

Driver's Ed

There has been an amendment to my marriage contract. I'm not referring to a legal document that was signed in the presence of a lawyer or a rabbi who may or may not have also been a notary, but an informal set of conventions that have evolved over time in the partnership.

Every marriage has one. It usually includes a tacit or explicit division of responsibilities that permits the union to function more or less efficiently on a daily basis. For example, in my marriage, I'm in charge of such details as making sure we don't run out of toilet paper, seeing to it that the dogs are fed twice daily, changing light bulbs, and brewing coffee in the morning. My husband, as we have discussed, is in charge of the remote control.

And, for most of our time together, he has been the family driver. Until recently.

I am thankful to say that the change did not come about due to an illness or a serious incapacity. But, rather, it began as a practical matter having to do with whose eyesight was better after dark: mine.

While I'm sure there was some reluctance on my husband's part to relinquish control of the steering wheel to the little woman, it had to be done. And there were definitely benefits which came with the change which

helped to assuage his male ego, benefits like, perhaps, a little more wine with dinner, and a catnap on the way home from the movies.

The perks of being a passenger obviously did not go unnoticed by my husband, for soon there were seemingly innocent requests to be chauffeured in full sunlight. Usually something like, "Could you drive? I have to make a few calls," as he reached into his pocket for the iPhone.

Let me state that I have no objection to change. Change can be healthy. It can signify that, like the Constitution, or your Facebook page, the marriage contract is a living document, capable of adapting to the needs of the present day. And I don't mind driving.

It's the driving lessons I can do without!

I have my first lesson as we are about to set out to visit some friends on a Saturday afternoon.

"You drive," he says. "I have to return some emails." Out comes the iPhone as I slip into the driver's seat.

"Why are you backing out of the garage like that?" he asks.

"Like what?" I reply.

"You're turning the steering wheel twice, when I only have to turn it once."

"So, did I hit anything?"

He returns to his emails as I successfully pull out of our driveway.

I apply the brakes as we come to a red light.

"You waited too long. You're going to ruin the brake linings."

"I have been driving since 1959 and all my brakes' linings have always been pristine," I remind him.

"Well, it's dangerous to wait so long. You can hit the guy in front of you."

I also remind him that the only person in the car to have recently caused a fender-bender was him. Suddenly, it's time for him to make another phone call.

"Why are you staying in this lane?" he asks as he finally notices that we have entered the highway. "All the other lanes are moving faster."

"Do you not see the fourteen-wheeler barreling down on my left?" I reply. "If I pull out now we're going to ruin a lot more than the brake linings."

"Well, get out of this lane as soon as you can. You know I can't stand driving in slow traffic."

"Yes," I hiss between clenched teeth, "but you're *not* driving. Isn't there someone you need to text?"

We arrive in our friends' neighborhood without further comment, and I assume the driving lesson has ended. I head toward a parking space.

"Park there," he says, his finger wagging at a different spot.

"Why?" I ask.

"It's better."

In spite of the fact that I was contemplating a divorce, we had a cheery afternoon, followed by dinner at a lovely restaurant.

"How's the wine?" I ask him as I'm sipping my club soda.

"Quite good," he answers.

"So have a little more," I innocently encourage.

Five minutes into the return trip, my darling falls asleep. Anticipating a peaceful ride home, I pray that

he does not begin to snore. I'm lucky this time. I ride in blessed silence.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I pull the car into our garage when, suddenly, Lazarus beside me strongly recommends that I back out and try it again.

Only, this time, I should turn the wheel more to the right so that when he backs out in the morning, he won't knock off the side-view mirror like he did last time—which was all my fault because I didn't park correctly.

And so the journey ends as it began.

Looking ahead, I can see that this new arrangement in our marriage is going to be a challenge. There is nothing worse than a backseat driver who is sitting right next to you. I wonder if there's a law against forcing your passenger to ride in the trunk. Whatever the penalty is, it may be worth it. It has to be a lesser offense than murder.

The Eye of the Beholder

Has this ever happened to you? You're in a restaurant. In your line of vision is another table with, let's say, three couples. You unconsciously absorb the physical details of the six well-dressed people who are about to eat their appetizers. You notice the gray hair on the partially bald men, the obviously chemically-treated hair of the women, the flashlights on the iPhones to help illuminate the menu when reading glasses aren't enough. And yes, those are hearing aids snugly tucked behind at least three pairs of ears. Your conclusion? Boy, there are sure a lot of old people in this place!

