
Already golden: reflections on a marital voyage

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He looks so young. Outside that picture of their first apartment in the Great Northeast, my father was only 22. He and my mom look like quintessential newlyweds in front of the tree back in 1962, when they celebrated their first Christmas together.

My parents' old photos present a window into what life looked like for a young couple five decades ago. Better dressed, even when they were hitting the Atlantic City boardwalk for an Easter Sunday stroll. The young homeowner reading the newspaper on his webbed lounge chair on the awninged patio of his newly purchased twin house. Heading off on the chairlift together on a vacation trip to the Great Smoky Mountains.

The pictures of my mom that strike me the most are those of her as a bride. Resplendent in a silk organza gown embroidered with lace and seed pearls, she arrived for her big day at Holy Family Church in Roxborough looking like she could give Kate the Duchess a run for her money. My mother was no society bride: After the wedding, she headed off to a duplex in Burholme. But even though they were from blue-collar families, you can see the value and importance they and their families placed on marriage. Pomp and circumstance were the order of the day as their families and friends celebrated their union at the Philadelphia Rifle Club.

In the pictures from a few years later, the man with the little baby girl looks almost a little too young to know what he was doing to have started a family. Being a parent myself now, I have much greater appreciation for all of the sacrifices and responsibilities that come with being somebody's parent. You almost wonder if the guy really knew what he was getting into when he put the ring on his 20-year-old bride's finger and promised for better or worse and to accept lovingly whatever children might grace their union.

Fifty years later, after a life replete with hardships and happiness together, they have two children and three grandchildren. Neither went to college, but they have a single home in the suburbs, have taken several European vacations and are looking forward to a comfortable retirement together. Life has turned out well. But no doubt, poised at either ends of the aisle 50 years ago, they were taking a risk, not knowing of the tumult that would soon roil society, tossing many into the sea of divorce.

I read about how many young people today have lost faith in marriage. Many are children of divorce and have seen firsthand the lingering devastation of an unhappy marriage. You can understand how they'd have reservations. But even in the more tranquil world of 1962, there were certainly no guarantees that it would all be happily ever after.

Before they were married, my parents simply did their best to get to know each other well

enough to get a sense of whether the union could work for the long haul. They found jobs and saved money, and prepared as much as they could for their marital vocation. Once they set sail as Mr. and Mrs., they simply did whatever they needed to do at the time to build and nurture a home and a family, sacrificing when they needed to fund a bigger purchase like a dining room set or a house or school tuition for the kids, arguing it out when they didn't see eye to eye, and ultimately doing the best they could to be responsible citizens, loving partners and devoted parents.

Now the Conrads have qualified to take home a rare trophy: a marital union that's reached the golden mark. Perhaps keeping it simple was the key to it all. In some ways, because my parents were never distracted by the big career or expensive, shiny objects, it was easier to focus on what should be the central and most important thing to all married people: their family. Work was work, and you had to have and manage money in order to support your household, but that was only a means to an end. Maybe we've lost too much of that sort of perspective today.

So as my parents mark this milestone, I'd like to toast their most supreme accomplishment: a life together that is beautiful in its simplicity and its fidelity to those vows they spoke a half-century ago. Thanks for your inspiring example of what truly matters in life.

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