

Romancing Your Better Half

Keeping INTIMACY Alive
in YOUR MARRIAGE

Rick Johnson



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To the love of my life
and the best wife a man could ever hope for—
my Suzanne

There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you—of kindness and consideration and respect—not only the social respect of manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn't know you had.

—John Steinbeck

People always fall in love with the most perfect aspects of each other's personalities. Who wouldn't? Anybody can love the most wonderful parts of another person. But that's not the clever trick. The really clever trick is this: Can you accept the flaws? Can you look at your partner's faults honestly and say, "I can work around that. I can make something out of it"? Because the good stuff is always going to be there, and it's always going to be pretty and sparkly, but the crap underneath can ruin you.

—Elizabeth Gilbert,
*Committed: A Skeptic
Makes Peace with Marriage*

What if God didn't design marriage to be "easier"? What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place? *What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?*

—Gary Thomas,
Sacred Marriage

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Acknowledgments

A book is an insentient entity that has life breathed into it by an innumerable amount of people during its creation. In some ways it parallels the story of Frankenstein's monster.

The author of a book actually has only a small part of its development. Here is my perception of the process involved, at least when I write books (probably most writers have their own unique experience):

The writer (me) has the initial idea, then the acquisitions editor begins the process by seeing that vision and submitting it to the publishing committee for approval. Once the acquisition of a book is approved, a contract is negotiated by an agent and all sorts of secretive (and likely tightfisted) accounting types at the publishing house, then an initial draft of the manuscript is written over many months. It is then reviewed by the acquisitions editor, who throws out most of the junk and molds and twists the material into something resembling an actual book. After rewrites and excruciating

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revisions (all under an extremely short deadline), the innocent writer then resubmits it to the editor, who fine-tunes it and again snips and gouges out all the “garbage” (usually the best stuff) the writer tried to sneak back into the text. After that, the manuscript is submitted to an in-house line editor who parses each sentence and picks it to death. Every word is looked at and compared to every word ever written in the history of the world. After another round of revisions guaranteed to bring out the pettiness in my nature, the book is formatted into its printed format called galleys. The galleys are sent back to the author to review for the 5,000th time and any final changes are incorporated before going to print. All this is happening while the poor writer is trying to work on his current manuscript as well.

During this entire process the author is also working on the next manuscript; marketing a previous book through social media, radio, and television interviews; filling out marketing and titling scripts; writing blogs for blog tours; developing leadership study guides for the book; thinking up and contacting potential endorsers and people of influence to send the book to; creating a list of people who contributed to the book and get a free copy and a list of people who want a free book to write a review; recording radio spots; approving cover artwork; and generally about 400 other things at the same time.

All that whining and complaining aside, I seem to be one of the few lucky individuals who has made a full-time living as a writer for the past nine years. That’s not because I’m such a great writer, but more because I have such a great team of people supporting me and making my books better as well as getting them into the hands of my faithful readers. These

Acknowledgments

people are the real heroes behind the scene as they put up with all my snarling and griping and still seem to like working with me (or else they are just very professional and have me fooled). They probably do twice the work under much more stressful conditions than I do, because each of them is working with a plethora of authors all at the same time.

Here's an abbreviated list (not in order of importance) of people on my team without whom I would be a miserable flop: Dr. Vicki Crumpton, Michele Misiak, Claudia Marsh, Greg Johnson, Cheryl Van Andel, Barb Barnes, Mary Molegraaf, Erin Bartels, Pat VanderWeide, Robin Barnett, Twila Bennett, the design staff, warehouse staff, and the sales team at Revell, as well as probably another couple dozen people that I don't even know about who have their fingerprints on this book. Thank you!

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Introduction

Being married is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves. A large body of research confirms that married couples are happier, they live longer, they are healthier, they are better off financially, and they have fewer psychological problems than people who are not married. Americans also highly value marriage—when surveyed, people consistently rate a good marriage and having a happy, healthy family as their most important goals.

