

Marriage Preparation

Knowing yourself and your partner

By **Marcia Jedd**

AN ANCIENT Chinese philosophical work called the *Tao Te Ching* says knowing others is intelligence, but knowing yourself is true wisdom. For those embarking on the unknown and exciting journey into marriage, a good sense of your own temperament, values and characteristics — as well as those of your partner and how the two entities will interact — is a powerful tool.

A better understanding of yourself and your mate is the whole point of many marriage preparation programs offered by churches today. Acceptance of and respect for both the self and partner follow. To that end, the Basilica has had a strong set of marriage preparation programs for more than ten years.

“We like couples to start their marriage preparation about a year before they hope to be married. We know the closer they get to the wedding date, the less objectivity they have to look honestly into their relationship,” says Nancy Keller, director of marriage ministry at the Basilica since 1997. The multifaceted ministry offers a variety of programs for both engaged couples and those already married.

The Basilica takes a three-pronged approach for its pre-marriage or marital preparation programs, which are required for couples marrying at the Basilica. The first is a written

inventory designed to facilitate discussion with a mentor couple on the important topics related to marriage. This is later followed by a temperament retreat based on a temperament analysis profile. Finally, engaged couples attend a two-hour wedding workshop to review the nuts and bolts of selecting music, Scripture readings and other aspects of planning their wedding at the Basilica.

The pre-marriage inventory and the temperament retreat are tools to help engaged people know more about their marriage partner and themselves. The inventory, called PREPARE, was developed locally by a Lutheran minister, the Rev. David Olson, and is used all over the country. Using it, each person completes an extensive questionnaire that delves into his or her values and attitudes surrounding religion and spirituality, relationships, family, parenting, finances and more.

Participating couples then are required to meet either with Keller or a designated mentor couple to review the results of their inventory in a series of meetings ranging from three to six weeks depending on the couple and their needs. The Basilica currently taps into the expertise of some twenty couples, representing a variety of pairings, including interfaith and second marriages. The program is always

looking for more married couples willing to share their experience with couples in the pre-marriage program.

After completing the inventory, couples attend the day-long temperament retreat to review their individual characteristics and temperaments. Keller is clear in pointing out that a person's temperament is not the same as the characteristics of personality. "Our personality is the outward mask we put on to the world. Our temperaments lie at the core of who we are. It will never change," Keller says. Five temperament types are identified in the assessment, and there can be combinations thereof. These are *sanguine* (typically described as extroverted, enthusiastic), *choleric* (leader, needs to be in control), *phlegmatic* (balanced, patient and low energy), *melancholic* (analytical, artistic), and *supine* (servant nature, dependent). Only a couple of descriptors that characterize each temperament are noted.

A person's temperament profile then is applied to three key areas: social needs, need for control and independence, and need for affection. As Keller suggests, the focus of the retreat is to assess oneself and one's partner in each of these areas, providing a barometer of sorts for each couple, showing where each partner falls in each category. For example, a woman might be a highly social person, but her fiancé might have a high need for solitude. Learning how to compromise and interact, given one another's differences, is indeed at the heart of the workshop.

PETER REICHERT, along with his fiancée, Susan Baker, have completed the pre-marriage program at the Basilica and look forward to their August 2003 wedding with an enlightened perspective. "The most beneficial thing the two of us were able to get out of the temperament retreat was being able to actually see each other's temperament," he says. Reichert says he knew of some of the differences between Susan and him, but the workshop afforded a "solid understanding" and

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allowed him to deeply see where their differences and similarities lie. Reichert says the commitment of time was minimal — spanning about three months — considering the value and insight he received.

The notion of opposites attracting has plenty of truth. "Many people are attracted almost innately to someone who is quite different because this person has abilities or gifts they don't have," Keller says.

Of course, not every couple is destined to be wed. Keller says only a small percentage — about a handful or less of some 140 couples entering the program each year — decide to call off their weddings. She notes most splits come because of vast differences in family values, communication or money management.

In addition to the retreat for those about to be married, the Basilica also offers a temperament workshop designed especially for married couples. "Initially, the temperament profile was designed as a counseling tool that a counselor can use in marital counseling, especially in crises, because it can give them a real understanding of what's at the heart of their issues," Keller says.

Given today's high divorce rates, typically estimated at 50 percent or even higher, the understanding of one's partner that preparation programs offer goes a long way toward a successful marriage. Keller notes research indicating that when a couple is married within

the church, they are less likely to be divorced. This is likely attributable to a number of factors, including the recognition of religion and faith in a marriage as well as the discovery and contemplation required in a pre-marriage program.

So faith and spirituality have a presence in marriage. "I talk to all couples about how important their relationship with God is, and their relationship with the church will be in their marriage," Keller says. This means a dialogue with couples about the role of prayer as an individual, as well as a couple. This can even include simple instruction on how to pray with a partner.

THE TESTS of health problems, death or other crises are often what bind a couple and meld their faith down the road. "Spirituality doesn't become vital unless you go through hard times," says Neil Clark Warren, a marriage counselor based in Pasadena, Calif., former dean of the Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Finding the Love of Your Life: Ten Principles for Choosing the Right Marriage Partner* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1992).

Warren says two people often hold the same view of God in a successful marriage. "In theology, we call it 'doctrine of God.' They also need to have a similar view of the church. It's hard if one is vitally involved in the church and one isn't," Warren says. Warren also echoes Keller when he says, "A couple needs to have a very similar understanding of how you communicate with God."

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Much of Warren's work has been around the study of marital success factors. To uncover this information, he studied more than 500 divorce cases in a process he calls a "divorce autopsy." Warren found that emotional health of each party in the marriage plays perhaps the most critical role in the success and the overall staying power of the marriage. "No marriage can ever be stronger than the emotional health of the least healthy partner," he says.

Similar preferences, values and character traits play a major role in a marriage. While Warren has identified fifty of those items for couples to assess within themselves and their partner, he recently narrowed the list to twenty-nine critical dimensions where most or all factors should be exact or near matches. Some of these leading areas are socio-economic background, level of intelligence, expected roles of each person in the marriage, views on parenting, education, anger management and obstreperousness (tendency to find fault).

Last, Warren looks for what he calls the "characterological health" of the marriage. "What kills a marriage itself is anyone who lies, cheats, manipulates or steals. You cannot make a marriage work with anybody like that. You lose trust and intimacy begins to die," he says.

Warren places great emphasis on finding the right partner in the first place. "The person you select has more to do with the eventual success of your marriage than anything else you do after you get married," he says. Pre-marriage programs are a firm step in the right direction. +

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