



Marriage first

Ellen Seidman

The child-centred life is hard on a couple and not so great for the kids. Focusing on your relationship can not only yield a healthier marriage, but also happier children. But, how can two overworked, overtired, overeverythinged parents realistically stay connected?

● **Start small.** Don't think, "We'll change our lives! We'll have a date night every single weekend!" Because big shifts like that aren't realistic. The trick is to make the most out of being together and create bubbles of intimacy throughout the day. For example, wake up 15 minutes earlier every morning, so the two of you can chat over coffee. Other couples report dining à deux after the kids are asleep, at least one night a week. "Every now and then on a Saturday night, my husband and I have our own little party," says Diana Tynan, 33, a mom with kids aged three and two in Maplewood, NJ. "We watch movies, drink beer, play Springsteen albums, stay up too late. It takes off the pressure of parenthood. Suddenly, it's just us again."

● **Have kid-free conversations.** "When I'm out with my husband, our rule is, we don't discuss the kids; we're all about us," says Hilda Hutcherson, a mom of four and an ob-gyn in New York City, who regularly dispenses that advice to patients. She gives this suggestion: "At the end of your day, share a highlight and a lowlight, ideally not involving the kids — one specific thing that made you really happy during the day, and one specific thing that annoyed you. It helps you instantly connect, and sparks longer conversations."

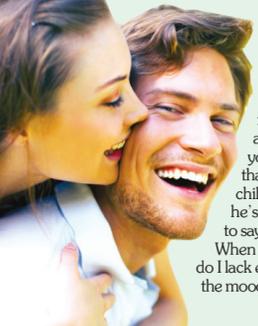
● **Stay in touch during the day.** Dr. Hutcherson and her husband text-message to say hi and share discoveries, like a new movie they've read about and want to see on their next night out. "My husband and I have a fun way of communicating via cell phone pictures," says Alle Ries, 38, from Atlanta. "If he's in a bad mood, I'll send him a shot of my smile to let him know I'm thinking of him. Or at work, I'll get a buzz from my phone and find a shot of a flower he saw on the way to the office. It feels great to know he's thinking of me."



● **Try new things together.** Last year, Julia Langley, 44, a Bethesda mom with two kids aged 12 and 14, signed up for a walk to raise awareness about breast cancer. "I trained on weekends, and asked my husband to join me," she says. "It's been a challenge finding ways to connect as the girls get older and their schedules get more hectic. The walks gave us concentrated time together without the pressure of making scintillating conversation. If we had that, great. If not, we'd fall into a rhythm of walking that brought us close without words. We still keep up those walks."

● **Bring on the PDA.** Nobody's suggesting you make out in front of the kids, but being affectionate keeps you connected and shows the children an important part of your marriage. "You're modelling what a good relationship is like — helpful for your children down the road," says Braun.

● **Make pleasure a priority.** "Spontaneity may be more fun, but if you're realistic and plan for sex, at least you'll have it," says Davidson. "Even if you're tired, once you engage your senses you will get into it." A mother of two told me conspiratorially, "We sneak in sex when we can." Any kind of intimacy is important, notes Dr. Hutcherson: "I tell patients to hold hands or cuddle before they fall asleep. The pleasure chemicals released from skin-to-skin contact bond you."



● **Don't be a martyr.** Getting your husband to do his fair share around the house means you'll be less zonked, less resentful, and more up for intimacy. "Don't ask your husband to 'help' you," says Davidson, "because that implies housework and child rearing are your job and he's just pitching in. It's far better to say, 'We need to share tasks. When I do most of them, not only do I lack energy for sex, but I'm not in the mood.'"

Where have all the good, old-fashioned ghosts gone? Every celebrity out there is doing his or her bit to save tigers and dolphins, crocs and rhinos, but hello, have any of you noticed that ghosts are vanishing too, melting into oblivion just like the icebergs? Why is there no data on them, no PETA-like campaign to bring 'em back from the brink of extinction? No, I'm serious. When was the last time you heard a really scary ghost story? When was the last midnight you felt someone was watching you from the foot of your bed? Scratching your head? What did I tell you? Ghosts are FINITO and this is going to haunt us for the rest of our lives.

Of the many reasons I can think up to explain the demise of the incorporeal beings, the first that comes to mind is, of course, the real estate boom. Once upon a time, in this very city, you had these lovely cavernous houses with wooden floors, enormous rooms, dark corridors, gardens of thick shrubs and shady trees. The perfect ambience for our spirit friends to glide around, sigh, melt through the walls, turn door knobs and knock down stuff. But greedy people demolished ancestral homes, sold the land to developers and overnight, you now have ugly, overcrowded apartment blocks, filled with flats that resemble each other so exactly that it confuses the ghosts. The ratio of people to spirits is so unfair to the latter that they feel discriminated against. They miss the vast spaces and dark shadows of the old dwellings. These new pigeon holes cramp their style. Without the proper background, they feel silly trying to haunt anyone. When we talk of depriving tigers or elephants of their natural habitat, it is hypocritical not to admit we have robbed ghosts of their natural habitat too. And the poor things, like the animals, can't really protest, you know.