So if marriage is so good for people and society, why can about half of current marriages expect to end in divorce? Why are young people increasingly reluctant to marry—they yearn for a lifelong loving relationship but are skeptical of its possibility? Why are about 40 percent of children born out of wedlock and likely will not have a marriage relationship modeled for them? These children are significantly more inclined than kids born and raised in a “traditional” family to have children out of wedlock themselves. Are we seeing the results of the disintegration of marriage in our culture

today? If so, how do we erase the decline and help people understand the value of a good marriage?

Just like laying a stable and solid foundation is the key to building a house that lasts, building a solid foundation for our relationship is one of the important keys for a marriage that lasts. The structure of that foundation is a relationship based on healthy intimacy, which in turn creates an environment where couples can grow together long enough for a deep and nurturing love to take place.

I'll admit right up front that I don't claim to be some kind of expert on what women want or need in a relationship (and I'd be pretty skeptical of anyone who did make that claim), or even a decent judge of what romance and intimacy in a marriage looks like. But I have managed to stay married to the same woman for thirty-two years as of this writing. That qualifies as a minor miracle nowadays (especially considering our personal family backgrounds) with the high rate of divorce and multiple marriages. Surprisingly, it's not because my wife has low expectations for intimacy and romance. She's a beautiful, intelligent woman who could have had her pick of a high percentage of the male population from around the world. But all that to say, I've picked up a few pointers and insights along the way about living with a woman and making her reasonably happy and satisfied. And since I *am* a man and have worked with thousands of other men, I have a pretty good idea of the things that a man needs most in a relationship.

Marriage hasn't been easy, but I will say that persevering through the tough times is a satisfaction in and of itself. The bonding that has occurred by going through the struggles, the good times, and the bizarre occurrences of life has created

a comfortable and deeply peaceful intimate relationship as the years have progressed.

The truth is that love and marriage are difficult. When Hollywood and Madison Avenue sugarcoat them and make romance seem like a walk in the park, they do a great disservice in creating unrealistic expectations for millions of young couples.

Loving a woman is, on the one hand, very easy. On the other, it is very difficult—sometimes nearly impossible. Frequently it doesn't take much to make a woman happy—a kind word, an unexpected expression of love, or a romantic gesture with no expectations. Other times, no matter what a man does, it is never enough. Likewise, women probably find men perplexing as well (although nowhere near as complicated).

Most men, if they are lucky, marry “up.” They value their wives as a greater “prize” than they deserve. My wife is a better wife than I am a husband. She's certainly a better person than I am, and if I'm being honest, she's likely a more mature Christian as well. Not only that, but she probably rates higher on most of the positive character traits than I do. She's more compassionate, tolerant, patient, loving, kind, gentle, caring, and humble than I am. She might even be more honest, faithful, loyal, and good than I am (okay, maybe more intelligent as well). I'm a lot stronger physically than she is, but that might be the only advantage I've got on her. (This works well for my main roles around the house as jar opener, garbage remover, bug killer, and heavy furniture mover.)

I've noticed that there are times in life when everything just seems to go right. I have experienced these phenomena in sports, in business, and in relationships. For brief periods of time nothing you do can go wrong. In sports they call it being

in the “zone.” Every basket you shoot goes in, every baseball coming toward the batter’s box looks as big as a beach ball, and every pass you throw is perfect. You feel “at one” with the field or court, your teammates, and the flow of the game. In business there are usually short periods of time when every decision pays off. You feel like King Midas—everything you touch turns to gold.

And there are times in a relationship when things go perfectly—when you are in the zone. When she gets and actually appreciates all my jokes (instead of getting offended), when I am able to artfully articulate exactly how I feel, when I am smooth and suave in everything I do, and when she looks at me like I am all that matters in the world. That “zone” to my wife probably looks like this: he focuses all his attention on me without being distracted, he spends time with me, he’s open and shares his innermost thoughts and feelings with me, he treats me like a queen.

Those times probably seem to be infrequent to both spouses, but they happen just often enough to encourage us to have hope. Hope that they will come again—usually when least expected. Those marriage “zones” are when my world seems best. Like the infrequent surprise sunny day in Oregon, they make all the other dreary times seem worthwhile.

