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Making Interfaith Marriage Work

This is Stay Happily Married #131, "Making Interfaith Marriage Work."

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

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Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. If you and your partner have different beliefs when it comes to religion, you know how complicated things can be. Are you unsure of how to respect and appreciate your partner's beliefs without compromising your own? Are you worried about how your children will identify and what your families will think?

Joining us today is Reverend Laurie Sue Brockway. She's an ordained nondenominational minister who marries and counsels hundreds of couples each year in New York City. She's written over a dozen books, including one called *Your Interfaith Wedding: A Guide to Blending Faiths, Cultures and Personal Values into One Beautiful Wedding Ceremony*. It just came out last month. It's available on Amazon and it's absolutely worth checking out, especially if you're right in that process of figuring out what to do about getting married.

She's listed by *New York Magazine's* "New York Weddings" as one of the top interfaith officiates in the state. And she writes for several websites, including the multi-faith website BeliefNet.com and Wedlok.com.

Laurie Sue, welcome to the show.

Laurie Sue Brockway: I'm so happy to be here.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited to be talking about this. This is a frequent -- this is an issue for a lot of people, isn't it?

Laurie Sue Brockway: Well, it's an interesting thing about interfaith pairings because now I think we're about up to 37 percent of all marriages being interfaith. Yet there's so many different levels of faith and interfaith, the way people either observe or do not observe faith, and the many different kinds of religions or people of different faiths and religions that come together in marriage.

So it's not one of those topics that has one pat answer on what all the problems are or what all the solutions are. But I can say that one of the most significant things that I see in my wedding ministry is that there are so many wonderful men and women who look for their soulmate, their partner, the person that they want to spend their life with, and sometimes that person happens to be in a different package than they might have imagined.

Perhaps somebody is Christian and they find themselves in love with somebody from the Hindu tradition. Or someone was raised Jewish and they find themselves in love with a Catholic.

So what I see is that many people decide to make love the focus of their marriage and they use the wedding as the microcosm of learning about some of the challenges inherent in that. And they begin to -- in the context of choosing love over looking at faith, religion, background, beliefs, they try to make a marriage work based on that love and commitment.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. I buy that and I think people ought to focus on love. But as a practical matter, there are things that happen in interfaith couples, aren't there, that make it hard to sort of stay focused on the love? Do you see people facing issues with their families and just conflict that comes from the interfaith status of the relationship?

Laurie Sue Brockway: Yeah. You know, I think with interfaith couples -- I always say with every couple there's a dragon to slay in the relationship. But I think an interfaith couple maybe has more than one dragon to slay. It depends, again, what their backgrounds are.

But you find from certain cultures, if the family is very religious, if they are Orthodox Jewish, if they are religious Hindu, if they religious Muslims, if their son or daughter selects somebody outside of their faith or tradition there's generally a lot of upset.

Because first of all, in many of those traditions it is the job of the parent to find the mate for their children. So if their kid goes out

and finds someone and falls in love on their own without going through that process, a lot of times the parents feel that they have failed.

Or that the child -- their kid, who's now a grown-up in their 20s or 30s -- but that person's not going to be properly blessed. Or that if they get married to somebody outside of their faith, their children are not going to be blessed. It's not going to work.

And also, the other thing that I see is that some families feel that it brings shame upon them if their child chooses somebody outside of their faith or background.

Lee Rosen: Right. And I guess no matter how much love you happen to be in, people feel that familial pressure coming from their parents, whether they like it or not. That's going to make the marriage -- getting off on the right foot -- a lot harder.

Laurie Sue Brockway: You know, I always find that just even in planning a wedding it's almost like kids in a sandbox. Everybody reverts to 5 years old again. And when you're 5 years old and your mother says, "Do it this way," you hear that so loudly. And I do believe that some -- especially people in their 20s who are a little younger getting married for the first time, they're going to feel that pressure.

But a lot of times if you have a family that really does not agree with your marriage and you are really clear that you want to marry the person that you have fallen in love with, then you may have to make some choices about moving forward without their blessings. That happens from time to time. I don't see it a whole lot, but I know that it happens.

And I remember one wedding -- not just one wedding; I've had a few weddings where a parent has not come to the wedding because they do not approve of the marriage. But I know that when the children come, the parents start coming around again. They want to create a scenario of forgiveness and they want to be a family.

Lee Rosen: Well, that makes me wonder. As the marriage does mature and time goes by, do you find that the religious differences tend to be more or less significant than people thought they would be when they got married?

