



# Of love and lucre

WHAT IS HARDER TO TALK ABOUT THAN SEX AND MORE APT TO PROVOKE A QUARREL THAN THE CHORE WARS? MONEY, HONEY!



I

feel just like Captain High Liner," complained my husband, Paul, fingering the brass buttons on the dated navy polyester jacket. He'd been forced to don said jacket at a chi-chi restaurant in Ottawa. "How can they think *this* looks better than my sweater? I hate this place already." It went downhill from there: "Look at these prices!" he exploded, opening the menu. "What kind of person spends \$30 on an appetizer? That's just ridiculous."

And on it went. He found fault with the bow-tied waiters and the heavy, formal decor. It got to the point where I — perfumed and spiffed up for this naughty weekend away — just wanted to get out of there.

The clincher? We weren't even paying! I won the trip and the dinner at a press event. "For god's sake!" I told him later in the hotel room.

"It's bad enough that you never take me out to nice restaurants, but you didn't even have to pay this time and you still managed to leach all the pleasure out of this for me!"

Although I'm hardly a spendthrift, I chafe at my husband's inability to sit back and enjoy a great meal in a beautiful setting without obsessing over the cost. But that incident demonstrated for me what, until then, I hadn't completely understood: It isn't even really about the money. Paul thinks spending excessively is just plain wrong, even if it's not coming out of his pocket. And there's not much I can do to change his mind.

That doesn't surprise Olivia Mellan, a Washington, D.C.-based psychotherapist and the author of *Money Harmony: Resolving Money Conflicts in Your Life and Relationships*. The reason money is such a hot-button topic for so many couples, contends Mellan, is that it frequently holds a deeper meaning than mere

BY CAMILLA CORNELL



dollars and cents. Because few of us realize how loaded the subject is, we argue about money without recognizing the emotional burden it carries.

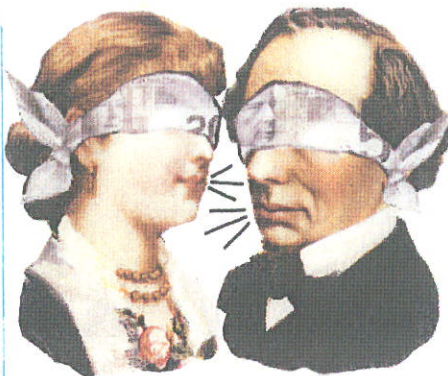
“For most of the couples I meet, money is harder to talk about than sex or childhood trauma,” says Mellan. Conflict over finances, she says, has been one of the top two reasons for marital discontent for 20 years. The other item on the list changes; it could be sex or communication or housework. A 2009 survey by Credit Canada and Capital One backs her up, indicating 86 per cent of Canadian couples regularly argue about cash.

### ALL ABOARD THE BAGGAGE TRAIN

Attitudes toward money, says Mellan, are shaped by a potent mixture of family background, societal and religious messages, and personal experience.

My husband, according to Mellan, tends to be a “money monk.” An aging hippie, my mate thinks conspicuous consumption is just plain immoral (golf clubs excluded). And he doesn’t really comprehend my desire to have someone wait on me, instead of vice versa. His Italian mother gladly cooked dinner every night and never complained about it. I, on the other hand, grew up in a household with a working mom, where going out to dinner was a special occasion gleefully anticipated by all of us. I feel pampered and wine-warmed in a good restaurant.

Okay, that may be too much analysis of one small incident, but the point is this: You may not recognize it, but there’s often an underlying dialogue going on in your dealings with dollars that has little to do with cash. “When we’re arguing about money, we honestly think we’re talking simple facts and figures,” explains Vancouver-based Diane McCurdy, a certified financial planner and the author of *How Much Is*



“Remember, money is just a tool, not a club to hit each other over the head with.”

*Enough? Balancing Today’s Needs with Tomorrow’s Retirement Goals.* “But we’re not. This is not a rational subject — it’s a deeply emotional one.”

Maria McCrea\*, 47, of Hinton, Alta., discovered just that during the early years of her marriage to husband Ken\*. An immigrant to Canada, Ken had trouble finding a decent job and yet, like many men, felt responsible for providing for his family. McCrea wanted to be able to discuss their financial struggles openly and explore options. “I couldn’t,” she recalls. “For many years, I just had to shoulder that burden on my own because he was so sensitive about it. Everything I said he twisted into, ‘You think I don’t make enough money.’ That was never what I meant.”

The best way to deal with subtext, says Mellan, is to get it out in the open. “Try to talk about what shapes each of your views about money and empathize with your partner’s point of view.” In McCrea’s case, it might have helped to say: “I believe you feel as if it’s your job to take care of us, but we’re in this

together and I would love your help to figure out how we’re going to handle our situation.” (Men, in general, says Mellan, love to be useful.)

Sometimes the issues are so emotionally charged, you may need a professional go-between — a therapist, counsellor or relationship coach — to learn how to discuss your differences effectively. But ultimately, Mellan advises, “if you take the time to communicate your fundamental goals and needs with sensitivity and compassion, you can usually work out a solution.”