The people who could really spin a masterly ghost yarn are gone too. My grandfather was a great one for ghost stories. A doughty old timer who had settled in Shillong from the time it was a one-horse buggy town, he regaled us with morbid tales of star-crossed lovers throwing themselves into Ward's Lake, phantom carriages rattling along empty streets, robbed women, long dead *la di dah* English ladies strolling through their equally dead poodles, and all sorts of macabre accounts delivered with a deadpan expression and I suspect, conjured up on the spur of the moment. His penchant for tall stories backfired on him one evening, when he blustered about how, when he was on his way home along Kerch's Trace, a tree spirit shook her long black hair on him from a high branch with an evil cackle. This was too much, even for naive kids like us, and we burst into peals of laughter. Grandpa, of course, went into a sulk and refused to spin yarns for a few days. But looking back, I feel so grateful that he put in so much effort to keep us entertained. Look at the old folks now. Everyone is living longer, but refusing to be called old. The grandpas of today are taking up jobs after retirement, playing golf, gallivanting around Europe, taking courses, selling insurance or petitioning the government on some boring issue like municipal waste dumping. They are so hyperactive, they can't sit still and tell a



The vanishing act

nice ghost story. So, they are as much guilty as you and me of marginalising our spirit friends.

Ghosts were aplenty on mother's side of the family too. Every holiday afternoon in our ancestral house in that distant Upper Assam Town, the grown ups settled down on their long siesta. This was the time my brother and I loved to run wild in the vast outdoors, eating tiny tomatoes, playing among the bushes, watching dragonflies hovering over the pond. But we were told, in frightening detail, about the witch that lingered near the pomelo tree, and her weakness for tender meat. So many afternoons were wasted indoors due to the spectre of that witch. It needed a whole lot of growing up to realise that the witch was no more than a spectral baby-sitter who minded us as our mum and aunt slept, an unpaid nanny, if you please. No self-respecting ghost would ever put up with such indignity. No wonder she never showed up. They are meant to have such prosaic uses. Ghosts are meant to add a mysterious element to our lives, a heightened awareness that there is a realm beyond our humdrum concerns, a dimension that makes us question our lives, death, the afterlife and God. With ghosts not playing an active part in our lives today, it is almost as if we have stopped questioning, and wondering, about that unknown world. We have become cynical smart Ales, using logic, rather than intuition. We are desperate to show we are educated, enlightened, and laugh off anything supernatural as old wives' tales. But infinite universes can exist side by side, with our consciousness passing through all of them. All possibilities exist — we are alive in some, long dead in others. Ghosts may simply be people of other dimensions, going about their daily business of living.

Technology, too, has its dark role in bumping off ghosts. Take for instance, the television. First, it killed conversation. When you switch it

on, even the most besotted lovers tend to talk in monosyllables. With conversation in *rigor mortis*, the ability to tell ghost stories has become a casualty too. Television has also killed the imagination. Everything is visualised for you, including the blood splashes on the murdered victim. Endless babble about politicians, floods and the jinxed Commonwealth Games drive all other worldly thoughts from the mind. But the telly does remind you of other ghosts — the ghost of Bofors, Union Carbide, Godhra, Dantewada — that haunt our *netas* and parties. Much to their acute discomfort.

Ibsen once wrote of ghosts siding between newspapers. Nothing encapsulates this better than what is going on in the countdown to the Commonwealth Games. It is almost as if there was a malevolent spirit, in fact a whole battalion of them, throwing a spanner in the works. You have flood waters taking over the athletes' track, A R Rahman delivering a musical dud, athletes from Canada and Australia pulling out, terrorist threats, a foot bridge toppling in a most unbecoming manner, and the stadium ceiling following suit. This is like a Ramsay horror flick with a sporting angle, or a Ram Gopal Varma chillfest with the plot going awry. I am surprised that no one has thought of hiring some witch doctor and conducting a full scale exorcism before we are accused of ghosting the games, rather than hosting them. With our national prestige at stake, I think, and I am saying this with a straight face, that we must not be above resorting to some mumbo jumbo to keep the games afloat (pun strictly intended.) How about a huge government order for lemons and chillies, for starters?

