Are your perceptions real? Minding your P’s and Q’s
by Steve and Kathy Beirne

You may have seen a little story going around on Facebook about a woman who was very critical of her neighbor’s laundry. She would see it out on the line, and every day she’d tell her husband, “That woman certainly does not know how to do laundry. The clothes are still dirty!” Then one day she looked out the window and saw that the clothes were clean! “She finally learned how to do the wash!” she exclaimed to her husband. “No,” he responded, “I got up early this morning and washed the window.”

We all look at the world through our own window, where the “dirt” is our presumptions about other people’s behavior. And there is no place where that view can cause more difficulty than when we are interacting with our spouse.

“He didn’t notice how I paid all the bills. He just takes me for granted.” “She left the garbage for me to take out, and she knows it was her turn to do it.” Those judgments made about one another can turn into scripts that you create, leading you to believe things about each other that may or may not be true, and can end up hardening your hearts, not a good thing in any relationship but especially in a marriage.

Early in our marriage, before the days of the Internet, we got into an argument before Steve left for a meeting. We had a baby at the time, and I was looking forward to putting him to bed and then reading the newspaper. I was particularly interested in who had won the Academy Awards the night before. When I picked up the paper, the front section was missing! I thought Steve had taken it with him, just to get back at me for the argument, and I stewed about it until he got back. He came home to a sad, frustrated wife, much to his surprise. When I told him what I thought, he was shocked. “I would never do something like that!” he said. It turned out that the press had broken down and they had not printed the first section of the paper.

While this may sound like a weird situation, I’m sure you have had things just as silly in your relationship. Because we need to trust each other so deeply in marriage, small things can injure us. But imagining those things can injure the relationship even more.

Take the time to check out your perceptions. The wife who thought her husband didn’t appreciate her bill paying could point it out to him. The husband who put out the garbage might ask his wife if she had remembered that it was her turn. Assuming the best rather than the worst can be so helpful to a relationship. That comes more easily when you are already feeling loved and full of warm thoughts for your spouse. But even when things are a little tense, assuming unkind motives will only make them worse.
Remember the old expression, Mind your P’s and Q’s? Well, that expression is a way of helping you monitor these situations. Mind your PEAs—your perceptions, your expectations and your assumptions—and your Q’s, the questions you ask that can clarify the PEAs!

**Check out your perceptions.** Ask your partner if they meant to do what they did, or how they perceived what you did. While facts are facts, perceptions can vary widely from person to person. One person can see an insult where another sees a humorous remark. Many a conflict arises from two people having different perceptions of the same event.

**Manage your expectations.** Expectations are the way you believe things will go, or should go. When your expectations are not met it creates frustration, so it is important to check internally to see if your expectations are reasonable. Do you think your spouse should have been aware of your expectation? If it occurs to you, ask if you have the same expectation of a task or event. “I’m hoping we’ll leave your parents’ house around 5. Is that okay with you?” Setting common expectations in advance helps to avoid frustration after the fact.

**Identify your assumptions.** Assumptions are things you believe to be true. When you make assumptions about your spouse’s intentions, reasons for doing something, or understanding of the situation, you run the risk of creating a misunderstanding between you. So be aware of them yourself, let your partner know what you assume, and ask if you are on the right path.

One of the problems with having a different perspective on something is that it often comes up right in the middle of something else—at your in laws, or running late for a meeting. Just know it happens to everyone. As long as both of you are willing to work on those peas and q’s, and pray for the patience all marriages take, you should be able to see the world through (mostly) clean windows most of the time.

Steve and Kathy Beirne have extensive experience in marriage and family education, catechetics, and marriage ministry. They are the editors and publishers of Foundations Newsletter, FACET premarital resource, and Catholic and Newly Married, an award winning book published by ACTA publications. They live in Portland, Maine, and are the parents of 7 children, grandparents of 5. You can visit their websites, facetsite.com, or foundationsnewsletter.net, or contact them at foundationseditor@gmail.com