

# COMPROMISING FOR LOVE

How to find the middle ground between

“To hell with him!”

It's much more difficult to have a relationship than not to have one. Indeed, sometimes it takes such psychic energy and emotional fortitude that I wonder whether I'm the only one who's bothering these days. It is a speculation that, backed up by all the evidence in the media, leads me to the suspicion that if Noah built his ark tomorrow, we'd all get on one by one.

To find out whether or not that is indeed the case, I've spoken to a great many women, women both in and out of what they term important love relationships, as well as to several people who work with people trying to deal with the problems of being a couple. I learned that, while women are far from inflexible, the days when a woman compromised all for love are long gone. And this is not simply because it is more economically and socially feasible for them to go it alone. Women today, along with the people who counsel them, are wary of making compromises, unconvinced that they are intrinsically healthy or that, in the final analysis, they are right for the development of a relationship. While each person had a particular view of the matter, everyone I spoke with agreed on one thing: Compromise is a tricky business, as apt to cause disharmony between two people as harmony.

The problems of compromise become quickly apparent when one tries to define it. To some people in the field, it has purely negative connotations—of giving in and, eventually, giving up. “The woman who compromises,” says Dr. Donald Bloch, director of The Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy, “is not doing her partner any favor. She's not good news, because she will always try to get her own back in some way.” When I asked Dr. Bloch whether compromising for the person you loved might not be considered a form of generosity, he was somewhat skeptical. “It depends,” he said. “True generosity is recognizing another's pain, not giving in to his or her *schtick*. If, say, a woman's partner can only make love when he is the initiator, it's not kind of a woman to say to herself, ‘Well, if it's so important to him, I guess I can stand it.’ That's allowing him to continue living with a hang-up—and it's ultimately no favor to him.” For these reasons, Dr. Bloch is encouraged by his finding—a finding agreed to by the other therapists I questioned—that women are tending to make fewer compromises in their relationships today than they were making ten or fifteen years ago. While he doesn't believe that life should be a series of

therapeutic encounters ("That would simply be boring," he says, "and if two people have constant difficulty, they ought to examine whether or not they should be together in the first place."), he does favor the principle of struggling—even battling things out—rather than compromise as ultimately healthier to the individuals and the relationship involved. "People who have pretty good luck in working things out together are reasonably attentive to not letting bothersome issues slip away," he believes. "At the very least, they tag an issue as being unresolved."

Susan, a thirty-three-year-old commercial artist, seems to be proof positive of Dr. Bloch's thesis. Her three-year-old marriage to Bill is a happy if noisy one. "Compromises don't work for me—nor for him," she told me. "If I give in on anything, I resent him and feel oppressed. It leaves a residue, and I'll make him pay for it some way or another. It's much better for us to battle something out and find a road that works for us."

On the other hand, Dr. Bloch feels that compromise "often masquerades for

## and "To hell with me!"

issues not being dealt with. Silent compromise is usually a form of copping out, of unwillingness to face a possibly strife-producing issue. Which is a waste, because facing such an issue might get a couple into a potentially useful discussion about what's really bothering them; and you can be sure if something's bothering someone, most likely it's connected to a lot of other things. For instance, a woman mildly upset by a partner who doesn't bring his plates into the kitchen after a meal might find, upon talking about it with him, that what she really minds is her feeling that he's not pulling his weight in the relationship. And he might counter with his grievances in the same area, which can all be very useful stuff."

Silent compromise, with its resultant missed opportunity for uncovering the true difficulties between partners, was certainly the case with Ellen, a legal secretary, divorced from her husband two years ago. She talked of how she resented her husband's addiction to televised sports events, especially baseball and football, on weekend afternoons. She had never made a fuss about his habit of spending Saturdays and Sundays in front of the television set because, she reasoned, it wouldn't be "right" or "fair" to spoil his fun, but inwardly she had seethed. "It wasn't until we had been divorced for a while," she told me, "that I realized it wasn't the baseball and football that I minded so much, dreary as it was, but the feeling I had that he was withholding himself from me emotionally in a lot of ways."