Laurie Sue Brockway: You know, that's a great question because I think some people are actually surprised at how significant they become. And again, it depends on the couple.

If one person in the couple is an atheist and the other one is a devout Jew or Christian or Muslim, then it's a scenario of one partner not participating in faith and the other partner really leading the way with faith. But if both people have strong ties to their religious roots then there are definitely inherent conflicts.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Laurie Sue Brockway: I think the people who are really, really religious do not usually find themselves looking or engaging or even being open to a marriage with someone from another faith. Sometimes it happens, but I find that a lot of the people who are interfaith couples are not that religious, not that devoted to their own faith.

Twenty-five percent of -- a recent Pew study said that 25 percent of all Americans have switched faiths at some point. And it's assumed that part of that has to do with intermarriage.

I don't know that people necessarily formally give up their own faith and convert to another faith; but sometimes if you're not that religious, if all you do is put up a Christmas tree, you only go to church on Christmas Eve, then if your wife is Jewish and she feels it's really important to raise the children as Jews then maybe you start celebrating Passover. You go to services for the high holy days. You maybe adapt a different faith without actually converting or leaving your own faith.

In the seminary that I was trained in the key words were "never 'instead of;' always 'in addition to.'"

Lee Rosen: Meaning -- okay.

Laurie Sue Brockway: People do not have to give up their own faith in order to be in love with somebody of a different faith tradition.

Lee Rosen: Right. Although it does seem like it -- just listening to you and thinking about it, if religion does become more significant to somebody down the road, they get older and for whatever reason they sort of revert back to maybe that childhood training or something, gosh, that could make things awfully complicated and tricky when you feel like your spouse is shifting gears on you.

Laurie Sue Brockway: You know, it's really interesting. I married a couple once; the bride was Christian and the groom was from Sri Lanka and he was Buddhist. His family was Buddhist. It was a beautiful, beautiful ceremony that included both of their traditions. And she had three sisters who were all in really intense interfaith relationships.

And one of the sisters, who was raised Catholic, was telling me that her husband just converted to Islam. And so she was in a marriage that had been in process for 10 years. She was dealing with her mate actually choosing a religion totally out of his faith background and her faith background and they were looking at ways that he could pray five times a day, he could be devout, and that it would be okay for them to have kids that did not change their religion because Dad had. See, the kids were already older.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Laurie Sue Brockway: You can't really switch things on the kids. I think if you have -- there's a couple of ways to approach it. Either both parties decide that religion is not primary in their lives and it is not the focus of their marriage, but it's there and they can look at ways to adapt and include different traditions.

If you'd like the Hanukkah candles, if you'd like the Christmas tree, or if you're Hindu you want to celebrate Diwali. Maybe you include some of the traditions without so much of the religious aspect and you expose your kids to both or to all. Or to even more than just your two faiths.

Or you can make a decision that you're going to raise your children by one of your religions. And it's usually the partner who is more religious, who has the strongest roots to their religion, that kind of wins out in that aspect.

Lee Rosen: They're going to sort of drive things. Yeah.

Laurie Sue Brockway: Well, the couple has to agree on it. You can't just say, "Okay, our kids are going to be Jewish. That's my decision." You have to talk about it. I mean, before you get married -- in my book I have a test that people can take about whether they're ready for interfaith marriage.

And I think, honestly, one of the key, key things before you begin a marriage is to really figure out what your real values are and what your religious beliefs are and have real clarity. I even have a section with 36 questions that you can ask yourselves. What's the religion of your birth? Do you consider yourself religious? Do you attend regular religious services? What's important to you in religion?

You have to really kind of sort through together and without parental influence what's important to the two of you. I mean, your parents are going to lobby for whatever they believe in and

whatever they think is right for you. And it could be that all or part of what they're saying is going to be appropriate for you, but I think couples kind of have to withdraw themselves a little from the pressure of family because family does what they know how to do.

And a lot of -- God bless them. We love our families. But they have their ideas and they have their traditions and they were raised in a certain way and even if you're somebody who comes from a family with deep religious roots and you don't have those - - you don't have the same feeling -- then you have to really assess what's real for me? What do I want in my life? And then what do I want to give to my children?

Lee Rosen: Right. So let's say that the couple -- and that's really the focus here. But we do keep going sort of back to the -- I guess the in-laws because they are a big influence.

But if the couple comes up with a plan and they have an agreement and life is going along and they've got kids and they're sort of working in the direction that they wanted to work in, what do you do with that sort of never-ending -- or is it never-ending -- pressure from in-laws? Especially the ones that you've kind of -- they feel slighted. It's their religion that sort of got moved, cast aside a little bit, and the other religion is the one that maybe the children are being raised in. How do you deal with those in-laws who are having to face that every time they come to visit?

