

What a 20-Year Marriage Taught Me About Romance

July 21, 2015 by [MariaShriver.com](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

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Jan Ellison on falling in love and keeping the romance alive for 20 years.

By [Jan Ellison](#)

I met my husband in college, but our romantic involvement was limited to a secret crush and a half-remembered kiss in the dorm bathroom. We didn't date until years later, when I was 26, and we ran into each other at a party in San Francisco. I remember telling my mother about the party; when she asked me if he could be the one. I said yes for the first time in my dating life.

I invited him to join my family reunion in Hawaii at Thanksgiving. We took long walks together. We went kayaking. He spent time in the pool with my young cousins and my little sister, throwing them into the air and playing endless games of Marco Polo. Everyone in the family loved him, and so did I, by then, but something told me I should hold off telling him so until he told me, first.

He wasn't the kind of man to rush into wild romantic gestures and proclamations. His feelings were strong, he told me later, but he'd wanted to be sure. He didn't want to make promises he couldn't keep. He didn't lavish attention upon me like other boyfriends had, and this took some getting used to. He didn't care if I wore make-up, or if I dressed up or wore lingerie. He didn't put me on a pedestal, but considered me an equal — a person he respected and trusted.

He invited me to Florida with his family at Christmas, and when we got back, he finally said those three magic words.

When we'd been dating nine months, we chartered a sailboat in the Virgin Islands for a week. I was impressed by how calm he was steering the boat, and how patiently he showed me how to drop anchor. He challenged me to help him with the ropes, and the radio, when we sailed through

a squall. He was not an experienced sailor, but I knew he wouldn't take unnecessary risks with me on board, and I felt safe in a way I had never felt with another man.

Still, I wanted more in the way of romance. I wanted flowers, dancing, compliments, and I told him so. But I knew that even if nothing changed, he was the man I wanted to marry. He proposed a few months later, on his knees, with a beautiful diamond ring.

When we'd been married just over a year, I got pregnant with our first child. Morning sickness hit and we shifted into survival mode. Romantic notions were set aside as I threw up day and night for five months straight. I wore cotton maternity dresses that fit like burlap sacks. I could barely walk up the stairs, much less dance, and the smell of flowers made me sick.

When our son was born and settled into my arms, my husband looked down on us, and for the very first time, I saw him cry. We were moved from Labor and Delivery into the Maternity Ward, and a nurse announced it was time to breastfeed. But my son had his tongue up on the roof of his mouth, and he wouldn't latch on. A lactation consultant was summoned, but she gave up after an hour.

I started to cry. My husband put the do-not-disturb sign on the door and told me this was a mechanical problem. He held the baby in position against my breast, and right away, our son latched on and started to nurse. This was my first clue that the brand of romance I'd thought I wanted was to be eclipsed by something far more profound and enduring.

My priorities changed. I began to balk at leaving our son — and as they arrived, over the years, our three daughters — with babysitters they didn't know well, even for a few hours. My husband became the one to insist we spend time alone. He promised me the kids would be fine, and he was right. Those evenings and occasional weekends away reminded me that keeping our marriage vibrant and alive was one of the most important things we could ever do for our children.

My husband has always wanted to take our kids backcountry camping, so last summer, he planned a trip. Our kids were 17, 15, 13 and 10 at the time, busy with summer camps and jobs, so the only days we all had free overlapped with our twentieth wedding anniversary. We spent a beautiful day hiking along the southern shore of Caples Lake, near Tahoe, then traced Emigrant Creek to a glacier lake surrounded by the Mokelumne Wilderness peaks.

Our four kids worked together to pitch their tent, and we pitched ours. In the afternoon, a storm blew in. There was thunder and lightning and hail. Our kids retreated to their tent with the dog, and my husband and I huddled together in ours.

When the hail stopped, I unzipped the tent to start dinner, and stepped into a puddle a foot deep. We'd set up our tent in a flat area that turned out to be the base of a seasonal creek, turned to a pond in the storm. I laughed until my stomach hurt as my husband moved the tent to higher ground.

We lay in our tent after dinner, marking our 20-year anniversary by listening to our kids in the tent next to us playing word games and singing until they finally fell asleep. We zipped our sleeping bags together to stay warm.

“What’s on your bucket list for the next 20 years?” I asked my husband.

He replied with the most romantic thing he’s ever said to me: “This is my bucket list,” he said. “Being here together, right now.”

The Takeaway:

The gestures we long for in the beginning of a relationship may not be what will sustain it for the long term.

The most important thing we can do for our kids is nourish and appreciate our marriages. Celebrate your husband for what he does and who he is, instead of what he doesn’t do and who he is not.

This article originally appeared on [Maria Shriver.com](https://www.mariashriver.com).