

A True Anniversary Celebration

Coming through a difficult season of marriage and what I've learned since

By Shauna Niequist | posted 7/27/2011

Last night for our anniversary Aaron and I went to Marché, a French restaurant that we used to go to years ago but hadn't visited in ages. Marché serves the best steak frites I've ever had, with perfect little cups of béarnaise and red wine sauce. The restaurant is part Moulin Rouge and part Alice in Wonderland, deep reds, blues, and golds, with umbrellas hanging from the ceiling and super-oversized drum lampshades.

For the first couple years, it seemed like anniversaries were a little like birthdays when you're in your mid-20s—seriously, it's an accomplishment to just stay alive another year? We get to go out for a fancy dinner just because we stayed married? I like a fancy dinner as much as the next girl, but it seemed like a lot of fuss for just making it through.

That's what I used to think, before several good friends' marriages ended, before I experienced firsthand just how difficult marriage can be, before we faced our hardest season yet by far. I wouldn't say we have a hard marriage, but I'd say we had a really hard season. This year, we understand that staying married is indeed an accomplishment, and that staying married well—connected and intimate and giving—sometimes requires every last thing we have to give.

If you've been married long enough, and if life has been hard enough, if you're very honest, you've had tiny, nearly invisible moments when you look over at that person, watching TV or getting a glass of water and you think, *Who is this person? How did we get here?*

You never feel this on your wedding day. You can't even imagine it on your wedding day. But life invades, and brokenness, immaturity, and sin invade and all of a sudden, there you are, and you start to believe that you might not ever be able to get back to where you were, all shiny and perfect and bursting with love, on your wedding day.

What does it mean that neither of us can remember what we did for last year's anniversary? I even checked the calendar on my computer—the day is blank. I think maybe we went to Rose's or The Green Well, but it certainly didn't impress itself deeply on our minds. We could tell ourselves it was because we were just moving back from the lake, a month after the miscarriage. We could blame it on the fact that the week of our anniversary, we had our kitchen torn apart, had the world's largest garage sale, and still didn't know if we were moving to Chicago or not.

But you don't forget anniversary dinners because things are busy. You forget anniversary dinners because you both know that you didn't have much to celebrate that year. And thankfully, blessedly, this anniversary feels really different from the last. We're *back* this year, back to the connected, rich way of living we'd experienced up until the last season, and we're glad to be back. We've weathered something, and it's added a layer of sweetness, appreciation, depth to our life together.

For a while we were alternately at each other's throats or isolated under the same roof. We said terrible things to each other, gripped tightly to unrealistic expectations, failed to forgive, even when we promised we would. But we're inching our way back, and I'm so grateful. We're back because we began listening to each other at what seemed like the last possible moment. We were heading for a crash and we both knew it, and turned to each other in the nick of time—*Okay, tell me again. Really, tell me.*

In our best, gutsiest, most honest moments of the last year, we said things to each other that we never imagined saying out loud to anyone, things we were afraid of, things we couldn't bear. And those ugly honest confessions bloomed into a new intimacy, a new protectiveness, a new promise to walk together, and better than before. The connectedness of marriage is almost like being a twin, knowing someone's voice and hands and language as well as you know your own, and the honesty of it, right at the core, when you get to the core, is stunning.

Marriage is more than a contract, with partners and stipulations and *if you, then I* arrangements. It's a messy, beautiful, living, breathing thing, full of dreams and history and patterns and memories, and this is the deal: you can make your point all day long, and you can even be right about your point, but if you stop listening, if you stop really hearing and seeing that other person, something fundamental will be lost. You can try to push and pull all you want, hoping for change. But more often than not, if you do that, I think you'll find two people bruised and exhausted, but not really changed.

So on our eighth anniversary, we're shoring up the distance we created and working hard to recapture the good things that have been there all along. We're working on loving each other just as we are right now: unfinished, unvarnished, in the middle of all the mess, in some ways really different from each other, and in some ways very similar. This year we've decided to lay off each other, to trust that life and God and pain will instruct us when necessary. We're committed to helping each other through those moments, instead of pouring salt in raw wounds and pushing on tender spots, our immaturity disguised as altruistic desire for the other to grow.

In some moments during the last season, we wanted the other to grow because it would have suited our needs better, and that's not nearly good enough a reason. We tried to teach each other lessons that we realized after the fact weren't ours to teach. Life will teach us things, and there are times for marriage to teach us, but there are also times for marriage to be a safe landing spot when life is instructing us rather brutally.

In the space that's been created now that we've let a few things go, we're finding all sorts of beautiful things blooming into life once again—the reasons we fell in love, the things we used to laugh about that stopped being funny for a while and are now, blessedly, funny again. The specifics of that season, we're finding, are not nearly as important as the things that have stayed the same: Aaron is still the most fascinating person I've ever met, the most creative, most truly original person I've ever known. And I can still make him laugh really hard, no small thing. We love to be together as much now as we did back then, feet touching as we read in bed or at a concert of a band he loves or a restaurant I've been dying to try. What brought us together still holds us together, and what we've learned in this last season helps to bind that original connection even more tightly.

I was not afraid during that dark season that Aaron and I were going to split up. I didn't think either of us were going to cheat or leave. But I was, in my most private, fearful moments, afraid that the damage would be irreparable, and that we would slide into being one of those couples who has closed their hearts to each other in the deepest way. We'd continue to live together and raise a child together and watch TV together at night after long days. But I was afraid we'd lose that thing, that deep trust and connection, that willingness to be vulnerable and to try again and risk being hurt again. That's what I was afraid of.

And of all the things I'm thankful for right now, the restored connection between us might be at the top of the list. We made it through and into a new, better place. And so maybe that's what I want to tell you if you're married and you think the damage is done. I thought that, too, a couple times over the last few years. But our hearts are more elastic than we think, and the work of forgiveness and transformation and growth can do things you can't even imagine from where you're standing now.

When we first got married, we used to say to each other, this is the love story of my life. *You're the love story of my life.* And it's as true as ever tonight. It's a good love story, one about redemption and growth and forgiveness and repairing the damage two people can incur if they're not careful.

People joke about the seven-year itch, and they ask, with various euphemisms, how you keep the spark alive after the honeymoon is over. I'm sure there are as many answers to that question as there are married couples, but I'll tell you something that we've found. You know what's really, really sexy eight years into a marriage? Apologies. Nothing has connected and reconnected us more than honesty, than taking responsibility, than seeing the damage we've wrought and working hard to make it right. Around our house, apologies are sexy.

The best gifts we can give each other this year are apologies and acceptance, gifts we should have been giving each other all along, but forgot for a season, in the midst of hurt feelings and tangled conversations. So here we are: saying we're sorry, letting go, accepting, listening closely for the first time in a long time.

Happy anniversary, Aaron. I know we'll remember this one, and not just for the steak frites.

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