Laurie Sue Brockway: That's a really -- that is a difficult and challenging thing. But I do believe for the most part -- I'm not saying this across the board because obviously in some -- like in Jakarta it's illegal to get married in an interfaith wedding. There are some places in the world where it is so verboten and so taboo to have an interfaith marriage.

It's yet so prevalent. I think that eventually the family is going to settle in. And if they don't, then you're going to have to have certain boundaries. And the boundaries are that you have to make an agreement with each other to stay close to each other, to hold onto each other, and to be a unit and united when you deal with family. And to not let Mom start bending your ear or Dad start telling you how it should be if you know that they're always negative, if they're always against the marriage. If you love someone, you have to really create boundaries to protect the union and the love.

Lee Rosen: Right. It makes a lot of sense. It's fascinating to me, just listening to you because you're in New York; I'm here in Raleigh, North

Carolina. And the range of possible religious -- all the different interfaith marriages you're dealing with is just incredible to hear about. You have so many cultures in such a small area and here I think we have a more limited number of religions that you hear a lot about, anyway. But the big conflict is, oh, she's marrying somebody who's not from the South. That's the bigger --

Laurie Sue Brockway: Right. You have a different. You know, anywhere you go there's going to be people who are not going to agree with your marriage. And that is just the state of marriage. And every time you plan a wedding you're going to have people who want to do it their way or have ideas. There's a lot of conflicts in the whole wedding planning.

And suddenly people become very religious. People who never even observed their faith in one little iota of a way maybe since they were 6 years old, suddenly when they're planning a wedding the religious stuff comes up. And it comes up again when you're getting ready to have children. So the best thing that couples can do is really talk it through and see where they're at.

You know, I had a bride whose father was Hindu, her whole family, and she married a Hindu man but he was one caste below her. She was a Brahmin. The family stood at the back of her wedding and cried. Cried. And when it came -- the father too.

When it came time for them to participate in her ceremony -- because that's part of the Hindu tradition; they do blessings -- it was like they were dialing it in. They didn't even look -- they couldn't look at the couple in the eyes. They couldn't look at the priest in the eyes. And it was one of the saddest things I've ever seen.

And the bride's mother just kept -- the bride's mother was on her side and she kept focus and she helped her get through it. And this bride and groom said, you know what? We are in love. We know we're meant to be together. And if they can't accept it, they can't accept it. We love them, but if they can't accept it, we're going to live our lives.

And I said to her, you know what? When the babies start coming they're going to turn around.

Lee Rosen: Right.

Laurie Sue Brockway: So a year and a half later I got invited to a baby shower that was catered by the bride's father. And he was happy and he was there and he was participating. Sometimes people are so stuck in their

own tradition that they cannot see past the situation until there's something greater that opens their eyes. And what's greater than a grandchild?

Lee Rosen: Sure. Sure.

Laurie Sue Brockway: That's part of your lineage and you can't reject your grandchildren.

Lee Rosen: It's interesting.

Laurie Sue Brockway: There was a --

Lee Rosen: No, you go ahead. I'm sorry. You go ahead.

Laurie Sue Brockway: There was another couple. Because I haven't had a whole lot of real tragic stories, but I have had a few brides and grooms who have had some really devastating experiences. One of my couples -- Omar and Jennifer, who are in the book -- Omar is a wonderful African-American man. He is a beautiful guy. And Jennifer is a beautiful woman.

The two of them fell in love in college. And her father, who was a strict Catholic-Italian, was very against it and he -- the family just really kind of nudged her out of it. So she broke up with Omar. And the two of them just couldn't live without each other. And finally, Omar reached out. They got back together. He proposed. They were planning a wedding. And in the middle of it she said, "I don't think my father's coming."

So we went over all the reasons. Basically, prejudice runs very deep in some people and she acknowledged that. And even Omar said, "You know, I love Jen. I'll do whatever I can to support her. I'm not so happy to have to deal with a guy who's prejudiced against me, but I will support my wife." And it turned out Dad did not come to the wedding.

But something happened a few months later where one of the aunts brought some pictures of the wedding to the father and the father started to think about what had happened. And he reached out. And he had actually never met Jennifer's husband, so he reached out and they all met and they're trying to work it out.

And they came from two different faith backgrounds also because Omar's family was Baptist and Jennifer's was Catholic. Still Christian, but it's still interfaith.