Then there are experts who feel there are good and bad compromises. Dr. Janet Bachant, who counsels couples, makes a distinction between a woman's compromising *herself*, which is at best an unproductive process, and the alternative of making compromises *in conjunction with her partner* for the relationship. Like Dr. Bloch, Dr. Bachant is down on silent compromise. "When a woman makes an implicit compromise, she is making a contract, a bargain, between herself and her partner. But one of which he is unaware. She is saying, in effect, and saying silently, 'Okay, I'll do this, but in return you must do that.' She is setting herself up for rage, since her partner, perhaps unaware that she is compromising anything and further unaware that she expects something from him in payment, is unlikely to meet her silent (Continued on page 154)

**BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL**

demands. Further, by concealing her internal process from him, she has estranged them." Dr. Bachant feels, like Dr. Bloch, that open communication between a man and a woman is the only chance they have to work out their difficulties. "A woman and her partner must communicate their different needs and discuss things as two equals in order to work out compromises. Then bargains such as 'I prefer sex at night and you like it in the morning, so can we save the morning sex for the weekends, when I feel less rushed, and have nighttime sex during the week?' make sense."

Dr. Bachant has found that as a woman begins to accept herself more, she is less apt to make compromises of self, but more willing to accept the differences between herself and her partner.

This certainly seems to be true of Leslie, a twenty-eight-year-old television production assistant, married for the past two years. "When it comes to my personality," she told me, "I will no longer compromise. I've got to feel I can be myself, and be comfortable being myself, or nothing's worth anything. In my relationship with my husband, I don't feel that I'm giving up chunks of myself. That's the most important thing, that and the fact that I like the person I am in the relationship. It's self-acceptance, I guess—and age."

The compromises Leslie has made seem to be of the healthy variety Dr. Bachant favors. "This apartment," she said, looking around the stylish, clean-lined living room, located in a large, well-kept apartment house in New York's Greenwich Village, "is a perfect example of the sort of compromise my husband and I make. I'd be happier with a sloppier Village dump, and he wanted the Upper East Side. I got location, he got style."

When style refers to matters of taste, it seems to be a much easier thing to bargain with than when it refers to personality. Differences in personality style can be big sources of conflict between couples, according to therapist Dr. Pamela Oline. "An important compromise," says Dr. Oline, "is learning to respect the other person's style without giving up your own, seeing his style as a language you have to learn."

Her words reminded me of Joan, a thirty-year-old, married to Phil for the past five years. "He's very orderly in his habits," she told me, "and I tend to meander, so we've had to find a space where we both feel comfortable. If we hadn't, we would have driven each other crazy—or one of us would have killed the other long ago. For instance, we had to learn to avoid certain situations which, because of our different styles, were stress-producing. A case in point, supermarket shopping on weekends: I like to wander around picking up cans and reading the contents on cereal boxes; Phil likes to get in and out of the store like a white tornado. We were always getting on each other's nerves. So now we don't shop together: Either he goes or I go. It's a compromise, because I would like us to be able to shop together, but it's a compromise that serves us well."

I was also reminded of Evelyn, a suc-

cessful travel agent, divorced and currently living with a man she considers the most important in her life thus far. After they moved in together, Evelyn found Charles's need for privacy very threatening. She had to compromise her own need for complete openness with his for an interior life of his own, a life that isn't motivated by her and where, she has had to learn, she shouldn't take what he does personally. "When the phone rang in his den and he didn't bother to tell me who had called him, it used to kill me," she recalls. Now she has come to understand that it's not because he doesn't love her, but because "that's just Charles."

"Compromises," Dr. Oline points out, "changes in tastes and habits, are essential under any conditions of living with another person or other people. They're a part of civilized living. You don't play your record player at four A.M. if your neighbor—or your lover, for that matter—wants to sleep."

