

CHAPTER ONE

A PICTURE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

My Story. A Modern Story.

I could feel the veins in my neck bulging.

The veins in my neck never bulge. I'm the emotionally unhealthy guy who internalizes everything—no matter how much the circumstance warrants a reaction.

The more she explains how my negligence of our relationship makes her feel, the more I want to jump in my truck and spend the weekend alone on the open road—neglecting our relationship.

Instead, I apply the proven tactic of bringing up unrelated issues as a means to make her feel shame. And voilà—she backs down and the night ends right on queue.

We then resort to our increasingly popular nightcap. I walk out slamming the door behind me for dramatic effect. She crawls under the covers in tears—but not before setting up her wall of pillows down the middle of the bed just to remind me, when I do come to sleep, that things are not okay.

Needless to say, Analee and I didn't come into marriage expecting, after only eighteen months, that screaming matches, excessive amounts of frustration, and pillow walls would become our norm. How did we get here? How does anyone get here?

To answer that question, we should probably start from the beginning.

IN THE BEGINNING.

I used to think I was a decently articulate guy, reasonably comfortable in my own skin. Then Analee would walk in the room.

Instantly, I had nothing but unintelligible things to say and a deep urge to be someone cooler and wiser and generally better than myself.

She was everything I wanted—everything I dreamed of in a woman. Electric personality. Exotically gorgeous. Lit up a room. World-travelled. She had a faith that was real and seasoned. She did most of the talking so I didn't have to. The list went on, and as it did, I became more and more convinced I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life waking up next to her.

Of course, that meant she would have to feel the same way about me—a risky endeavor for any woman.

It took me six months of running in the same social circles to work up the courage to talk to her. Fortunately, I found the grit to mumble words in her direction and after a handful of texts—which may or may not have involved a few helpful Justin Timberlake lyrics—we found ourselves dating. Nine months later, I convinced her to marry me.

Saying “I do” to Analee is one of the better choices I've made in life. Anyone who knows us would concur and secretly wonder how I married so far up.

Our first year and a half of marriage felt like a perpetual sleepover with my best friend. We lived in a tiny cottage, in a quaint city, and bought a cute dog—all the makings of an absolute dream.

Then it happened.

It only took me eighteen months and a few blunted expectations to feel sincerely disappointed with marriage. There was nothing “wrong” with Analee. In fact, she was as lovely as she had ever been. This disappointment had little to do with her, and everything to do with my own misinformed ideas about marriage and their inability to support the very unnatural art of loving another person.

I had brought suitcases of misconceptions to the altar. And as these misconceptions were tested in the face of a very real relationship, we slowly but surely waved goodbye to our best friend slumber party and Norman Rockwell picturesque life.

Unresolved conflict soon became a staple of our relationship.

Failed expectations, yelling matches, and sleeping with a pillow fortress between us was not entirely new to this season. Yet these episodes seemed to be more frequent and less forgiving than in our first year of marriage.

We weren't supposed to be the ones in a perpetual fight. After all, we had all the tools to have a successful relationship. We knew each other's love languages. We had navigated conflict in the past. All throughout year one of newlywed life, we spent two hours every other week in counseling so we could avoid meltdowns like the ones we were now consistently experiencing. We were the couple who underlined and dog-eared their marriage books. Yet despite having all the tools at our fingertips, we often found ourselves too angry, exhausted, and generally uninterested in using them.

Something was missing. We both felt it. We both wondered why.

We exhausted those books early on, subtly believing that if we could expose ourselves to all of the best three-step formulas and tab them for easy reference, we could somehow avoid all of the ugly, uncomfortable realities of life with another human being.

But we couldn't. And as it turns out, we were never meant to.

As I took inventory of our relationship, the one thing I couldn't seem to find was a vision for our marriage worth fighting for. Don't get me wrong, I thought I knew what we were—by default—trying to build together: a happy life. A loving relationship. Two successful careers with a cushy joint bank account. A someday-family we could spend the rest of our lives driving to soccer practices, sending to college, and pushing out of the nest so we could retire into wild motor home adventures. But in the midst of a relationship that internally demanded so much, something told me a dream lifestyle wasn't the kind of vision that our marriage needed.