My goal with this book is to give you as many tips (or keys or nuggets or whatever you want to call them) to help you slide into those zones as often and easily as possible. Because when you learn how to create and then appreciate those times in the zone, you create a lasting and fulfilling marriage. And your marriage matters—to you, your family, and our culture.

1



Marriage

Together Forever?

It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great.

—Coach Jimmy Dugan in
A League of Their Own

Most men were initially drawn to their wives like moths to a flame. Many of us were just stumbling along, minding our own business (happy in our bachelorhood) when *Pow!*—out of the blue we were dumbstruck by the power of this strange but beautiful and beguiling creature. We didn't know why we were attracted to her (although she certainly caught our attention with her looks), but we just knew we wanted to be close to her and

spend time with her. We had an irresistible urge to smooch on her all the time. We longed to be around her when she was absent but were dumbstruck speechless when she was present. She made us feel thick and substantial while floaty and weightless at the same time. We were rendered dizzy by the aroma that followed her around like a flitting butterfly, tantalizingly alighting on the tips of our noses. Her voice was like a siren of Greek mythology causing us not to wreck ourselves upon rocks but to desire to share our most secret dreams with her that we never told anyone (which was maybe just as dangerous). Some of these dreams we never even knew ourselves. But we knew, we knew in our heart, that this was the woman who made us want to be a better man. To conquer the world and lay it at her feet like a puppy seeking his mistress's approval.

I knew on our second date that my wife-to-be was the "one." She gave me a postcard that simply said, "I believe in you." No one had ever told me that before. All I knew was, I wanted to be the man she put her faith in. I needed to be that man.

When a man and woman come together as one, their individual strengths and weaknesses complement each other, making them more powerful as a team than either of them are individually. Make no mistake, though, marriage is difficult. It may well be the hardest relationship we will ever experience in our lifetime. I've found that nothing *worthwhile* in life is ever easy. In fact, the things that matter most are often the most difficult—things like marriage, raising children, significant accomplishments, etc. That means that the marriage experience, if done properly, is one of the most satisfying and enjoyable experiences we can undertake—even with all of its struggles and hardships.

Perhaps there is a good reason that marriage is difficult. Oftentimes the experiences we have with other people that are the most challenging, stretching, and even wounding are those that bond us closest together. If that's true, then maybe marriage isn't meant to be easy. Because it's the most important relationship you'll ever enter into, you can expect to have some of the deepest struggles you'll ever encounter. Maybe the very fact that it *is* so difficult ensures that it is a worthwhile endeavor. I know, *Easy for you to say sitting behind the computer keyboard—you don't know my spouse*, but trust me, I've had my share of marital challenges over the past thirty-two years. The one thing you won't find in this book is an author who thinks he knows everything about marriage and has had a perfect relationship with his wife. I've made as many mistakes as anyone reading this book.

That said, those kinds of experiences are the very thing that help others learn from and hopefully keep from making the same mistakes. And it's worth it, because married people are healthier, happier, and better off financially than their single counterparts. Having a spouse means you have someone to rely on to help shoulder the burdens of life and raising a family. You are responsible for each other. You care about each other's well-being, mental health, and financial situation.¹

Marriage allows each partner to develop certain skills while not having to be “perfect” at everything. We can count on our spouse to be responsible for the things he or she is good at, allowing us to focus on those things we excel in. Marriage also gives us a person to depend on and to face the stresses of life with together.

Perhaps because of those factors, research shows that married people are physically and emotionally healthier and

live longer than their single counterparts. Married men and women both report less depression, anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological stress. Single people have much higher mortality rates (50 percent higher for women and 250 percent higher for men) than married people. Women tend to live longer when married because they have more money and live in better neighborhoods with adequate health care (statistics show that just over half of single women have health insurance, as opposed to 83 percent of married women). Married men tend to live longer because they stop risky behaviors such as drinking, drugs, driving fast (while intoxicated), and putting themselves in a variety of dangerous situations. Married men also have much better diets and their wives monitor their health and force them to see the doctor when necessary.²

Nearly all Americans (93 percent) rate “having a happy marriage” as either one of the most important or very important goals in life, even outpacing “good health” and “good family life.” The number one goal of high school seniors is to “have a good marriage and family life.”³

Despite the pressures today to change or even abolish traditional marriage, individuals and society clearly benefit from this institution.