Another way of killing the ghosts is by making them hip and cool. Look at the *Twilight* series. When you have a vampire as cute as Robert Pattinson, where is the fear factor? The

media is abuzz with who he hangs out with, what he wears, what he twits his fans. Back in the old days, did you ever hear of Christopher Lee or Bela Lugosi (of Dracula fame) jiving at a discotheque or skiing at St Moritz? So you believed they were actually vampires and you cold sweated in the movie hall till they were righteously impaled. Vampires are meant to be cold, not cool, and you must want to run away from them, not date them, for God's sake!

Technology has, however, taken ghost hunting to a whole new level. I often watch the ghost hunter shows on TV. The crew wear hip trench coats and carry a lot of equipment like EMF meter, IR camera, dowsing rods, recorders to decode electronic voice phenomenon. So, there they are, cooped up in some old house with a cellar. They are bathed in a sickly green light as the machines measure the electromagnetic fields, trace the slightest vibrations. Then they show you a wispy shred of mist and certify it as a paranormal presence. Or a raspy sound on the tape is supposed to be a voice. The wait for a sighting is so long and tedious that most of the time I am sleepy, and the next thing I know, it is bright in the morning and time for work. Works better than a cup of warm milk, I tell you.

They say ghosts are a metaphor for memory and remembrance. Jacques Derrida reminds us "Psychoanalysis has taught us that the dead — a dead parent, for example, can be more alive for us, more powerful, more scary, than the living." Perhaps we should look for ghosts not in haunted houses, but within ourselves, for the people who have left us, the people we may have not loved enough, and also our former selves — the lost child, the lost youth, whom we abandoned in this journey called life. The past itself is a ghost, and it always hovers in the periphery of the present. And, when we look back on the Holocaust, or the partition of India, the Khmer Rouge genocide, we feel that the belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary, man alone is capable of every wickedness.

Let me end with an account of the ghost in the machine. Even as I write these lines, there is panic and disarray around me. There are constant announcements on radio and television. It seems certain phone calls made through six cell phone numbers bring doom to those who answer them. Not only does the screen flicker an evil red, but the phone explodes, the person gets badly burnt and some calls have also proved fatal. We all laughed at first, but you know what mass suggestion is. I, who prided myself on being a sophisticated city slicker sceptic, have gone into panic mode, and saved the numbers so that I do not answer them at all, and to be really safe, fling the phone away when it rings. The whole thing seems so far-fetched and yet, the fear around me is so real and palpable, that being rational seems a bit overrated. So, this then is the ghost in the machine. It is a ghost without any sense of aesthetics or atmosphere. It doesn't drift around poetically in beautiful old houses with antique furniture. It doesn't play the piano and wear diaphanous gowns. It just catches you in the middle of a busy day and blasts into your ear. A ghost without any manners and good breeding. Ah, how I long for the good old days...

—indrani.raimedhi@gmail.com

Alpha and Omega

Cast: Justin Long, Hayden Panettiere, Christina Ricci. Directors: Anthony Bell, Ben Gluck.

Hitchhiking, truck stops, angry bears, prickly porcupines and a golfing goose with a duck caddy. Just ask Kate and Humphrey, two wolves who are trying to get home after being taken by park rangers and shipped halfway across the country. Humphrey is an Omega wolf, whose days are about quick wit, snappy one-liners and hanging with his motley crew of fun-loving wolves and video-gaming squirrels. Kate is an Alpha: duty, discipline and sleek Lara Croft eye-popping moves fuel her fire. Humphrey's motto — make 'em laugh. Kate's motto — I'm the boss. And they have a thousand miles to go. Back home, rival wolf packs are on the march and conflict is brewing. Only Kate and Humphrey can restore the peace. But first, they have to survive each other.



Resident Evil: Afterlife

Cast: Milla Jovovich, Ali Larter, Kim Coates. Director: Paul W.W. Anderson.

In a world ravaged by a virus infection, turning its victims into the Undead, Alice continues on her journey to find survivors and lead them to safety. Her deadly battle with the Umbrella Corporation reaches new heights, but Alice gets some unexpected help from an old friend. A new lead that promises a safe haven from the Undead directs them to



Los Angeles, but when they arrive, the city is overrun by thousands of the Undead, and Alice and her comrades are about to step into a deadly trap.

MOVIE WATCH

Vikram Barkataki

TOP 10 Hollywood

- The Town
- Easy A
- Devil
- Resident Evil: Afterlife
- Alpha and Omega
- Takers
- The American
- The Other Guys
- Inception
- Machete



"If you are not absolutely thrilled, amazed and delighted with our product, remember it's just a cheap plastic kitchen gadget."



"It's called 24-hour tech support because that's how long it takes them to answer the phone!"



"This call may be recorded so we can play it back for laughs during our break."



"You figured out how to use the phone all by yourself. Congratulations, that's a good start! Please hold for tech support."