What we needed was a better picture of what marriage could be . . . one that didn't stop at a well-insulated life with a good partner and kids who don't do drugs. We needed a picture that answered in the deepest part of us *why* marriage is

important,

and valuable,

and worth investing into as much as it asks of us.

The interesting thing is that most of us today *have* a vision for marriage—whether or not we recognize it or can put it into words. We all bring to the table some construct of what we hope it will be. It's not a lack of vision that threatens many marriages today. What threatens our marriages is that many of our visions for matrimony have been crafted by modern and misguided ideas about love.

The next one hundred or so pages are about exposing these misguided ideas and exploring a vision of marriage worth fighting for.

MODERN MATRIMONY IS A STALE BRAND.

My general disillusionment with marriage is a popular place to land these days.

Sociologists say marriage is fundamentally broken.

Historians say it's outdated.

Progressives say it's not even necessary.

And tragically, statistics seem to say it's not worth it.

In America, one marriage ends every ten to thirteen seconds.¹ Almost half of the weddings you go to this year will celebrate the union of a couple who won't stay together. And if they do stay together for more than ten years, one out of every four of them will say they are unfulfilled in their relationship—but too comfortable to leave.²

The number of Americans saying “I do” has dropped each decade since the 1950s and cohabiting—but-unmarried partnerships have risen 1,000 percent over the last forty years.³ “The question has become,” as social scientist Andrew Cherlin says, “not why fewer people are getting married, but why so many are still getting married?”⁴

The disheartening statistics go on. Yet the statistics are also incredibly understandable.

Our parents' generation was handed a vision of marriage that apparently wasn't worth more than a 50 percent success rate.⁵ They added their own dysfunctional patterns, as did any generation before them, and passed on this mediocre brand of what is supposed to be the height of human relationship.

As the infamous *Newsweek* article “The Case Against Marriage” put it, “Many grew up shepherded between bedrooms, minivans, and dinner tables, with stepparents, half-siblings, and highly complicated holiday schedules. You can imagine, then—amid incessant high-profile adultery scandals—that we’d be somewhat cynical about the institution [of marriage].”⁶

Then again, your parents may be about to celebrate their thirtieth anniversary of being happily married. Or maybe you’ve been fortunate enough to grow up with very functional and loving divorced parents. Or maybe you’re just now entering marriage with nothing but the very best hopes and dreams. Regardless of the good, bad, or ugly exposure we’ve had personally to the institution of marriage, it’s hard to deny that the path to marital disappointment is all around us. It’s put on display every day—in the news, in celebrity relationships, in our friends’ and coworkers’ lives—and the truth is that even in the healthiest relationships, we will inevitably have moments with our spouse that cause us to entertain this exceedingly popular *misunderstanding*—the key word here—that marriage, as an ideal, is simply broken and disappointing.

However, the flip side of the divorce statistic tells a dramatically different narrative—one that perhaps we have not given enough attention.

MARRIAGE ISN’T BROKEN— IT’S SIMPLY MISUNDERSTOOD.

Yes, many marriages end in divorce.⁷ The research is clear. But research also shows that when marriage “works,” it *really* works. In fact, if cultivated, marriage is actually better for you on all fronts—physically, materially, and emotionally.⁸ Studies show that healthily married people live longer, have better health, earn more money, accumulate more wealth, feel more fulfillment in their lives, enjoy a more satisfying sexual relationship, and have happier and more successful children than those who cohabitate or get divorced.⁹

Happiness? You are twice as likely to be happy if you stay married. And married people, in general, report lower levels of depression and stress than non-marrieds.¹⁰

Health? Robin Simons, a sociologist at Wake Forest University, has done research that reflects that “married people overall do better on virtually every indicator of health and well-being.”¹¹

Sex? According to Linda Waite’s research for her groundbreaking book with Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, over 40 percent of married women said their sex life was emotionally and physically satisfying, compared to about 30 percent of single women. The same trend is seen among men—50 percent of married men say they are physically and emotionally content versus 38 percent of cohabitating men. And 40 percent of married people have sex at least twice a week (not to mention those who have more!), compared to 20–25 percent of single and cohabitating men and women.¹²

The list of perks goes on, but only perpetuates the countertrend that marriage is not, in fact, disappointing. It’s simply misunderstood. And we as a modern society seem to be largely unaware of its unique purposes.