What Is Marriage?

[Marriage] is the merciless revealer, the great white searchlight turned on the darkest places of human nature.

—Katherine Anne Porter

Two (usually young) people start out in life together under the bliss of hormone-induced euphoria. They have

well-intentioned but unrealistic ideas of what their lives together will be like. What starts out as an innocent, uncorrupted, and pure bud of love over the years morphs into an old gnarled, scarred, and weather-beaten tree stump of friendship and devotion. And yet within this hoary old trunk beats a vibrant heart of the strongest white oak hardened by its perseverance and longevity to withstand any challenge that man, beast, or Mother Nature can throw against it. Those marriages that last for decades begin to discover the peaceful joy and contentedness that can only come from a lifetime of companionship and working together to rise above obstacles.

Many partners enter into marriage as frauds—showing only the best of themselves. But marriage has a tendency to expose the truth about two people and shine light on their true character. What was kept secretly under wraps while dating soon becomes apparent in the light of day during marriage.

When that happens, the character of the individuals either nourishes the relationship or destroys it. A healthy marriage relationship is comprised of the traits of trust, honesty, humor, faith, and commitment. Marriage in turn teaches us patience, selflessness, and humility.

Overcoming challenges is what makes us successful and grows us as human beings. Whether in a sporting event, at the workplace, or in a science lab, the person who is able to overcome the greatest difficulties is celebrated as a winner. Why should marriage be any different? When the hardships of a relationship confront us, we shouldn't easily quit but rather give it the same effort we would any other worthwhile challenge in life. Certainly a good marriage is more important than throwing a basketball through a hoop in the larger scheme of things, yet people go to great lengths to improve

themselves in sports when they won't spend nearly as much energy trying to overcome minor obstacles in their marriage.

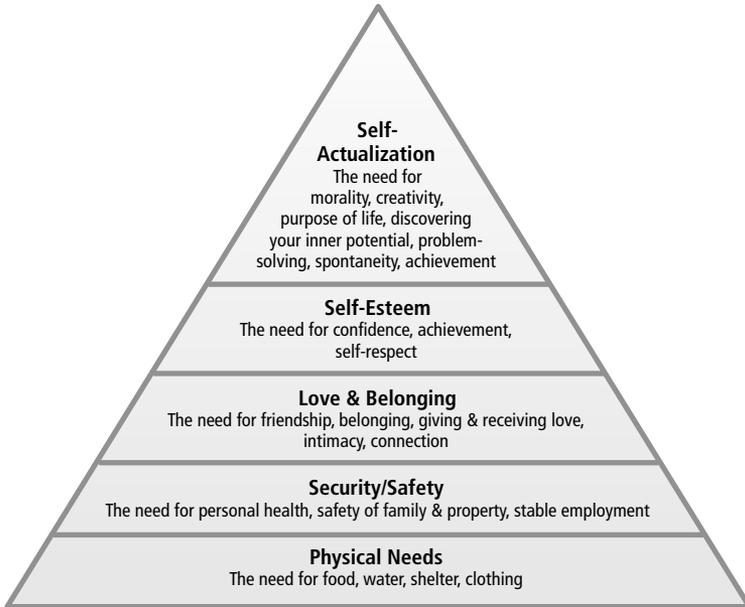
Perhaps the greatest compliment we can get from our spouse (especially after a decade or two of being married) is to hear that if they could do it all over, they would marry us again. To have that person—who knows our core character with all its ugly faults and basest venalities—actually *want* to go through the dark challenges, abject failures, and deep wounds of life all over together again means that they are either insane or that this kind of love is worth every obstacle we must face in order to achieve it.