Adhering to reality for the moment, as painful as that might be, you overhear that the woman on the left is celebrating her birthday tonight. And guess what? She is, in fact, a whole year *younger* than you are. Wow, you think, she should take better care of herself!

The question is, how accurately do we see ourselves? In public places, I frequently find myself scrutinizing people I consider "older," trying to determine their ages. It's funny how I consistently conclude that they must be at least ten years older than I am.

With each passing year, reconciling my chronological age with the "me" that exists inside my head is becoming

more and more challenging. The person that lives behind my face cannot possibly be related to that D.O.B. I just wrote down on the intake form at my doctor's office.

While I can't exactly pinpoint during precisely which decade my self-view became arrested, I can assure you that my alter ego is, in fact, still paying full price for a movie ticket. And that lovely twenty-one-year-old woman calling for "Grandma" can't possibly mean me.

Contrary to what you might be thinking, I don't avoid mirrors. That would be difficult, if not impossible. I prefer to confront my reflection, rather than poke myself in the eye with a mascara wand.

But I have discovered a few tricks that I'm happy to pass along:

Be sure to place your mirror away from the possibility of naked sunlight streaming through the window. And never, never make the mistake of looking into a magnified make-up mirror while wearing a pair of reading glasses!

And what about photographs? I will admit that lately I've grown more camera shy. The person living inside my head is not always happy to be mistaken for the woman in the picture. And selfies are definitely out of the question. My arms simply aren't long enough to get the desired effects.

I know that men can have a similar reaction. My husband, for example, is frequently alarmed by his captured image, and can be heard to mutter "Who's that old man?"

And then there's my ninety-one-year-old uncle who stated the other day that his peers "look so old," implying

that he didn't see himself that way. Of course, he might be correct. I don't know his friends.

So, do I really want to know how the rest of the world views me, or do I want to continue to exist in the bubble labeled "you're as young as you feel"? After all, except for the forty-five minutes in the morning that it takes me to recover from night-time stiffness, fortunately, I feel pretty good.

The illusion is not fool-proof, however. In spite of my personal inner life, the world continually presents a series of reality checks.

The cashier behind the ticket window never asks me for proof of age when I say "one senior, please." (What can you expect? She's probably only eighteen and everyone over thirty looks old to her!)

Young men have occasionally offered me a seat on a crowded bus. I don't require it, but I accept. Pride is one thing, comfort quite another.

The bagger in the supermarket offers to help me load my cart full of groceries into my car. I flex my muscles and tell him "I'll be fine, thank you." Clearly, he has no clue that he is actually addressing a much younger woman than the one he sees before him.

In spite of considering myself to be a confident woman with real, serious values, I have a sneaky feeling that this duel between perception and reality will go on. And I will continue to derive pleasure and satisfaction to hear from someone who has just learned my age "Oh, I'm shocked. You certainly don't look it!" Proving, once and for all that I'm not like those other guys. You know, the ones in the restaurant.

Alternate Realities

Even if you are one of those people who claim to be only vaguely interested in television—and swear that you watch only PBS soap operas, British spy movies, The History Channel, or Bloomberg Business—you must be aware when a new season is upon us. I, for one, am an unabashed TV watcher, and I confess this with the same courage with which I own up to my Cool Whip addiction. I do not ask for forgiveness.

As devoted as I am to police dramas, post-mortem dissections, and *Jeopardy!*, I have so far failed to understand the public's attraction to reality TV. I have experienced it at least enough to decide that even five minutes is four minutes too long. If I had watched the Kardashian daughters when I was in my childbearing years, I probably would have run to my ob-gyn demanding to have my tubes tied.

And yet, they return, season after season. Young, well-built, bikini-clad people prancing around a remote island. Young couples jumping out of airplanes and racing around the world looking for clues. Over-dressed bejeweled fashionistas claiming to be housewives—though how they manage to get any vacuuming done between all those cosmetic surgeries is beyond me.

As I am wasting my time pondering why these shows continue to grab the ratings, I review what I have just written. Of course, I can't relate to these programs. Not only is the content totally inane, these people are simply not my demographic. Smarten up, TV executives. There are more than sixty million of us in America over the age of sixty.

And so, in the interest of eliminating age discrimination in primetime TV, I offer an alternative version to one of those mind-numbing sixty-minute time wasters:

The Real Housewives of Century Village

As an answer to *The Real Housewives of Miami*, I offer *The Real Housewives of Century Village*. The stars of the show are six friends of a certain age who reside in a retirement community which, by sheer coincidence, also happens to be located in south Florida.

