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life advice

Don't Be a Marriage Martyr, Act With Loving Intent

Drop the self-righteous attitude and get back into the love you want with your spouse!

BY DR. NOELLE NELSON April 2013



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Who's the better spouse? Do you do all of the laundry, cooking and dishes? Do you regularly clean up your spouse's mess? Clearly you have the high ground here. Well, not so fast... what's your intent?

For example, your spouse habitually misses the laundry hamper and their dirty clothes litter the area around it. Irritated, you fuss and fume, but you toss *their* dirty clothes in and now the hamper is over-full and laundry must be done.

So, you do the laundry. When your spouse notices and thanks you for clean clothes, you say, smug as can be, "Yes, because I did it."

Confused, your spouse goes away with a vague feeling that he or she's done something wrong but doesn't really know what, and now there's separation between you and your spouse mixed with an uncomfortable distancing.

In another example, you give your spouse a compliment and for whatever reason—perhaps your beloved is distracted by something going on at work—he or she doesn't respond in kind, and maybe doesn't even say, "thank you." And you think, "I try to be nice, to pay attention to my spouse and give them compliments, and what do I get for it? Nada! They're just ungrateful and don't care!"

Yep, you definitely sound like a great spouse. You're very aware, doing your share to contribute to the health of your marriage. However, if we dig a little deeper, here's what might appear to be your true motivation, not always of course, but some of the time.

You pick up the scattered laundry not because you enjoy pitching in, but because picking it up allows you to feel "better than," as in: "Well, at least I don't dump my laundry wherever, at least I get it in the hamper. And I certainly don't let it pile up so that laundry has to be done this minute!"

You compliment your spouse, not to give them a little love in their day, but because if they don't respond positively, you can feel righteous about your "doing it right" behavior and their "doing it wrong." Your apparently loving behavior is really an opportunity for you to make your spouse wrong and yourself right, even if only in your own mind. You revel in being the "marriage martyr."

Does this make you a bad spouse? Of course not! It just makes you a spouse who sometimes doesn't match their inner intent to their outer behavior.

"So what difference does it make?" you might ask. "If I'm doing good things what does it matter why I'm doing them?"

Well, it matters because only caring intent will lead to feelings of joy and satisfaction. Doing things to prove others are "wrong" or "bad" hardens the heart. You end up bitter and resentful and eventually won't be able to get yourself to do even the outer behaviors. If you want a happy marriage, intent matters. When you give genuinely to others because you value their well-being, when you do things because you care, then you flood your own being with warmth and "good vibes" and in giving.

Take a look at your own behaviors. Be brave. Be honest. Tell yourself the truth. How much of what you do is to make yourself look "right," and how much do you do out of genuine caring for yourself and your spouse?

Then, be even braver! Make conscious decisions as to those things you want to do out of true caring, and dump as many as possible of those behaviors you would only do to make yourself "right" and your spouse "wrong." Have genuine conversations with your husband or wife about how better to handle the laundry or whatever you do out of self-righteousness rather than clubbing him or her with your smug sarcasm.

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