IT’S TIME FOR A REBRAND.

Just as Analee and I were entering the painful epiphany that our marriage was missing something, we were invited to a friend’s home for a “marriage day.” We spent the day hearing timeless perspectives and honest reflections on marriage from older, more seasoned couples, and with every story they shared, a bit more color filled my picture for what marriage could be.

This day at a friend’s home challenged my paradigm of matrimony. It painted just enough of a new picture that I couldn’t help but want

more. It marked the beginning of a personal journey to cultivate a vision of marriage worth fighting for.

It's a journey I'm still on today and a journey in which I'd love for you to join me.

I've spent the last three years putting the most basic assumptions about modern marriage to the test. Along the way, I've interviewed three *New York Times* bestselling authors, a molecular biologist devoted to family development, a prime-time TV star, a personality psychologist, two marriage therapists, and several couples whose relationships I simply admire. I've exhausted resources by Israeli Breslov rabbis, modern sociologists, sex therapists, Orthodox priests, university professors, and Christian counselors. And perhaps most importantly, my wife and I have explored these various ideas we've come across by conducting several experiments in our own marriage—every one of which has helped us change our marital narrative and learn the very unnatural art of loving another person.

I began sharing some of my experiments and findings over a year ago and was astonished at the responses. My first article on the subject, “3 Things I Wish I Knew Before We Got Married,” was shared online over 350,000 times and the conversations started by readers clued me in to a few things.¹³

I've noticed I'm not alone in my desire for a new brand of marriage. In fact, I'm walking alongside a vast amount of people—like you—who aren't interested in accepting “marriage as usual.”

I've noticed that most of us want something more from marriage than some quick fix for loneliness or romantic obsession or a tool of self-fulfillment. We want to invest ourselves deeply and see a deep return.

I've seen that many of us believe God created marriage for more than the American dream and idyllic family Christmas card. We want to know what He originally designed it to be.

Most of us know there's more to life than happiness. Instead, we want a version of marriage that actually deals with the realities of life in radical proximity with another person.

We all want to see the end of broken homes and raise children who grow up emotionally connected and confidently commissioned into adulthood.

We want relationship. Real, challenging, relationships that don't just enrich our lives, but play a role in showing the world a better way of life.

In the end, we want a better vision for marriage—one that answers in the deepest parts of us *why* we stay married—a vision that's worth fighting for.

I have no intention of spending the next few chapters handing you a step-by-step formula to a better marriage. You can pick that up from your local Walmart. I simply want to paint a picture of marriage that's worth endlessly investing into.

Join me on this endeavor and we'll talk about four misconceptions about love that accompany modern marriage—happiness, me-centricity, falling in love, and privatization. My hope is that by the end of this book, we'll have replaced them with timeless truths that will play a leading role in writing a better marriage narrative for us all.

However, before we jump in, here are five thoughts—in no particular order—that may help us get started.

1. *Different strokes for different folks*

This book is written under the assumption that if we want to change our reality, we must first change our own minds. Accordingly, we'll use three types of content.



Mindset. These sections deal with debunking common misconceptions and offering a better way to see marriage.



Best Practices. These sections suggest practical ways to help walk out the proposed mindset shifts.



Case Studies. These sections document real-life experiences, primarily through interviews, of those who have seen these mindsets and best practices make a difference.

These three chapter elements are for people like me whose mood often dictates whether they want to chew on deeper ideas and philosophy, acquire practical life tools, or get proof via real life accounts. My hope is that when all three elements converge, a greater vision for marriage will start to come together.

2. *Reflection helps*

If you would like to dig deeper than this book has the page space to go, I've produced a downloadable PDF with questions as you read for personal or group reflection. It also includes suggested experiments and tools to try on your own. To download, simply visit www.tylerwardis.com/marriage-rebranded-reflections.