Lee Rosen: Right. Oh, yeah. It's just as big a deal.

Laurie Sue Brockway: Interfaith, interracial.

Lee Rosen: Right. Every one of these issues is a huge, big deal to every family. If it's going to be a big deal, it doesn't seem to matter how -- it doesn't have to be extreme for it to matter to that family. It's very interesting.

Laurie Sue Brockway: You're so right about that because what seems like a given to some of us -- they love each other, they're devoted. I mean, how many people search their lives for that one person who can be their soulmate, their true love, and who will put them above all other things? And so the skin color's a little different than they expected. So there's an accent. So the family doesn't speak English. I mean, you make adjustments.

Lee Rosen: Right. He's got a job. He's not a criminal.

Laurie Sue Brockway: For love, sometimes you make adjustments.

Lee Rosen: Right. I know. It is. It's very interesting but these things do take on a life of their own and I guess they're deeply rooted in a lot of people and it just drives them crazy.

I'm curious. When you see the couples that are really thriving in a marriage that is interfaith, interracial, whatever it may be -- bringing together different cultures -- what are you seeing in the most successful couples? What are the qualities that they are demonstrating that are really helping to make this work?

Laurie Sue Brockway: Number one, they have excellent communication and they talk to each other.

Number two, they make their relationship the most important thing. It is the priority over what other people think about it, over what other people want them to do. Their relationship to one another is number one and that is the most important. Because if your spouse is number two to your mom or your dad or a belief system, then it really is challenging. So couples who are successful find a way to make their relationship the priority and then they make their family the priority.

And they also -- I think also it's one of the deeper issues is truly accepting it within themselves. Because I think that sometimes the world mirrors our inner feelings. And I've had couples who -- once in a while I'll have a couple who just isn't quite there yet. Like, they still have their own issues or prejudices and things that they're dealing with.

And if you're not 100 percent congruent about the person you're going to marry, then it's going to be reflected in your external world. People are going to say, "Well, maybe he's not the right person. Maybe she's not the right person." But when you are 100 percent clear that this is your meant-to-be, this is your -- in Hebrew we say *besheret*, this is the person that you're meant to be with, then nothing can get past that.

And sometimes for couples it's a period of building that up. I mean, who isn't confused in a relationship? I mean, some of us -- sometimes you'll spend years with someone and you still think, "Hmm, I don't know if I can get married." I've had people who've been together for 10 years; one couple 20 years, going back and forth about whether they should get married or not. So it's a human thing. It's a relationship thing. It's not just an interfaith thing.

Relationships are hard. Putting two feet in the room with the same person is really a challenge. And it's a beautiful challenge but really being able to join your life with another person is always -- it always has challenges associated with it. So we have to tune out the family issues as much as possible.

Lee Rosen: Is there --

Laurie Sue Brockway: And I --

Lee Rosen: Go ahead.

Laurie Sue Brockway: -- you're not that religious. But if you are somebody who's a person of deep faith, then it's another issue because you have to really make clear decisions about whether you can be a person of one faith, married to someone who does not share your faith.

Lee Rosen: Right. Is there anything -- is there an ideal or a perfect interfaith marriage? Is there such a thing?

Laurie Sue Brockway: You know, I wish. Is there a perfect marriage of any kind? I think that's a great question because there really is no perfect marriage. There's no perfect relationship. Because none of us are perfect. We are all imperfect beings. We're humans.

And I think one of the things that will really help couples is to know that there just is no perfect marriage. There's great marriages. There are beautiful marriages that you build and you grow and you nurture, but there's always going to be stuff. It's either you're going to get angry at your husband who leaves his

underwear on the floor or annoyed that his mother called and talks about you. It could be anything.

Lee Rosen: Right. It is. It's complicated. But I agree with you completely.

Laurie Sue, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today and to share your ideas about interfaith marriage. Thank you so much.

Laurie Sue Brockway: It was a pleasure to speak with you. Thank you.

Lee Rosen: And thank you all for listening. Let me remind you about the book. You can get a copy of *Your Interfaith Wedding*. And Laurie Sue is a prolific author; that's just one of her many books. You can get it at Amazon.com. I end up buying everything at Amazon.com. I'm going to put a link to the book in our show notes so that you will have it.

You can also take a look at her columns. She writes at [Wedlok](http://Wedlok.com) -- which is spelled W-E-D-L-O-K -- dot com. Check those out as well.

Thank you so much for joining us. I hope that you will be back again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your comments and your feedback. Couple of ways you can reach us. Our comment line is (919) 256-3083 and you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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

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