"I feel guilty using my old computer to help me shop for a new computer!"

FORECAST

SEPTEMBER 27 - OCTOBER 3, 2010

- **ARIES (MAR 21-APR 19)**
Taking the first few days of the week step-by-step is the best way to survive the frantic — albeit fun — times. Tuesday and Wednesday, if you find yourself flirting with someone, make yourself clear. This is also crucial on Thursday or Friday, but the people you'll be dealing with will most likely be family members and the tenor of the conversation might be difficult and emotionally charged. A different kind of charge — a blast of energy — lifts your weekend to great heights.
- **TAURUS (APR 20-May 20)**
Monday through Wednesday are not great days to make major decisions about the future of your cash. Thursday and Friday, your close friends are in the picture, and it's been a while since you've caught up. Hanging out with someone and talking for hours is the best use of your Friday night. Saturday and Sunday, romance and art are prominent themes.
- **GEMINI (MAY 21-JUN 21)**
It's not raining, it's pouring the first half of the week — metaphorically, at least. You were in the mood to meet some new people, and a bus full of new people has just pulled up to your life. Chatting, handshaking and even flirting take up your week until Thursday, when money concerns distract you from your social life. Friday is a high point in your week — you've gotten a lot done — and Saturday and Sunday are fun, friend-filled and active.
- **CANCER (JUN 22-JUL 22)**
Your wild side is coming through at the start of the week, and people are responding well to it. You are the kind of person who makes an impact. Toward the middle of the week, your mind fills with possibilities for the future. The work week ends with the spotlight on you, and it stays there throughout the weekend — a weekend that sees you rewarding yourself with an extravagant purchase.

- **LEO (JUL 23-AUG 22)**
A party is a fine place to get some things figured out. You and your friends have a casual rapport that strikes fairly deeply, shorthand that lets you talk about weighty issues with lightness and humour. You are constantly impressed by these friends, especially on Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday, your chest swells with contentment. Intuition, sensibility and pride all figure strongly toward the end of the week. This weekend, someone who has heard good things about you will finally get to meet you.
- **VIRGO (AUG 23-SEP 22)**
You need the skills of a mathematician at the outset of the week. If you're not a mathematician, just work extra hard to be logical and reasonable when dealing with whatever comes your way. Be as warm as possible when communicating with others. Thursday and Friday, largely because you're giving off good vibes, a family event you've been dreading turns out to be a blast. On Saturday and Sunday, rely on your flexibility and organisational prowess to get everything done.
- **LIBRA (SEP 23-OCT 22)**
Monday through Wednesday, you desire to experience new things. To grow mentally. To expand. Thursday and Friday, you have little time to acquire information, what with all the things everyone else needs from you; but even in your most trying moments, you have an eye on the beauty around you. The weekend offers plenty of time to be around friends and stare up at the sky.
- **SCORPIO (OCT 23-NOV 21)**
As good as it can be to take risks in your life, risks aren't going to go your way on Monday or Tuesday. Don't let any minor details escape your attention on Wednesday. Thursday, the tension finally breaks and you can rely more on your wits. Sometimes it's a lot more fun to go along for the ride than to be the person setting the course. Worries about work weigh on you this weekend. Modesty and calmness are the answer.

- **SAGITTARIUS (NOV 22-DEC 21)**
There are a lot of porch-sitters in your life, so for the first half of the week, keep your head down and ignore them. The second half of the week, you're more open to other people, but you'd still be wise to follow your mood, and if that means building a fort with couch cushions, crawling in with a book and shutting out the rest of the world, so be it. Something takes you beyond your sofa this weekend — a trip? — and the journey does you tonnes of good.
- **CAPRICORN (DEC 22-JAN 19)**
People love chatting with you, but your chatting time Monday through Wednesday, is crowded out by more pressing tasks. Be nice, of course, but don't let yourself get trapped in a conversation about, say, what was on TV, last night. The best way to get through this week is to narrow your aim and strike quickly at everything. Focus on one person on Friday; lay on the love. Saturday and Sunday, nothing is as it seems.
- **AQUARIUS (JAN 20-FEB 18)**
The fires of your romantic life are burning so brightly Monday through Wednesday, that you can't see anything else. But Thursday, you have a lot of responsibilities to see through. Friday finds you tending to some long overlooked chores as well, although you find them therapeutic. Saturday and Sunday are marked by creativity and sudden changes.
- **PISCES (FEB 19-MARCH 20)**
The start of the week — and through Wednesday — you are busy, but not particularly ambitious socially. A sense of uncertainty weighs heavily on you, at least until Thursday, when an unexpected romantic development puts a smile on your face. Expect the grin to last through Friday. Saturday and Sunday, you are inspired to go on a new health kick.