3. *Formulas are for institutions*

Don't be fooled by the term "Best Practices." I'm not suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach to marriage. These are simply practical insights and suggestions I've come across that have proved worth some experimentation.

Though we'll read plenty of cause-and-effect stories throughout the book, let's be clear that every relationship is profoundly unique. The success or failure of every relationship is a combination of many variables. The goal of this book is to look at a few of those variables from several different perspectives—not to offer a comprehensive guide. If you're looking for a way to avoid the process of trial and error required in developing any real relationship, there are plenty of books out there offering $A + B = C$. However, this is not one of them. Comprehensive formulas are for institutions, not relationships. And I think what we're all after is the latter.

4. My wife is going to join us

I've invited my wife into our time together. At all the right moments, she'll offer her own brilliant thoughts and perspectives.

5. Why I wrote this book

Let's be honest. If I picked up a book about marriage by an author who had only been married for five years, I'd be skeptical too. In our digital age when seemingly anyone with access to Wikipedia can become an overnight guru, I'd be apprehensive to read on as well. If I'm being honest, I initially turned down the request to write this book because of this exact stigma. However, after months of feeling drawn back to the project, here are two reasons I decided to write it.

One, I'm an expert. But only if by "expert" we mean what physicist and Nobel prize winner Niels Bohr means by it: "An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field."¹⁴ In fact, one could say this book is largely inspired by the documentation of all my mistakes in marriage, identifying the bad ideas behind them and attempting to replace them with better ones—key word here being "attempting." My wife would be the first to tell you that just because I may be writing about a beautiful

picture of marriage does not mean I'm not in a long and challenging process to cultivate it in my own relationship.

But she can say it far better than I:

Analee's Point of View. *Marriage is the beautiful, messy at times, unfolding of two people in which our growth is never meant to stop. No matter where we are in this lifelong process, WE ARE ALL learning. And there's no question that I have my share of growing to do. But let's just say that the running family joke—that Tyler coined—throughout this writing process was that he couldn't make me his priority because he was too busy WRITING about making me his priority. In all seriousness though, I am incredibly thankful he has been so committed to finding the greatness in marriage and leading us toward it. I've never expected him to be perfect, but to watch him stay open and devoted to the process has been everything a wife could dream.*

I will be opening the good, bad, and ugly of our married life to you with the hope that you might see a bit of yourself in our story, or at least find a slightly better way to develop your own story. But in many ways, I'll simply be a guide to an exploration of ideas and suggestions posed by far more experienced people than I. Most of whom (they're all listed on the dedication page) took the time to sit with me, share life with me, and show me another piece of the beauty of this thing called marriage.

And two, I couldn't not write this book. The statistics are one thing, but I've watched nine young couples in the past two years walk away from their marriages. No doubt you've watched the painful process of marriages falling apart in the lives of friends and family, as well. And while it's true that the decision to end each marriage was unique, I would venture to say many if not most of

these relationships were severed under the influence of bad ideas they've inherited about matrimony.

Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying divorce is universally wrong. Or that I am some sort of hero, here to rescue our current state of matrimony. What I'm saying is simply that, after watching several friends have their relationships destroyed by modern yet misinformed ideas about marriage, I couldn't *not* write this book.

So regardless of how broken your ideas about marriage are or are not, or how functional your marriage is or isn't, let's start over together. Let's wipe our slates clean and become apprentices to this thing called matrimony—or as I've come to know it, the very unnatural art of loving another person.

CHAPTER TWO

CARVING TO THE SKIN

Happily Ever After Isn't the Point

“Marriage is a school of sanctity.”

—Martin Luther

Amanda did everything “right.” She’d been reading relationship books since she was twelve and only dated when the prospect had the potential for marriage. Sam and Amanda spent the first year of their marriage settling into a new town, buying their first home, and starting their traditions of weekly dinner, a movie date, and late nights drinking wine on the back porch.

It was the beginning of a dream come true—or so she thought.