The group consists of Connie, a platinum blonde; Carole, an ash blonde; Roz, a champagne blonde; and Sue, a golden blonde. Zipporah, playfully referred to by the others as "Zip the Lip," is the token brunette. Jane, the non-conformist of the group, courageously allows her hair to remain its natural gray—although this is subject to change, now that Mr. Lerner, her neighbor, has become available due to the recent death of his wife, may she rest in peace.

Connie, Carole, Jane, and Sue are widows. Roz, however, is recently divorced, her husband having left her for his physical therapist while he was recovering from a knee replacement. After forty-five years of marriage,

Roz bitterly recalls the day she watched him hobble off, leaning on his walker, with his suitcase strapped to his back. Zip the Lip is the only housewife who is still married.

For the first show of the new season, the camera pans in on each of the six *amigas* at home, preparing to meet for a shopping spree at T.J. Maxx.

The first vignette belongs to Roz, who is trying to apply her mascara while weeping over her divorce. She explains to the audience that she still loves him but, at the same time, wishes he was dead. She gets some comfort from the fact that their children are not speaking to him. As she rearranges her champagne-blonde hairdo, Roz tells the viewers that the one good thing that came out of all the intense grief surrounding her divorce was that she lost twenty pounds, and is back to her college weight. She stands up from her vanity to show off her skinny pants with matching jacket from Chico's. She dons the jewelry she recently purchased through binge buying on the Home Shopping Network, and steps outside to the parking lot to meet her friends.

Connie, Carole, Sue, and Jane are introduced consecutively. Connie, who is the most affluent of the friends (her husband owned a chain of funeral homes) walks us through her decorator-appointed condo as she searches for her Bottega Veneta handbag, which, unlike her friend Sue's—she assures us in confidence—is not counterfeit.

We meet Carole, the most indecisive of the group, in her bedroom, still in her bathrobe. Half the contents of her closet are strewn on the floor as she tries to

decide what to wear. We politely leave her to resolve her quandary.

Sue has just stepped outside and locked her door as the camera catches up with her. She is a vision in pink with her Chanel jacket and Prada sunglasses. (*But are they?*)

Practical, non-conformist Jane, the only one of the crew wearing sensible shoes, is distracted as she talks to the camera, keeping an eye out for Mr. Lerner, should he emerge from his condo. Her plan is to dash outside and “accidentally” bump into him, offering words of comfort, and a helping of home-cooked brisket. We now understand the purpose of the sneakers, which clearly do not go with her otherwise coordinated attire, complete with dangling earrings.

We are introduced to Zipporah in her kitchen, where she is still yelling at her husband about how he ruined the last night’s meal. Fresh from a French cooking class, she was intent on showing off to Connie and Sue, whom she had invited for dinner. But the stupid lout had brought home three cucumbers instead of zucchini squash, completely ruining her plans for ratatouille. Phil is saved from further debasement when Roz knocks on the door to tell Zip that everyone is waiting outside.

During the last half hour of the show, the audience is treated to a discussion about whose car they should use, and who should ride with whom. Carole, of course, is vacillating. Connie and Roz are somewhat on the outs, since Roz accused Connie of cheating at mah-jongg. And Zipporah sullies the air by telling Jane that her dangling earrings make her look like a slut.

Jane still holds a grudge against Sue for sneaking into her bathroom and taking her last Depends, leaving an empty box in the cabinet. Connie is whining because, although she has the largest, most expensive, most comfortable car, it isn't fair that she always drives.

We leave the six friends as they argue in the parking lot.

Previews of the next week's episode invite us to be flies on the wall as the real housewives of Century Village finish their post-shopping spree luncheon, and discuss how to split the check.

I hope this show is a success, because I'm already hard at work revamping other reality series. For example, in my version of *The Amazing Race*, which will be called *I'm Still Walking—That's Amazing*, ten couples compete for a grand prize, which is yet to be determined, but might be a lifetime supply of early bird dinners at the local deli. Considering age limitations and reduced stamina, the playing field will have to be modified, let's say from racing around the world to fast-walking around a gated community, while telling Phil, the host, about their latest maladies.

And my version of *Survivor*? I'm considering an intimate portrait in real time of those facing the challenges of life after being voted off the condo board.