Some common stressors in marriage consist of the lack of communication (or miscommunication), avoiding important issues, financial struggles, overscheduling of our time, addictions, and living in crisis. Bad relationships between unhealthy people tend to be smothered in chaos. When people live in chaos it's extremely difficult for the relationships or the individuals to grow beyond getting their immediate needs met. Those relationships spend all their time and energy just running around putting out fires.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs posits that if you can't get your most basic needs met you can't focus on higher concepts like love and intimacy. It's difficult if not impossible to move from one level up to the next one until that need has been fulfilled. Once the foundational level of a person's needs are met—like their physical needs (food, water, shelter, etc.)—then a person can move into the next level of development, and so on, until they finally reach the top level of self-actualization. So, for instance, if a woman lives in an unsafe environment or struggles keeping the utilities turned on or from getting evicted from her home, she's

not likely to be able to work on her self-esteem or growing intimacy in her personal relationships. The “depression of poverty” keeps people from having the desire or ability to move forward in life and make healthy choices.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



The healthier we get, the further up Maslow’s pyramid we progress and the greater the likelihood that we will be able to sustain healthy relationships with those in our lives. This is one reason why I am telling my young adult daughter that *now* (while she is *not* in a relationship) is the time to grow herself and heal any wounds—so that when the right young man comes along she will be in a position to take advantage of entering into a healthier marriage. Since we tend to marry a person who is at the same level of emotional maturity as we

are, it only makes sense to be as healthy as possible in order to find the healthiest mate, thus giving ourselves a better chance of having a successful relationship.

What Does Marriage Take?

Success in marriage does not come merely through finding the right mate, but through being the right mate.

—Barnett R. Brickner

Marriage is as much a business partnership as it is a romance. Even though our culture heavily promotes the unrealistic concept that marriage is a fifty-fifty proposition, it's important to remember that it's more about mutual submission to one another's needs and desires than it is absolute equality. To have an "absolute equality" mentality creates ongoing disappointment and resentment. More important is that each partner feels like they are invested in the relationship and contributing. Sometimes it seems like one spouse is giving 95 percent while the other is only contributing 5 percent toward the marriage. In those circumstances it's important to trust that your spouse will carry more than their fair share at some later date. That requires being a servant-hearted spouse even when we don't feel like it. It also requires being proactive and intentional in your commitment to serve your spouse.

Right after each of our children were born, my wife had to devote all her energies to healing herself and nurturing these helpless newborn babies. Therefore I took over all the chores she normally did as well as my own duties. So for a period of time I did *all* the dishes, laundry, housecleaning, and other things necessary to run a household. But I knew that when

appropriate, my wife would return to her normal duties and at some time in the future (like when I was ill) she would take over more than her share of the everyday chores for a short period of time. This is a sign of a healthy relationship.

It's virtually impossible to split every task equally down the middle. Besides, one partner might be much better (more capable, interested, or experienced) at some tasks than others, and allowing each spouse to do their share of chores that fit their skill set is a much more efficient and expedient process. What's important is that each partner believes they and their spouse are contributing something of value that benefits the relationship. When we do that, it allows us to produce more as a team than we could produce individually. Ultimately, marriage is more about giving than it is about getting.

A marriage requires nearly continual forgiveness (both requesting and granting) from both spouses in order to work. If you can't extend that kind of grace, you can't expect to receive it either. It necessitates the willingness to compromise—by both partners. Without the ability to forgive, the wounded person soon becomes the wounder. In addition, forgiveness (along with gratitude) appears to be the number one trait linked to happiness in marriage—and possibly in life. When you are able to forgive each other, you don't carry around all that resentment and anger bottled up inside. This is important because all those resentments (even from outside sources) eventually get taken out on one person—our spouse. If we can't learn to regularly forgive and forget, we become bitter, frustrated critics—unable to see the beauty in life or the blessing of our spouse.

Even strong Christian marriages face the same challenges as any other marriage: communication problems, sexual

temptations, frustrations, and unrealized expectations. Without the ability to forgive each other, those pressures erode the foundation of your marriage and create disappointment and resentment.

