

Hello friends,

My husband, Erik, and I were recently given the honor to speak about compassion and marriage at our niece's wedding. That doesn't sound too hard, does it? We certainly had plenty of material to pull from over the past 27 years of married life. However, quickly into our preparations and conversations that began months ago, we realized we had NEVER partnered before in giving a talk. The process brought out a myriad of parts I'll share more with you another time!

Over the years, we've composed entertaining Schmidt Happens annual mailings for close friends and family, but collaborating in this way was a new endeavor and took just a smidge longer than we anticipated. Condensing nearly three decades of reflections from a philosopher and a psychotherapist into a twelve minute talk was no small feat, but an honor we took seriously and embraced with care and intention. I took a photo of each of the locations we worked on the talk in the week before the wedding-- a slightly pressured adventure!

This collaborative process was an enlightening exercise in communication, honesty and flexibility. We're still learning things about one another even after this long! A number of the young couples present requested a copy so they could continue to reflect on the content more carefully--a humbling, unexpected gift.

Here is the twelve minute version—with hopefully more reflections to come.

Zielson Wedding Talk by Laura & Erik Schmidt

September 10, 2022, South Yarmouth, MA – Flax Pond

Laura: Good morning, everyone. It's a joy to share in this special day of celebration with Team Zielson! Erik and I feel a special connection to Anya, and now Tucker, because Anya is one month older than our marriage. Her birth determined our wedding date, because there was no way we would get married without Mark, Megan and baby Anya present. We have watched, nurtured and loved our 'lil wedding weed grow and mature like a child of our own. Now, 27 years later, we get to honor you at YOUR wedding!

Anya and Tucker, we have tremendous respect for the partnership you've already worked so hard to build. You are both insatiable learners. You ask the hard questions—of yourself and one other.

You look as deep and wide as the fjords of Iceland to find the answers that genuinely resonate with you. You think things through on your own terms and unapologetically find the clarity, confidence, and peace inside that you so earnestly seek. You do this with courage and conviction, even when those answers startle those you love.

I have worked as a therapist for nearly 25 years and I can't recall a couple who has worked (and played!) as hard as you, at this stage in their relationship. Voluntary pre-marital counseling is a pretty tough sell, (big surprise :) because most couples aren't ready or even aware of the important questions you've already been asking for years. Your honesty, courage, and directness individually and as a couple inspires us deeply.

Erik: What is compassionate marriage?

Compassion includes the feelings and motivations that arise when you respond to another person's suffering. Buddhism pairs it as a noble attitude with appreciative joy or finding joy in another person's happiness.

Compassion is not the same as empathy, or trying to feel another person's pain. That can be presumptuous, and it makes the response more about you than the other person. It emphasizes the power of your imagination rather than the significance of what the other person is going through.

That brings out why we find the common wedding phrase that two become one gets it backwards. We have found that it's more helpful to think of this as the day when one become two. That is why compassion lies at the heart of marriage. It's how we grow together and it's how we get from hard times to gratitude. Even life altering accidents and devastating illnesses can be embraced. Traditional wedding vows often include the phrase "in sickness and in health", but that paints a misleading picture. It encourages you to expect life altering accidents or devastating illnesses, but suggests they are the exception, an episode we will have to put up with for a time but then put behind us.

In our experience, it often doesn't work like that.

Don't get us wrong, life together is beautiful. But everything can go wrong in an instant. Hopefully, compassion will emerge in those dark moments. When it does, it lifts the high points on days of joy, like today. But the origin behind those happy moments can be found in the darkest times. As we often hear in the mindfulness community, "No mud, no lotus."

There are, however, several steps in the journey from dark times to closeness and joy that we would like to share with you.

Laura: Step 1 Relationships start in passion, but flourish through compassion.

One of Anya and Tucker's favorite writers, Alain de Button, often starts with the ancient Greeks, who had more words for love than skiers have for snow. For the Greeks, *eros* or passion is grounded in aspiration.

We fall for the people who enable us to experience ourselves as the person we hope to become. We want to be smart, we want to be strong, attractive, funny, whatever

— We fall for people who give us a glimpse of ourselves as that person. That’s why erotic love is so closely tied to the unique pain that comes in breakups, separations, divorce, death, unhappy partnerships. These losses can feel so personal and devastating.

When we fall in love and when we marry, we hope or assume it will seal everything. We think a wedding will put us on the road to becoming the people we hope to become.

“But as de Button says, *“Marriage ends up as a hopeful, generous, infinitely kind gamble taken by two people who don’t know yet who they are or who the other might be, binding themselves to a future they cannot conceive of and have carefully avoided investigating.”*

Erik Step 2: Marriage is not about making a rational choice

My own academic life started with a simple question: When can an irrational choice count as reasonable? Should we understand the biggest and most personal decisions in life as efforts at maximizing our prospects, or trying to increase our chance of getting more of whatever it is we want in life? The answer I found in our marriage was that we flourish when we move beyond the act of making comparisons. Marriage is not a rational choice.

Shortly before our wedding, I sat through a grad seminar on rational decision theory and I kept excitedly sharing with Laura that nothing about the choice to marry someone counts as rational. The evidence is the wrong type: it’s an absolute choice based on finite information. It’s bad induction — all my past failures give me confidence

that this relationship will finally work out. Or the comment that caused a big engagement blowup — the success conditions for marriage lie in the future, when it can be too late to respond. I thought it was so romantic to say, “Think about it. We simply can’t know we made the right choice for at least 20 years.” (Yeah, that went over well)

Marriage isn’t a rational choice. It’s closer to a step of faith. It’s a wild leap to trust in the unknown. It isn’t rational because it’s not a matter of comparison, even if we are tempted to compare our partners with someone we meet or with some imaginary person we wish they would become. Marriage is not about comparison. It’s putting yourself alongside another person who is different from you.