Sam took a new job fourteen months into their marriage, requiring more travel and late nights even when he wasn’t on the road. Amanda quickly felt the loss but learned to cope with their new life. She supported him in his career by learning to require less of him and offering him space as he needed. As the demands of work became more intense for Sam, the weekly date nights became less frequent. Neither of them seemed to notice.

Three years and seven weeks after they exchanged vows, Amanda sat in our living room a couple weeks after Sam filed for divorce. As

she shared about their short married life together, her sadness was only rivaled by her confusion about Sam's choice.

"We started so strong . . . He was such a great husband . . . I couldn't wait to see him as a father . . ."

Sam's story was a bit different. "There's no question in my mind that we were in love at the beginning," he said. "We had some of the best moments together. But as time passed, it's as if we became indifferent. I felt nothing when I left for a trip and nothing when I came home. *We just weren't happy anymore.*"

Unfortunately Sam and Amanda's story is a common one today. Many fall in love. Get married. The *happiness* that once validated this love inevitably fades. And many find themselves lost and confused.

In our modern era, you and I are led to believe that happiness is a worthy guide in life and that—in one way or another—we have some sort of inalienable right to experience it. As we'll see, our culture's obsession with being happy often makes it far more natural for us to love happiness more than we ever love another human. And though being happy is a very real by-product of a healthy relationship, this inflated value we give to it makes us vulnerable to missing one of the more beautiful purposes of marriage altogether. We're about to explore this in depth, but first, we need to reevaluate our misled ideas about happiness.

Stanley Hauerwas, an American theologian and Duke University professor, articulates here the bottom line: "Destructive to marriage is the self-fulfillment ethic that assumes marriage and the family are primarily institutions of personal fulfillment."¹

I learned this lesson like I learn most things in my life: the hard way.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF A MODERN HEDONIST.

1989. My mom tells me I can't have another piece of blackberry pie at our family reunion. I happen to like blackberry pie very much, always have. To this day, she still recalls me uncharacteristically crying to the point of convulsing for an inappropriate amount of time.

1999. I find the new pinnacle of human existence after kissing my first girlfriend. She dumps me a few months later, and for weeks I'm convinced all of life's happiness is behind me.

2001. I experience God for the first time and read that He wants me to have life to the full. I tell my friends that I've found the key to happiness and invite them to join me. It didn't take me long to realize that even this kind of happiness came with a price that I often wasn't willing to pay.

2003. I'm not happy in the American suburbs, so I move to Kosovo, a recently war-torn nation where I hope finding the meaning of life will make me smile more than four years at a state college or a corporate gig. I drink a lot of coffee, make a lot of friends, but come home a year later with no sense of lasting fulfillment.

2007. Since I was a kid, I've wanted to live on the West Coast. So after college, I jumped into my car with \$800 in my pocket and drove to LA. I lived in the Hollywood Hills, worked a job that had me traveling the world for free, and only occasionally found myself fulfilled.

2008. I meet a beautiful half-Filipino, half-Swedish actress in Hollywood. She loves God and kisses extremely well. After nine months of dating, I eventually convince her to marry me and we begin our happily ever after.

2011. Though I happened to marry my favorite person on earth and the first couple of years of our relationship are a dream, I'm

now certain that nothing in life has ever made me more frustrated than marriage. It often feels as if just when I think I've given all I can possibly give, it somehow finds a way to ask for more.

The worst part of it all is that most of my wife's demands aren't unreasonable. One day she expects me to stay emotionally engaged. The next, she's looking for me to validate the way she feels. The list goes on—but never ventures far from things she perfectly deserves as a wife. Unfortunately for her, meeting her very valid needs at the expense of my own didn't play nice with my idea of “happily ever after.”

Though I've been largely unaware of it, most decisions I've made in life have been subtly influenced by my pursuit of happiness. Maybe the same is true of you. It's human, after all—to want to be happy.

In fact, it's probably a bit more human than we think because the roots of our modern obsession with happiness reach deep into history.

A HISTORICAL SNAPSHOT OF MARITAL HEDONISM.

The Garden and Misaimed Desires. The hope of finding happiness through getting married is nothing new. According to biblical history, it reaches back to the beginning of human nature after an incident involving an apple and a mistake.