Having a good marriage also requires us to prioritize our marriage. We have to be willing to make time for one another and take steps to improve our marriage. Activities like reading books, attending workshops and conferences, being part of a small study group, and seeking counseling if necessary are vital to ensure a growing and healthy marriage relationship. If we allow busyness, weariness, an unhealthy past, or a lack of replenishing relationships in our life to interfere with our timetable, we are unable to prioritize our spouse and give them the attention they deserve. Most of us work at least eight hours a day. Throw in travel time, shopping, and sleep and you've taken up most of the rest of the day. Oh yes, then throw a handful of kids into the mix along with their sports, music, camps, and other activities and . . . wow! I'm tired just writing about it. It's no wonder I hear all the time comments from parents like, "I'm exhausted" or "I'm so busy I don't have time for myself" or "We haven't even had sex in a month" or finally "Our marriage revolves around the kids. I'm not sure we even love each other anymore."

It's human nature to spend our most precious commodity—our time—on the things we value most. So when I hear men say they love their kids more than their job, but they spend twelve hours a day working and miss all their kids' games and recitals, I have to question whether their actions back up their words or not. Or when a woman says she values her marriage but spends all of her energy investing in her children with no time for her husband, I question where her

values really are. It's important for parents to remember that your marriage will still be around long after your kids are gone. And it's worth staying together for the long run. Even though our kids are grown and gone (most of the time), I'd be lost without my wife. She knows me better than anyone in the entire world. She cares about me more than anyone else in the world. She appreciates my ugly old self better than anyone else could. To think of ending that and having to expend the energy to try to build that all over with someone else is daunting to even consider. But building that kind of relationship takes time. It isn't done overnight or even over years. It takes decades.

Being grateful is a big part of a successful marriage. Appreciating your spouse and the sacrifices they make is part of being happy and contented with our life and marriage. We all just want to be appreciated. It's amazing what a simple "thank you" will do for your relationship.

Lastly, to have a long-term successful marriage also requires having the devotion to place another's wants and needs ahead of your own—not a natural trait (at least for most men). It requires the discipline to deny ourselves the pleasures and desires that we selfishly and sometimes desperately crave, with no guarantee that we will be "rewarded" or will benefit from that self-sacrifice. A good marriage depends upon this trust as the stabilizing force that keeps each partner from desecrating the vows made when their love was strong and unassailable. I know that after all our years together, Suzanne will still always place my well-being in the forefront of every decision she makes. She would never intentionally seek to harm me or betray me in any way. And I believe she feels I will do the same for her. This confidence, though, has

been built (tested and proven) over a long time of devotion on both our parts.

Why Your Marriage Matters

Divorce, by definition, is a failure—of love, forgiveness, and patience, or (at the very least) it is the result of poor judgment in choosing a difficult partner in the first place.

—Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*

When you got married you literally signed a contract. You swore a verbal oath to one another in front of witnesses. If you are a person of faith, you made a covenant with and in front of almighty God. If you are not a person of faith, you at the very least made a pact with the state that you would uphold certain vows that you recited publicly. Those vows probably included staying together in a permanent union (“till death do us part”), a promise of sexual fidelity (“forsaking all others”), financial support (“with all my worldly goods I do thee endow”), and emotional support (“to love, honor, and cherish”).

Take a look at your marriage vows and see if you are following the agreement you made with each other. If not, you are violating the terms of your contract. While the state may not take actions against you, at the very least, violating those vows speaks to the quality of your character. Additionally, the Bible unequivocally states that God hates divorce. As a Christian you might have some ‘splainin’ to do someday.

Marriage also grows you as a person. The challenges of marriage grow and mature us both as couples and as individuals. Those challenges make life worth living; having no challenges in life is boring. But people have a propensity to

avoid difficulties. So some people leave a marriage when it gets too hard. This tendency of humans to avoid unpleasantness and difficulty keeps us from growing to a higher spiritual and maturity plateau. Persevering through difficulties (of any kind) in life and marriage helps develop our character and make us less selfish. As a man, I've found that marriage has grown me immeasurably. I'm not sure many men are capable of overcoming their self-serving nature without the benefit of marriage.