Laura: Step 3 Compassion is not about guessing or intuiting the other person’s mind.

There is a common illusion in relationships:

Laura: “Wow! He knew just what I was thinking before I even said a word!”

Erik: Or “She intuits my every need. We don’t even have to talk. We just sit with each other like two buddhas in a canoe.”

Laura: In time that leads to presuming that if this person loves me, they should *know* without me having to say it. Why should I have to spell it out?!

But this is a mistake. No-one can read minds--even after decades together. Love and compassion are both rooted in curiosity and listening, not guessing and assuming.

We’ve all heard these words used by the parent reassuring their upset toddler: “Use your words. Tell me what you need, sweetheart.”

Expect to be surprised by your partner. Some of our closest moments have come when we put our own agenda or assumptions aside and simply listened with patience and an open-heart.

Erik: Step 4 Compassion isn't the same as being generous

It can feel like it, but generosity can also be a way to disguise control.

I can personally be generous to a fault. When I see a need, I feel compelled to fill it. But what pulls me back in marriage is when I see how being generous sometimes leaves less room for Laura to grow. The impulse to give to your partner can feel like it arises out of compassion, but it isn't always compassionate in the end.

When I taught overseas without Laura, just a year into her brain injury when she was still very dependent on me, she had to problem solve and figure things out on her own back home. That was scary but also empowering for her.

For me, the impulse to give too much comes out of my need to be needed, which can be a great comfort, but it actually distracts me from compassion – from giving the other person a chance to grow or change on their own. It's all too easy to give so much that the other person comes to depend on you. That's not compassion. It does not affirm their potential or their agency.

Laura: Step 5 Compassion leads to self-compassion.

It's usually much easier for me to extend compassion towards someone else than towards myself. Can any of you relate?

After my brain injury, I found myself unemployed, socially isolated and entirely dependent on Erik for my existence—for years. One of my greatest fears in life is to be a burden, and that's all I was. I couldn't offer anyone anything, and my feeling of worthlessness was nearly unbearable.

One evening I broke down, sobbing, "I'm such a lug,"

Without missing a beat, Erik looked at me with soft, loving eyes, squeezed my hands and gently whispered, "But you're MY lug."

In those 4 words, Erik acknowledged the difficulty the injury presented. He didn't deny it or sugar coat it. AND, he held my experience with genuine compassion and love.

'It's ok, Laura. I'm here. I got you. We're a team and I'm not going anywhere.'" I had to borrow self-compassion from Erik for a long time, until I was able to generate it for myself, and tell myself those words when I need to hear them the most.

ERIK: Step 6: As compassion becomes intertwined with self-compassion, seek connection by balancing independence and closeness.

Our need for togetherness exists alongside a need for separateness. One does not exist without the other. As the French Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion puts it, "loving requires distance and the crossing of distance." We wholeheartedly agree. It's a dance. And it's a balance you won't always get right. The excesses and deficiencies of intimacy and closeness can be hard to avoid.

If we allow ourselves to get too close then there is nothing more to transcend, no bridge to cross, no one to visit on the other side, no other internal world to enter. When people

become too fused—when two become one—paradoxically, connection can no longer occur.

Separateness is a precondition for connection and that's the paradox of intimacy. It takes honesty and trust to unhook and spend time apart. Separation nurtures compassion and appreciation for the other that ultimately brings you closer together.

Time spent alone reminds us that we are autonomous, separate beings. We each have our own points of view, our own thoughts, and we author our own actions. The opposite of compassion turns the other person into an object or a thing. And it's hard to be passionately in love with a thing. In fact, that's the opposite of *eros*.

Laura: We don't choose someone because they are just like us, or because they look like the best piece to complete our puzzle. We love someone because they are unique and different. That's the spark that won't die. As one of my favorite family therapists, Virginia Satir wrote, "We meet on the basis of sameness and grow on the basis of our differences."

Compassion draws you closer by embracing your separateness. Each of you is an exquisite, precious individual. You are separate and together. You. I. We.

Erik: Or to remember my father, Wolfgang, who would love to be here today: by recalling: Du. Ich. Wir.

both of us: We love you !

(P.S. for some context on those special three German words:

Erik and I spent a 2 hour layover in the Munich, Germany, airport in July, en route to Slovenia to begin our 27th wedding anniversary celebration gravel bike tour. Our relationship has a long history bike touring!

While waiting for our plane to Ljubljana, I wandered into a nearby gift shop and noticed a postcard with 3 simple words that perfectly embodied our conversations preparing for this talk--simply and completely reflecting the separateness and togetherness present in long term partnership. Du. Ich. Wir. (You. I. We.)

I'm typically tempted to buy nearly every wonderful card I ever lay my eyes on and have drawers of cards on hand to choose from for just the perfect occasion. And, I've been trying harder the past few years NOT to continue this pattern-- to try and use the numerous cards I've already purchased, or to make my own—imagine that?! The cost of an item is also storing and keeping track of it.

So, proud of myself for staying strong and resisting temptation, I returned to Erik empty handed and told him about the timely postcard—in German even (a language and culture deeply imbedded in both our families. I assumed he'd be relieved. one less thing to keep track of and avoid carrying on my back the next three weeks throughout Slovenia, Austria and Croatia.

To my surprise, Erik said (possibly for the first time EVER in a situation like this!) I had to go back and get the postcard; it was perfect for Anya and Tucker. Not only did I buy one postcard, to frame for them as a wedding gift, but I got one for us as well. Du. Ich. Wir.

du. ich. wir 