all of these happy couples. Did you learn things you hadn't already figured out after all the years of being married?

Linda Bloom: I'll tell you one of the most surprising findings of all. We interviewed a couple that does not fight. They have been compatible and harmonious from the beginning of their relationship. And I did not know that that existed anywhere in the world. I thought -- my belief before I knew this couple -- because I know that they're the real McCoy. I know that they're high integrity people and they were being honest with us. I thought that people who didn't fight were denying things and repressing things and keeping secrets.

But there really are some couples who -- and I think this is rare -- that there are some couples who are so compatible that they just have an ease and they don't have to struggle. And that was the most surprising part for me.

Lee Rosen: Right. I'll bet it was fun taking a break from the day-to-day practice of dealing with people whose marriages are struggling and being out talking to these happy people all the time. That must have brightened your lives a little bit.

Charlie Bloom: Yeah. I think that there was a certain element of what I'd call enlightened self-interest in us taking on this project because it was really a gift to ourselves to focus on couples that are really thriving in their lives and to find out from them how are you doing this? What are your secrets? So it was really refreshing. It's been very refreshing.

Lee Rosen: Finish every day with a smile on your face.

Charlie Bloom: Oh, yeah. And inspiring too, I mean, just to see -- because like Linda said, I mean, these are not couples who have had it easy throughout their marriage. Some of them have had extremely difficult challenges, not just in their marriage but in their lives. I mean, they've had things that they've had to go through, like all of us do, but some of them even more extreme than most of us hopefully will ever have to endure.

There was one person who was a Holocaust survivor whose family was basically wiped out during the Second World War when she lived in Europe, and then had a very difficult -- she was on the last ship out of Europe that was before the Nazis closed it down to the Jews. And then had a difficult adjustment to make when the ship dropped her family off in Cuba.

I mean, so there are things that people have gone through, not just challenges in the marriage but in their personal lives with health, with money, with children. I mean, so the things that all of us have to face and really came out of it incredibly well.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Linda Bloom: It's so inspiring to hear these people's stories. And I wanted to give you one example of one thing that we learned from a couple, how important it is to feel welcome in your home. When you come in after work to get the warm greeting that your partner's life is enhanced when you come into their life again.

And they said that they've got a tradition longstanding that whoever's home first greets the person who's coming into the house at the end of the work day by yelling, "Hooray." We've taken over doing that and it's so fun. It's so enlivening.

And I'm really hopeful -- and I think that this will happen -- when the reader gets a bird's eye view into these really happy couples' lives, what are they doing? How are they being? What are they saying?

This same couple that we learned "hooray" from, they have Sacred Saturday. And so every Saturday all their friends, everybody who knows them know don't call, don't invite them to anything; they dedicate all day every Saturday to each other.

Lee Rosen: Wow.

Linda Bloom: And when people are hardworking professional people, some of them are raising kids, they don't take enough time to really delight in the relationship.

Lee Rosen: Sure.

Linda Bloom: These kinds of things about what are these happy couples doing specifically, it gives them ideas that they might want to incorporate into their own relationship.

Lee Rosen: Fantastic. You know, they say that writing a book is hard. I mean, everybody that I've ever talked to that's done it talks about the struggles of word after word just cranking it out. And here now the two of you have written two books together. That has to have put a certain amount of stress and strain on a marriage. How have you survived that?

Charlie Bloom: That's a good question, Lee. Well, let me just take a shot at that and Linda can have her two cents in. The second book has -- the experience has been radically different from the first one. We made a lot of mistakes in terms of the process of writing in the first one. I mean, we could write a book called *101 Things I Wish I Knew Before I Wrote My First Book*. So it was challenging.

And basically it's the same stuff that comes up in relationship. It's power struggles. It's resolving differences. It's managing your ego. It's the desire to control. It's all the usual stuff. But after we did the first one and we somehow managed to get through that, we learned a lot from the process and we -- in the second book, my experience is that what we've done is we've identified the complimentary strengths that we both have. And one of the reasons that we work well together is because Linda has strengths in areas that I don't have and I have some strengths in areas that she doesn't have.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Charlie Bloom: And we've been able to recognize that and to kind of use each other's strengths rather than trying to make each other's style more like our own. So it's made that process much, much easier. And that just happens to be one of the secrets of healthy relationships is that you focus on how you compliment each other and how you -- the fit that you have in terms of using each other's competencies and strengths rather than convert them into being the way you want them to be.

Lee Rosen: Right. Yeah. That does sound like you get to put a lot of the advice from the book to work in writing the books.

Charlie Bloom: Into practice. That's right.

Lee Rosen: Right. Exactly. Well, Linda --

Linda Bloom: One of our --

Lee Rosen: Go ahead, Linda.

Linda Bloom: One of our teachings when we teach our workshops is how important it is if you want to go for a great relationship to make it a high priority.

So one of the hardest things about writing book number two for me was that it took such a long time. It was as six-year gestation. And I never thought it was going to take that long. And one of the reasons that it took that long is because we weren't willing to put a high level of press on our life by moving it along at a more rapid pace because we took time to be with each other, took time to be with our kids, took time to be with the grandchild, took time to be with our friends, took time to work out, and so it lengthened the amount of time that it took.

And the other thing that made it lengthy in time is we wanted it to truly reflect and be in the voice of the people that we interviewed. So we had drafts going back and forth, make sure that every word was true for them.

And so I don't believe that our projects in the future will have to be so lengthy because I think we have a system that really works better for us now. But it took a lot of letting go and a lot of goodwill to be able to live by the principles that we espouse, to actually live it ourselves.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm glad you figured it out and survived it, so that sounds like we can be optimistic about a book number three down the road. That's terrific.

Linda Bloom: We're already on it.

Lee Rosen: Good. Good. Good. Well, Linda and Charlie, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today. I appreciate it.

Charlie Bloom: Oh, it's been our pleasure.

Linda Bloom: I'm glad you invited us to speak. It's been a pleasure.

Lee Rosen: Good. Well, you can find out a lot more about Linda and Charlie Bloom and their practice by visiting their website at BloomWork.com; that's B-I-o-o-m-W-o-r-k dot com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. And you can find out more about the practice and all about the seminars and the counseling they do and you can also order a copy of the book. And that's what I'm going to do, *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married: Simple Lessons to Make Love*. That's book number one. That's been out now for five years, 13th or 14th edition of it just going crazy like gangbusters.

But the really exciting news, at Amazon.com early next year you can get *Secrets of Great Marriages: Real Truth From Real Couples About Lasting Love*. That's out early 2010, so be looking for that. And we'll make a note about that in the show notes and remind you of it.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope that you will be back with us again next week. In the meantime, as usual, we love to get your feedback, hear your questions, hear your comments, ideas about upcoming shows. You can reach us by calling our comment line at (919) 256-3083, or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

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