But your marriage is not just about you. Your marriage is important to many others besides you and your spouse. Certainly your children think your marriage matters (don't be fooled by pop culture—divorce devastates children, even when they are grown). Both your parents and your spouse's parents think your marriage is important. But others are affected by what happens in your marriage as well. This concept struck me a few years ago. I had an epiphany that after three decades of being married, our marriage was not just about us anymore. The truth is that if we were to divorce, it would impact the lives of many other people. Of course we would each be wounded by its fracturing. And our children and grandchildren, yes, but also all of the people who look to us for hope and encouragement as an example that a love can last a lifetime. Should we fold, all the young couples we have mentored and counseled would be highly discouraged and question the advice we had given them. Perhaps even people who have benefited from reading my books or from being involved in our ministry would doubt the veracity of our work. What about all the people who don't actually *know* us but know that we have been married for a long time? Would our demise impact them at all? Maybe it would remove just a bit of hope and encouragement from their own marriages.

Young couples today yearn for stable marriages, but are anxious about the likelihood of achieving it themselves.

Lastly, what about the effect on society our breakup would have? Our divorce probably wouldn't shake the foundations of society, but get *enough* people of all ages divorcing, remarriage, having multiple blended and extended families and it becomes confusing. So confusing that since 1990 the federal government has stopped producing information on marriages and divorces in this country.⁴ And where do individual and societal expenses begin and end for struggling broken families in areas such as health insurance, education, and welfare assistance? Not to mention the impact on society resulting from fatherless boys and girls wreaking havoc in areas such as higher rates of crime, promiscuity, and out-of-wedlock children.

Experts believe that divorce is contagious. But so are good marriages. Marriage matters—yours and mine. At the very least it is a stabilizing force for a culture to grow and develop from.

Why Marriage Is Good for You

Eighty-six percent of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages were happier, rating very happy or quite happy.

—L. J. Waite and M. Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*

Permissive divorce laws have encouraged a rise in divorces over the years. The implementation of no-fault divorce laws in the early 1970s appears to coincide with significantly higher levels of divorce in the United States. When United States divorce laws underwent major changes, the divorce rate more than doubled in all states.⁵ In 1968 about 25 percent of all

marriages ended in divorce. Today that number has doubled, with nearly 50 percent of all marriages ending in divorce.⁶ The average length of a marriage is between seven and eight years.⁷

But now our culture is actively promoting the message that divorce is not bad, and in fact marriage might not even be good. It is becoming politically incorrect to even use the word “marriage.”

I recently spoke at a conference attended by managers of various state-run social service agencies. Even though everyone in attendance recognized and admitted the significant advantages and benefits of marriage (and many even worked in programs designed to promote marriage among their clientele), they still were cautious about promoting it publically. They somewhat tongue-in-cheek referred to it as the “M” word. It was unfashionable (or at least politically incorrect) to even say out loud the word “marriage” at this conference!

There’s a rather silly thought going around today about people looking for someone to marry to “complete” them. Well, that may be true, just not the way most people think. If nothing else, it creates unrealistic expectations in a marriage. Your spouse isn’t a ready-made piece designed to add to your pleasure and fulfillment. Your spouse is, however, designed to cause you to struggle and grow into a more “complete” version of yourself than you would have been without them. It is a process designed to force you and your spouse to grow separately and together. At that point (usually after many years) your marriage becomes a completer version of an entity where *together* you are closer to God than either of you would have been on your own.

But beyond all that, your marriage is important, especially for your kids. Children need both the complementary

parenting styles of a mother (nurturing) and a father (authoritative) in order to thrive. These love styles (performance-based and unconditional) help teach children character traits and life lessons they need in order to be successful human beings.

