

4

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you can give your partner
is your own happiness.*

CHARLIE: Like many of us, I grew up with the notion that marriage requires self-sacrifice. I believed that successful couples put each other's needs ahead of their own and forego pleasures that their mate doesn't share. It's no wonder I wasn't exactly jumping out of my skin to settle down. In the shadow of my independent, commitment-averse self was the side of me that craved connection, affection, and (let's be honest) regular sex. So, at the age of twenty-five I got married. Given my beliefs, it's not surprising that my feelings were somewhat mixed when Linda and I tied the knot. In one candid wedding photo, my look of consternation exposes this ambivalence.

For me, the hard part of marriage was deconstructing the beliefs that I had been caught up in and creating a life in

which I could experience real happiness. With time, effort, and support, this intention has been, for the most part, fulfilled, largely due to the help I've received from Linda. She gave me the encouragement and trust that I was often unable to give myself along the way. Linda helped me to see that I didn't have to become a martyr and sacrifice myself in order to make our marriage work. She showed me that my responsibility to create a fulfilling, joyful life for myself was as important as anything that I could do for her or the kids. "The greatest gift you can give us is your own happiness," she said. "We don't want a husband and a dad who feels unhappy and burdened, no matter what else you're bringing home." I had to hear that message many times and in many ways before I finally understood it.

I learned that my inner responsibilities to myself were as important as my outer responsibilities to others. I came to trust that the quality of my own life is no less important than the quality of my family members'. It is my job, not Linda's or anyone else's, to see to it that my needs are met and that I experience fulfillment in my life. This has probably been the most valuable lesson I've ever learned, and it's one that I keep relearning at deeper levels. I've come to see that responsibility, in the truest sense of the word — responsibility for oneself — isn't an obligation or burden, but a gift and a blessing.

Most of us come into a marriage looking for what we can get from the arrangement. Love, attention, security, pleasure, companionship, and distraction from unpleasant feelings or thoughts are some of the things that compel us into partnership. When we no longer hold our partner responsible for

the fulfillment of our needs, everything changes. This is easier said than done, but it is perhaps the single most important thing we can do to ensure that our relationship will be mutually satisfying. Taking care of ourselves isn't selfish; it's the most generous and responsible thing we can do.