The Family Room

By: Dr. Roy Don Whitehead

Change May Be Possible But Not Probable

"Is it possible that he can change?" Dedra asked anxiously. (All characters in this column are fictitious.) Dedra's question is one that a counselor hears often. In Dedra's case she had been waiting a long time for Dan to change. She had waited through 15 years of marriage and four kids. She had left him three times but had gone back each time because he promised he would change.

Dan had a problem telling the truth. Dedra had caught him in all sorts of lies, ranging from large to small. Once he told her he had been robbed on the way home from work. He later admitted that his story was not true. She also discovered that he had lied about the amount of his income tax refund, understating it by several hundred dollars. He never would tell her what he had done with the money.

The lie that hurt Dedra the most was his lie about his relationship with a woman at work. All those stories about working late and being "out with the guys" turned out to be lies. Dan finally confessed to Dedra that he had an affair with this woman.

Dedra sought counseling hoping to find some way to save her marriage. Her question was: "Is it possible Dan can change?"

In answering her question I did not want to give Dedra any false hope, while at the same time I wanted to be truthful. "Dedra, it is possible that your husband will change," I told her. "Human beings can change and I cannot tell you that Dan will never change."

"But," I added cautiously, "saying that change is possible is one thing, different from saying that it is probable." We were sitting in my office as we were talking, and I could see that the ceiling fan was spinning overhead, but it is not probable that the world will end today, but it is possible.

"Probable means that a good thing is likely to happen," I explained. "Possible means that it might happen, the chance of it happening is only a 10 or 20 percent, but it is still possible."

"So, when you say that it is possible that Dan will change, you are saying that it is not likely," Dedra replied. "Right, I'm afraid it is not likely," I answered.

"Then, if I understand you, Dan will change, but it is not probable," Dedra said. I nodded my head in agreement. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Dedra, I think it is not likely that Dan will change, but I think it is possible. Dan has made a mistake in his life and he has paid a high price for it. He has lost his family, his job, his reputation, his self-respect, and his self-esteem. He has lost his freedom. He has lost his money. He has lost his health. He has lost his self-confidence. He has lost his self-image. He has lost his self-worth. He has lost his self-pride. He has lost his self-respect. He has lost his self-esteem