

Learn how to argue

Love and War, the new book by James Carville and Mary Matalin, details the trials and tribulations of a power couple who could not be more diametrically opposed in their political beliefs. Everyone has asked how their 20-year marriage endures.

As a couples' therapist for more than 35 years, I find it simple. How much time do we spend talking about politics? Differences in how we allocate the major resources of a relationship — time, money, and energy — are the core concerns.

You only go to the polls, if you go at all, twice a year, for primaries and the general election. But you have to vote with your feet every day to make decisions about spending your income, taking out the trash, arranging home maintenance, putting the children to bed, buying supplies and gifts on behalf of the couple, making social plans, negotiating driving directions, deciding whether the room is too hot or cold, deciding whether tuna sandwiches actually constitute "cooking dinner," determining how clean a bathroom has to be (not to mention the orientation of the toilet seat and toilet paper roll), and choosing a vacation destination. I think Carville and Matalin have it easy if the only area where they're polar opposites is politics.

After listening for all these years to couples, as well as being in a long-term marriage, I'm convinced that the world is divided into two kinds of people, A and B. And they always find and marry each other. As therapists, we know that while opposites may attract, similarities endure. All too often, we look at the major demographic variables — social class, education, religion — and forget to ask how we like the toothpaste tube rolled. More couples argue about that than about suppside economics.

Sleep with the window open or closed? That's good for a lifetime of arguing. Go to sleep with a TV or music playing, or in complete silence? Come home from work and have a period of silent decompression, or completely debrief your partner on every aspect of his or her day? Drink right from the container, or use a glass? Beach or mountains? Use your own fork to take food from a common serving dish? Stay up late? Wake up perky?

The last one is a real killer. I, for one, wake up early in the morning and want to start the day discussing every aspect of life. My husband, not so much. Takes him a full halfhour to fully open each eyeball. I've learned after a moderate amount of training that if I say "Hello" before 9 a.m., I've used my full allotment of morning conversation.

Thank goodness for laptops, e-mail, and text messaging. I can chat early with my friends who are similarly up and bereft of chatty companions.

If I were the czarina of who is allowed to get married (and I think, with my training and education, I should be), I would insist that all couples learn how to argue effectively.

Most pretend that "we love each other so much," "we are perfect for each other," or, most annoyingly, "we're soulmates." All to pretend that they will never argue.

But they will and they should. Even though many religious ceremonies say "the two are now joined as one," the fact is that two people are going to have some differences. OK, a lot of differences, many of which you don't recognize during the courtship or honeymoon periods.

The goal isn't to avoid arguments but to use them as real opportunities to solve problems. The sin isn't arguing; it's repetitive fights without resolution. Couples only fight about several main themes; the content varies, but not the process.

When I see a couple, married or not, straight or gay, after a few weeks I learn their own "dance of anger." If they just tell me the topic of their latest contretemps, I can act out all parts — and help them learn how to address the underlying problems instead of endlessly yammering about the superficial concerns.

Besides, after a certain point in a marriage, why bother fighting? The other person isn't going to change anymore, neither are you, and you're not leaving, so accept each other and move on. As I ask couples who fight vociferously for decades about driving, Is it getting them anywhere?

Politics makes strange bedfellows. Good bedfellows don't need politics.