It's certainly true that all of the women I spoke to, no matter how they defined the word "compromise," realized that some accommodations are right and necessary if a woman wants to spend a good part of her life with another person. Leslie put it most succinctly: "Of course, I'm not living exactly as I would live without the relationship, but I don't think that anybody can do that."

Beverly, a high school teacher in her mid-thirties, would probably agree with Leslie, and with Dr. Oline. It's why she accepts the fact that she can't always sleep in her bed with her lover, since their different sleep patterns annoy each other; she's a day person, he's an insomniac. But she is willing to do this, to drag herself and her blanket into a separate room at night, because she feels that, in her words, "putting yourself out in terms of time and space, and being able to accept another person's differences and shortcomings—those are, I think, positive compromises. A negative compromise involves selling yourself out in some way, doing something that is ultimately harmful to you."

Even a large compromise doesn't have to be a negative one, according to Dr. Oline, "if the choice is clear and explicit to a woman and she understands and accepts what she is giving and what she's getting in return."

That would seem to be the case with Bonnie, a magazine editor who would like a committed relationship, but who has accepted the fact that her recently divorced boyfriend is not ready for another monogamous relationship. "I decided that I could take the fact that he sees other women occasionally, because he makes it so clear when we're together that I'm his primary relationship. I really feel very much loved and secure. So even though I don't have the formal security of living with him, which I want, I've decided that on balance it's okay."

And it's certainly the case with Beverly, who realizes that her lover, a man several years younger than she, neither wants nor is suited for the traditional courtship-to-engagement-to-marriage type relationship that she eventually wants. She accepts that fact because, in her words, "He gives me so much. He's freed me to develop, to come into a much more cre-

ative time of my life. He's good for me, so I can live with the fact that he's not going to be permanent."

Now while that may be a positive compromise for Beverly, it might be selling out to someone else. The time of one's life seems to have a great deal to do with how and what one can compromise. All of the women I talked to felt that their capacity for compromise had evolved with their growth as human beings. Most spoke of being able to make certain compromises today they could not make when they were younger—and of not being willing to make others, which they did make when they were younger.

Alice, a thirty-year-old, talked about making fewer compromises for a relationship today than she used to because "I now believe my own life is just as important as my life with a man. I've learned that if you have no life of your own, or if your own life is so unstructured that the man's life provides your only structure, you are apt to make terrible compromises. Because in a sense you have nothing else to do. You'll do anything not to be alone. If you don't have your own life, you're in terrible trouble."

Eve, a secretary bringing up a child while going for her Ph.D. in psychology, spoke about the self-effacing compromises she made in her now defunct marriage, and about her growing feelings of self-reliance over the last couple of years, feelings which, she believes, will keep her from ever making such compromises again. When I asked her about why she divorced her husband, she answered, "Because the situation was intolerable. I was cutting off all my edges so I would fit the picture I had of the All-American Wife, and I wasn't getting any returns. How could I? I wasn't *there* anymore to get any returns. I, myself, Eve, was gone."

Cutting off the edges that don't fit—that's just what I found most women won't do anymore. Susan, for instance, talked about no longer being willing to keep her temper in check simply to keep peace between herself and her husband: "I know more and more that I have to speak out, that being wise and forgiving and discreet just doesn't work for me."

I guess, ultimately, that's what wise compromising is all about: knowing what does and doesn't work for you. Dr. Bachant put it this way: "It's important to stay in touch with what fits for you, to take the time and energy and honesty to know what feels right for you. Then you can go on and make compromises in the relationship. But a woman has got to be there for herself, and in touch with herself, and taking action on that—not on pleasing the man."

What it comes down to is that there has to be some middle ground between "To hell with him!" and "To hell with me!" if two people are going to try and make it together, and one word for that middle ground, to a good many of us, is compromise. But the terrain of that ground—and its boundaries—has got to be mapped out by each of us individually, and alone. Let me put it this way: All commitment has a price. The trick is knowing how much, and when, you can afford to pay.

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