

# The Doctor Is in ... Love

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WHAT'S it like to be partnered to a physician?

After more than 13 years, answering that question should be simple, since conventional wisdom states that 10,000 hours devoted to any pursuit now qualifies you as an expert. That said, I must regretfully confess I have no idea what it's like to be the spouse of a doctor. Ray Joseph has been pursuing medicine as long as I've known him, so in a very real way the two are inseparable. I only know what is: I am living with my favorite person on the planet, and he does happen to be a doctor.

When people ask me what secrets I might share in maintaining a long-term relationship with a doc, the first answers that spring to mind are dumb luck and stubborn perseverance. There's a good deal more to it than that, I'm sure – but I never fail to credit that kismet secret ingredient that makes any two people click.

Alchemy aside, Dr. Raymond S. Joseph Jr. and I have outlasted all seven of my mother's marriages (now a source of mirth and lore on my side of the family, while Ray's parents have been wed only to each other, and for more than 50 years). Admittedly, muddling through a same-sex relationship does present its own unique travails, although I would argue that at the eye of that maelstrom we call romance, all adult relationships are inherently the same. Are we in a relationship because we don't understand or don't like women? No, we've each been in relationships with them too, and agree that men and women are equally vexing and unfathomable.

What seems to be most clear is that no two couples make their relationship work in precisely the same way. But there are a few maxims that have helped us to bend without breaking apart over the years, perhaps paramount among them the notion that it's impossible to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Even if you're sharing a simultaneous experience of the same event, you're not sharing it from your partner's perspective.

Two people – even close ones – can see things in ways that are diametrically opposed. So while it's common for a partner to say, "I know just how you feel" when things don't go the way they'd like, Ray and I try to remember how differently we see the world. My good doctor doesn't have much of a clue about what a journalist

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does when his industry is telescoping into entropy. Nor do I possess the skill-set to comfort someone who's seriously sick, take someone's life into my hands in the operating room or huddle in a busy corridor and counsel a distraught relative. Whenever we can, we remember to say, "I don't get it, and I don't know what it's like, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." Where we got smart enough to accept our deficiencies in this area is anyone's guess. It might have been clubbed into us during Ray's residency in New Orleans. Oftentimes while we were there, I'd be frustrated about progress on the book I was writing, running late on deadlines, or livid because some celebrity had stood me up or canceled a planned interview – and Ray had no words of comfort. Likewise, he would come home from a long night on call after having taken better care of a patient over the last 24 hours than the patient had in his or her previous 24 years. I could only wake up, make a pot of coffee and pace, trying to figure a way out of this routine that was grinding us into antipathy toward each other and additional guilt for feeling that too.

Few people know what happens to a physician after a week of 14-hour days, or two rough 24-hour call nights in a 72-hour period. At Ocshner, we learned to recognize when Ray had "given all his 'nice' away." There's no more compassion, no more incisive thoughts, no more smiling and God knows, no energy to clean out a closet, hit the gym or even sit down to a conversation over dinner.

After his residency, Ray headed north to Seattle, where he had scored a regional anesthesia fellowship that was sure to make him more marketable and set him apart from the crowd. How could I object? Every time he talked about Seattle, Virginia Mason or the intricacies of regional blocks, he lit up like Christmas.

But there was no guarantee that some Seattleite wouldn't catch his eye, nor was there any certainty that I wouldn't find someone else. We concluded that New Orleans was a gauntlet that we'd run together, something like Navy Seal training except with the calluses on the inside all over our frayed nerves. We agreed that we'd had some of the best and worst times of our lives there, and we said goodbye. We still talked at least once every day by phone, and when Ray passed through Austin on his way to Seattle, I drove him and his overstuffed Honda Civic from Texas to his new home in the Great Northwest. But just as I began to think our phone calls were becoming perfunctory and friendly rather than romantic, his tone changed. He was lonely; and surprise: He Missed Me.

Then one day the cell blared with the ringtone I had just for him – Earth Wind & Fire's horn fanfare for "Got to Get You into My

Life” – and he dropped a couple of bombshells. “They offered me a job,” he said, giddily.

“Will you come?”

I said I’d have to think about it. New Orleans had been so tough. I had a morning radio show – a job I’d been invited back to, in an industry where on-air personalities are held in only slightly greater esteem than Tea Partiers have for ObamaCare. Both *The Seattle Times* and the *Post-Intelligencer* had hiring freezes in place, and my name recognition in radio didn’t reach much past the Austin City Limits. Two and a half years later, I relented, and we’ve been struggling with the new reality of my freelancing and his job – the one that makes him want to get out of bed in the morning and keeps him up at night.

Where does that leave us today? Well, not too far from where we started, since we both readily acknowledge that we have only the smallest inkling what it’s like to be in the other person’s shoes. What we do have is a mutual respect for that, and the understanding that what we want for ourselves and each other ideally rarely matches up in the practical world.

There are still days when Ray walks through the door and I can tell that he’s overdrawn his “nice” account again, just as there are days when I’m wondering where the next assignment will come from or if I’ll ever work steadily again.

But these are infinitesimal problems compared to those preoccupying most people in the world – and many of the couples we know. We both appreciate how fortunate we are to live in this time and place, and we’re determined to make the most of it.

While we both strongly endorse the idea that same-sex couples should be able to legally marry should they choose to do so, we also agree that a state-sanctioned document can lead to a sense of false security. No piece of paper ever kept two individuals apart or obliged one to love another. So in many ways, our life together is one of perpetual first dates with neither taking the other for granted. We’re two souls staring from a familiar present into an unknowable future, trusting that the only certainty is the love and respect we share. For us, nothing else matters.