One of the biggest myths of our culture is that divorce is the best thing for children when a marriage becomes unhappy—that staying married for the “kids’ sake” is a mistake. Divorce may or may not be the best thing for an individual parent seeking their own self-fulfillment, but it’s certainly not for children. While children in high-conflict homes may be better off when parents separate, most children (even those in unhappy low-conflict homes whose parents stay together and work out their problems) fare better when both parents are in the home.⁸

A wide range of research shows that children from single-parent homes fare far more poorly than their counterparts from two-parent families in virtually every measurable outcome. Unfortunately, according to vital-statistics data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 41 percent of all births are now a result of nonmarital childbearing.⁹ Here are a few examples of how children fare more poorly in these situations:

- Children in father-absent homes are five times more likely to be poor and ten times as likely to be extremely poor than children living with a mother and a father.
- Children from single-parent homes are much more likely to be neglected and sexually, psychologically, and emotionally abused than their two-parent counterparts.
- Teenagers from single-parent homes were one and a half to twotimes more at risk for illegal drug use than teens from intact homes.

- Boys fourteen to twenty-two years of age who grow up outside intact families are twice as likely to end up in jail. Every year a boy spends living without a father increases the odds of future incarceration by 5 percent. A boy born to an unwed mother is two and a half times more likely to end up in prison than boys raised in two-parent homes.
- Separation or frequent transitions (divorce, new partners, etc.) increase a girl's risk of early menarche, sexual activity, and pregnancy. Women whose parents separated early in life experience twice the risk of early menstruation, more than four times the risk of early sexual intercourse, and two and a half times higher risk of early pregnancy compared to women in intact families. The longer a woman lived with both parents, the lower her risk of early reproductive development and sexual activity (fewer encounters and less sexual partners).
- On average, educational achievement in children from one-parent homes is significantly lower. Children from single-parent homes score lower on tests and have lower grade point averages than those from two-parent, biological families. Children from one-parent homes are more than twice as likely to drop out of school as children from two-parent homes. Additionally, nearly all educational outcomes (grade point average, test scores, achievement tests, and high school/college graduation) are, on average, lower in students from single-parent homes than students from intact families.¹⁰

Businesses, corporations, and even the government are rightfully concerned about the status of marriages in this country. According to *The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing—First-Ever Estimate for Nation and*

All Fifty States (2008), family fragmentation (divorce, separation, children born out of wedlock, etc.) costs United States taxpayers at least \$112 billion each year.¹¹ The average employee loses 168 hours of work time the year following a divorce.¹² Absenteeism, reduction in productivity, and increased healthcare costs related to marital distress cost United States businesses and industry an estimated \$6.8 billion per year.¹³

Smart businesses realize the impact home life has on productivity and take steps to provide help to employees in these areas whenever possible. Even the military understands the relationship between a stable home life and the efficient productivity of their members. Several workshops based on my books have been used successfully by these and other entities to help their employees have happier and healthier relationships at home, which then translates into better job performance and productivity.

Husbands and wives provide each other with companionship, sex, and partnership, but also provide a veritable insurance policy in that should something unexpected happen, there is another person to take care of them. If you become disabled, sick, or infirm, there is a person to stand with you and help you through the crisis, a benefit you might not get as readily from a cohabitating situation. Should you die, your spouse will get social security or life insurance benefits, as well as all your worldly goods.¹⁴

Marriage positively contributes to each individual on a personal level and to society in general as a whole. Your marriage matters to you personally, to others around you, and to our culture in general. Keep an eye on the bigger picture and you'll know that your marriage and those of everyone you know are important.

Now let's look at some practical tips to making your marriage successful and fulfilling. One challenge that most couples face is effectively communicating with one another, which leads us to our second chapter.



*Intimacy-Building Tips
for Your Marriage*



- Pick one night a week to spend together. This could be a formal date, or it could be just spending the evening watching a movie together at home. Time together translates into intimacy.
- Share with each other (and your children) what first attracted you to your spouse. Tell your children (and grandchildren) the story of how you met. Share when and how you knew your spouse was “the one.” Sharing stories like these frequently not only reminds you of why you married your spouse, it also gives your children guidelines on finding the right person to marry.
- If you've been married longer than twenty years, renew your vows. Have a ceremony where you recommit to one another. What an awesome event for friends and family! Make it a fun party.
- Pray together with your spouse every day. Prayer is the most intimate activity you can do with another person.