When introducing the consequences of Adam's fruit-tasting endeavor, God made it clear to Eve that . . .

“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”²

This statement marked the first moment in history when a human being would not look to God for wholeness. Now, men and women both would try to find their fulfillment in another person or in

the works of their hands. This marked a massive shift in what it meant to be fully human post-garden and it effectively began the perpetual slide toward the make-me-happy brand of marriage or singleness we find ourselves chasing today.

Skip several thousand years.

Free Market Capitalism and Happiness-Based Love.

Modern consumerism offers an abundance of choices for anything in life, which, as psychologists have noted, can create problems for relationships.³ With more choices come more progressive filters to help us make those choices. And the most popular of these filters today is known as the inherent rights of every American to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Necessity is no longer the issue when trying to determine which car to buy or restaurant to eat at. That's why, whether we are aware of it or not, most decisions many of us make from day to day are often made through the lens of a simple yet telling question: "What will make me happiest?"

In this consumer-like quest for happiness, it is easy to make marriage more about what makes us happy than the object of our affection.

Hollywood and Happily Ever After. As soon as we're able to understand bedtime stories, Cinderella and her friends tell us that love is about happiness. As we become teens, Hollywood takes up Cinderella's campaign inundating us with the idea that marriage—and sex—is our gateway into happily ever after.

Many of us then spend our dating relationships subconsciously asking if this one could be "The One" we get to dance with in the rain and make passionate love to for the rest of our lives. It's not until months into marriage that most of us realize Disney and Hollywood were full of it. At that point, our frustration with Cinderella is only rivaled by the disillusionment we feel in our marriage.

Obviously, I'm stereotyping and exaggerating the point. But social and scientific observations confirm this phenomenon, as well. According to a recent study, 67 percent of unmarried people believe they'll one day find their soul mate—an ideal largely perpetuated by Hollywood—and the same study shows that those who inherently expect this happily ever after are 150 percent more likely to divorce.⁴ Additionally, science proves that the happy feelings in early stages of love have been proven to be a consistent neurochemical reaction, which biology calls the state of infatuation. This reaction—and all of the exhilarating emotions it offers young lovers—can't sustain itself any longer than twenty-four months, confirming that the unnatural reality of life in marriage can't hide behind happiness-based affection for very long.⁵

This is nothing new to you if you're a married individual. Like Sam and Amanda, anyone who has braved the commitment can validate that marriage doesn't always feel like the meeting of soul mates, nor is it always butterflies and sipping wine on the back porch. Marriage can at times feel more like exactly what it is: the very unnatural, and sometimes unhappy, reality of two unique people—with all of their beauty and dysfunction—attempting to love each other and navigate life together.

Sadly, many couples get stuck on these unnatural times. We are products of a culture that brings the hope of never-ending happiness to a relationship that isn't designed to *primarily* make us happy. As a result, we end up severely disappointed.

I'm certainly not assuming that all of us have bought into Cinderella's happiness-based hopes. But for those of us who have brought expectations of marriage being happy and easy—whether or not we're aware of them—it may be time to reevaluate. Perhaps it's time we realize that even though happiness has proven to be

a very real result of a healthy marriage, true love has a far more significant purpose in mind.

THE MICHELANGELO EFFECT.

As legend tells it, the story of Michelangelo and his sculpture of *David* has something to say to us about what marriage is really for.⁶

As Michelangelo walked the art market, he passed a stone that had sat for some time, unwanted by anyone. Apparently several artists had tried to use the stone previously but found it had too many veins to produce anything of value. As Michelangelo walked by this rejected rock, he claims the stone spoke to him saying that David was inside of it. As he inquired about its price, the shop owner gave him the stone for free—simply wanting to free up space for a more sellable piece.

Michelangelo used the friction between his chisel and the rock to chip away—piece by piece—at this “useless” stone. Michelangelo didn’t sculpt like other sculptors. No, he didn’t believe he was creating something from nothing. Instead, he believed his slow, deliberate chiseling actually liberated what was already inside of the stone. He saw beautiful figures beneath the surface and considered it his responsibility as an artist to simply set them free.

