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## For Better or For Worse?

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**D**espite our pledge when we marry, we don't consider what "in sickness and in health" might require. Perhaps it is best that most of us are blissfully unaware of what life eventually can bring to us.

"Although it's illogical, illness can feel like betrayal, a miscarriage of marital hope and promises," suggests author Beth McLeod in her book, *Caregiving: The Spiritual Journey of Love, Loss and Renewal*. The losses are great — companionship, security, intimacy and our dreams. However, out of the heartache of caring for a partner comes lessons to inform us, strengthen us, build our faith, and set examples for the next generation.

Harlan cares for his wife, Carol, who has dealt with chronic back pain for almost a decade. Only in their 40s, they have searched for diagnosis and relief everywhere they know. Harlan says the physical and logistical elements, no matter how frustrating, are easier than providing emotional support and dealing with feeling responsible for his wife's self-esteem. "When Carol is okay, she's a joy to be around — smart, funny, warm, compassionate. The problem is she is not okay an awful lot of the time. What I've had to do, more than anything, is recognize my anger, because rationally you know this is nobody's fault. And you know that however bad you are feeling, she's feeling worse.

"My wife knows she's sick, and there's always the question, 'Am I ever going to get better — or well?' We want off the roller coaster, but dumping her in a nursing home or divorce and remarriage are not among the possibilities for me. The great hope is that we'll get back to a normal life. If we can't, then I hope she comes to terms with it in such a way that she can at least enjoy the life she has to the greatest level possible."

As Harlan and Carol, and multiples of other couples, have faced the heartaches of chronic illness, they have been called to change their familiar ways. Beth suggests that in caring for a spouse, "We learn that only the present is given to us and that [it] is our choice how to react to it. ... It is in the now we live, and in the now that we can give."



A few important action steps to consider now:

- Talk about illness and dying while you are both still healthy.
- Create legal and financial documents to clearly state your wishes. Update these documents every few years and/or when there is a change in family composition.
- Learn to identify uncomfortable emotions and talk about them so hurts and misunderstandings don't fester.
- Tell your children where your important papers are kept. Discuss estate matters and end-of-life issues with them before a crisis hits.
- Develop support networks and educate yourselves to meet the challenges that may become your reality.
- As needed, delegate responsibilities so you can retain the more important aspects of your partnership without fatigue or resentment.
- Continue to build your love, your faith in God and His wisdom, strength and power.

Remember, your children will always need the attention of their parents. Involve them in any illnesses and care plans as they develop, so they will know you are all still a family despite disruptions.

Susan E. Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, and she is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.