### THE SPENDER AND THE SAVER...

Our backgrounds and early experiences shape not just our attitudes toward money, but the way we handle it, says Mellan. And the biggest fireworks occur when you’ve got two people whose money personalities are diametrically opposed — a spender and a saver, for example. Or a planner, who likes nothing better than to create financial flow charts, and a dreamer.

The key to finding harmony, according to McCurdy, is to recognize each other’s strengths and learn to laugh at the idiosyncrasies.

That’s a lesson Angelika Bullis, 51, of Yorkton, Sask., has learned over the years. Both she and her husband, Doug, are pretty frugal, she says. “But he’s more frugal.” Her main complaint? He tends to buy things simply because they’re cheap, without considering lifestyle factors or value.

Recently, the couple decided that with the high Canadian dollar and low real estate prices south of the border, it was a good time to buy property in Florida. Bullis envisioned a modest condo where they could escape winter for a few months and enjoy the sun and sand. But when her husband went down south to do some scouting, he ended up purchasing a modular home



many kilometres inland for \$13,000. "Yes, it was a good deal," she admits, "but we were the youngest people there by about 30 years. Everyone was in bed by nine o'clock!"

The issue could have resulted in major conflict for some, but the Bullises have learned to dance around their differences. "Doug likes to accumulate money," explains Bullis. "And that's a good thing. He has built a successful business and he's able to analyze whether an investment is a good deal or not." In this case, though, she persuaded him he could have his bargain and still take her to the beach. The couple ended up renting out the modular home for a year and, with the proceeds, leasing a condo in Fort Myers for a month. "I've learned to speak his language when it comes to money," says Bullis.

#### HE GETS THE CAR; I GET THE KITCHEN

Even if you and your partner do have similar money styles, says McCurdy, you might still butt heads over setting priorities: Do you buy the new car or remodel the kitchen? Do you pay off the mortgage or invest in RRSPs? Ac-

ording to the Credit Canada/Capital One survey, twice as many couples argue about spending (48 per cent) as argue about debt (24 per cent). Problems are almost certain to arise if one of you feels shut out of the decision-making process. Just ask Sharon Clarke\*, 49, of Orillia, Ont.

When Clarke met George\* in 1990, she had a small apartment, a job with a non-profit organization and a small nest egg. George was driven and well established. "He was a doer," she says. "I liked that about him." After they married, the couple amalgamated paycheques and George turned bill payments over to Clarke briefly. But when, on one occasion, she made an error and paid a bill twice, he immediately took charge of their finances. "You just can't handle it," he told her.

After the Clarkes' two children were born, George's grip on the money tightened. Clarke gave up her job, so "he had a paycheque and I didn't," she says. "He'd tell me we had no money, so I was always trying to save. I bought second-hand; we didn't go out very much." In turn, she says, "he spent money like a drunken sailor." But any of

Clarke's attempts to raise the inequity were greeted with comments such as, "Well, I make all the money in this family and you don't really do anything."

For Clarke, George's compulsive hold over the household cash was a reflection of his general need for control. Although money wasn't the only reason the couple divorced three years ago, it was certainly high on the list.

McCurdy asks new clients to make a wish list of long-term and shorter-term goals. And rather than compiling it together, she asks couples to do it separately "because if one is stronger-minded or thinks faster, he or she can influence the other."

Once you've come up with separate lists, you can identify key goals together. You might both agree you need to set aside money for the kids' education. You may concur as well that you're going to have to replace the car in five years and re-roof the house. Once you've hammered out the basics, do a cash-flow statement and tally up all your current expenses as well as the cost of key goals.

Whatever money is left over is your joint "mad money," to be allocated to personal spending or buying specific items on your wish list. If there's not enough money for both of you to purchase the things that are important to you, take turns, suggests McCurdy. So he gets his flat-screen TV this year, and the following year, you get your Caribbean vacation. The important thing is not to judge each other's expenditures as frivolous or unnecessary, she says. "Remember, money is just a tool, not a club to hit each other over the head with."

As for me, I'm making it easy for Paul to reserve judgment. These days, I go out to dinner with my girlfriends and leave him at home. **M**

*\*Names changed by request*

## YOURS, MINE AND OURS

### The bank account dilemma

People frequently gasp when I tell them that, after 20 years of marriage and two kids, my husband and I keep our finances totally separate. Not only do we maintain separate bank accounts, we don't even have a joint account. And yet, says Vancouver certified financial planner Diane McCurdy, "any number of different systems can work." Here's what you need to take into account.

● Agree on some basic goals (paying off the house and purchasing RRSPs, for example) and set systems in place so that those bills get paid first.

● No one should feel "ripped off," so strive for a measure of equal-

ity. If one partner earns more than the other, he or she should probably pay a higher percentage of the bills.

● Even if you do agree to a money merger, Washington, D.C.-based psychotherapist Olivia Mellan advises

keeping at least a small stash of your own. "Women, in particular, tend to lose themselves in a marriage," she says. "Having their own money often gives them a healthy sense of freedom and autonomy."