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The Exception

The existential epigram from Sartre states, "Hell is other people," and although there is often much painful truth in this truism, in our intimate relationships we might endeavor to find an exception.

My relationship of 28 years has been held fast with three simple stitches. Obligation has no province. I want to be the way that I am and the marriage supports that. It is obligated to me and not the reverse. My wife finds the environment it creates for her equally productive and freeing. That is why the marriage has lasted over 20 years, not because we stuck to our bad decision, but because the decision was good so it stuck. Completeness in oneself precedes a successful marriage. This is the first of the three principles. A good marriage thrives on an abundance of time spent "alone together" as well as the time spent interacting as a couple. This is the closeness which breathes. Each must create themselves today and every day and air, a great clean merciful expanse filled with pure air, is required. When marriage is the sharing of experience by two complete whole people, its longevity and quality are assured. A whole person grasps their own motivations and can share the truth with their partner, rather than make their partner the victim of their truth. Two incomplete people will share their needs and lies and nurture them as if they are true. The partner who says, "I am nothing without you," is tragically and deeply sick. Marriage creates no one. Nothing is easy, but a complete partner, a whole partner who owns their past can hear a truth which would be unavailable to an incomplete person, one too small, too wounded to listen and hear the truth if their ego's needs were not met, or even denied. A complete person loves to solve the puzzle: to unriddle their own self-deceptions, and revels with their partner in this game!

A good marriage makes sport and fun of growth. Complacency steals our vitality to leave us flat as a stale drink. Marriage has humor with which to combat this complacency and never tires of poking complacency with this and every other sharp refreshing stick. A good marriage keeps one alive, curious and restless, and I am sure only a whole person could stand it! Self-deception is never more humorous than when it's seen by the unforgiving sarcastic eyes of one who knows you well. A lucky man has his sad complacency answered by the humor of another who knows to expect better of him. Weakness has no quarter here, it's too funny. Who could take it seriously? Who could see and still behave this way?

Completeness and humor are the first two stitches which have sustained my marriage and so only the third remains. By far the most important of the three, the word which best captures the idea is "resolution." The supreme enemy of all long-term relationships is the resentment which builds up and develops from an ever-increasing unaddressed emotional toll, accrued in countless painful, unresolved conflicts. Misguided maxims like, "Don't sweat the little stuff," are the doom of a long-term relationship. After living with someone for nearly 30 years now I can assure you that any and every time someone's feelings are nicked, the circumstances and their implications are fully analyzed and exhaustively discussed, and solutions derived, along with whatever apologies are in order. No detail is spared, and resolution must be complete with no emotional residue remaining to accumulate

and form the fatal shift in attitude whereby you can no longer stand the way they chew, or clear their throat and brush their teeth. At the earliest possible time every issue must be drained of all bitterness, a solution arrived at to avoid its reoccurrence and full restoration of all respect then attended. These small injuries are a cumulative slow poison which may even destroy a relationship that may be able to stand firm and weather the big storms, only to surrender to inattention, and rot from within. "I can't stand the little things about him anymore. I get sick when I hear the sound of his car in the driveway. I wish he would drive back out again." "Her mannerisms all annoy me. I hate the way she taps her spoon." These are the voices of contempt and derision you will hear emerge to soothe the hurt of feelings which have been repeatedly injured without redress. Both parties must be willing to ferret these troubles out, and see them to their completion. There is no little stuff. If left unresolved it all adds up to an underlying feeling of disgust, which is the death of the relationship. This can be avoided by being emotionally responsible in all matters that bruise feelings, which are never avoided or plumbed short of full resolution, so no residual bitterness remains.

Many marriages last the years and test time to torture their participants. Duty, virtue, fear, pain and guilt may conspire to encourage great endurance to bear the suffering of your bad marriage. Misery can be unending, so it is not endurance that proves a good marriage, but lightness and the tears that come from a heart which still cares too much. Although we are all truly alone and can not know the being of another, it is the luckiest who finds another worthy, rich enough in life, with whom he might share his own.

I am afraid the wave comes and I must confess a lie as I stand before you and trumpet my exception. It is a lie of omission which I hope you can forgive, since I will surrender the missing information here. I have mentioned that clean air, distance to be alone, is necessary for independent self-creation and here is where the clue lies. We may be together as islands in a sea wrapped in clouds. Together upon a mountain top, it is tempting to imagine the clouds and sea are illusions and we might step from one sun-drenched peak to the next but the clouds do not hold us and we fall through into a swollen sea, always and again alone. This is why we need air and must be sure the work of self-creation is well and thoroughly done! The exception is notable because it is unusual, precious, because it is rare. Often are the times when the sea alone acknowledges my hurt feelings when I am not heard, in the awkward silence, the fight when we agree but still fight, or the aloneness which laps up familiar, cold and indignant saying, "As if you could imagine otherwise, of course you are alone." So I am chastised by the sea which is indignant in reclaiming me, jealous I have left her. For a moment I had escaped, and I remember the mountain top with its royal carpet of clouds, inviting me to dare the next, and so I am able to reach my cold hand from the sea to try again, and find sun and shower are both sweet from atop a mountain, when compared to the sea which jealously separates us, leaving us sure only in our own creation. When the sea's grasp is thwarted, and her clouds pierced by mountains which know the sun and how it makes every cloud into a carpet, the sun looks and is heartened, warmed for the sight and remarks, "It is an exceptional thing." Like dignity these moments can be elusive. If such things were simple, self-creation and the solitude which foster it would be unnecessary and living through others would be a good idea. Of course living through others will fail, and self-creation is the foundation any relationship needs first before such a rare moment together with sun and sky. The sea is everywhere, undrinkable and thirsty for my company. I become desperate for fresh water, pure and divine, its beads roll off my tongue and then gone, alone if complete I reach skyward, even though I now find myself at ease on these familiar

waters, no longer afraid to be bobbing, drifting hopefully in my jealous salt sea. There is then a need for completeness before this journey begins, a love of the sea which is needed to sustain one through the tumult. If both can not swim they will both drown. Only two accomplished athletes can achieve the exceptional, and swim close enough to be heard, even if only for a moment, over the lashing sea which separates us all, each from the other.

Now from the crest of a rising swell, I see a shadow floating far away over the arched back of the sea, and I know it is you. Let us make another mountain top, swimming ever faster toward each other. Do I hear your laughter? Can we swim fast enough to pile the water between us higher and higher, as we move ever closer, to pinch up the sea into a mountain top where I hear your every whisper, and we might warm the sun to happiness and gaze below, to see the still golden curve of eagles wings outstretched, circling, gliding silently above the clouds?

For more information on Rich Norman's books, including *This New Day– Self Creation: The Wisdom of an Idiot*, from which this excerpt was taken, please go to:
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