Michelangelo described his unorthodox sculpting philosophy saying, “Carving is easy. You just have to go down to the skin and stop.”

Two years of chiseling later, Michelangelo had set David free—and in the process, he sculpted this unlovely piece of rock into one of history’s most renowned pieces of art.

I think there’s more truth about marriage in this story than in most of our modern ideas about relationships. Marriage isn’t, in fact,

our gateway to happily ever after. It's more like a chisel in Divine hands. And though there's plenty of friction involved, it's designed to chip away at all the dysfunction in our lives and free the beautiful statues inside.⁷

Interestingly, the Bible seems to agree with this picture that Michelangelo's carving philosophy offers us. In fact, if you're ever wondering who you can blame for this chiseling sensation in your marriage, Adam—the first human in the Bible—is your guy.

A HEALING FIRE.

It all started when the first human on earth decided to name his wife after a hazardous chemical reaction.

After having just been introduced to the only other human being on earth, he says, "She shall be called *ishshah*—woman, because she was taken out of *ish*—man."⁸

Ish and *ishshah*. I assume that though they have a certain ring to them, these won't be topping your list of names for future kids. Even so, they paint a picture about marriage that answers many of our modern questions.

To start, both words are derived from the root word and Hebrew character *esh*, which means *fire*.⁹

This means that the original word picture we have for the relationship between a man and a woman is an all-consuming, tireless-in-nature, potentially hazard-creating fire. And though this picture lends itself to the modern concept of heated romance or passionate love, the Bible consistently points to a different purpose of fire.

Fire happens to be one of the Bible's primary metaphors for purification and personal development.

Jesus promised us, for example, that “everyone will be salted with fire.”¹⁰

God points to the purpose of fire when He says, “I will put [them] into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver.”¹¹

King David, too, alludes to the intention of fire when he reflects in the Psalms, “We went through fire and through water, yet you brought us out into a place of abundance.”¹²

It would seem that the relationship between two spouses—fire—as depicted by biblical accounts, is a source of personal refinement, designed to play a significant role in one's process of growth and maturity. But hang with me—the biblical picture gets better.

In the New Testament, Paul the apostle goes on to compare love in marriage to the love Jesus showed humanity. He says (emphasis mine):

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might *sanc-tify* her [literally, purify her internally by the reformation of her soul], having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, . . . having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.¹³

This idea was beautifully expressed in a recent Orthodox Christian wedding we attended. During the ceremony, they acknowledged that Jesus did everything He did—including death on a tree—for our salvation. Then the priest looked at the couple and, borrowing Paul's comparison of marriage to Jesus' love, said, “You've been given to one another for the other's salvation.” Not salvation in the

sense that only-Jesus-can-save, the priest clarified, but the kind of salvation that's alluded to by the original Greek word *soteria*—meaning one's holistic healing, deliverance, and prosperity.¹⁴

Now that's a picture of marriage worth fighting for.

Marriage is actually about you and your spouse's holistic healing, deliverance, prospering, and growth. And similar to our former picture from Michelangelo, the Bible alludes to this unnatural relationship as a sort of tool in Divine hands to help us become increasingly beautiful—increasingly our best and brightest selves.

HAPPINESS < BEAUTY.

So what about this modern idea of happiness? Does it have a place or do we abandon the idea altogether to embrace the refining fire of marriage?

Not at all. Happiness is a very real result of a healthy marriage. Even modern social research shows that marriage historically offers more happiness than singleness or divorce.¹⁵

However, as we've seen from Michelangelo, Adam, and Paul, happiness is not the primary goal of your marriage. Becoming more beautiful by becoming your best self—more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, faithful, gentle, self-controlled—is the goal.

Marriage—like fire—can be an all-consuming and potentially painful substance. But also like a fire, it can refine us. And like a chisel liberating the figures inside of a rock, as it would seem, marriage is a tool that the Divine uses to make us beautiful.

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman, the authors of *Intimate Allies*, explain this paradox well: "Marriage is where depravity is best exposed . . . and because it, more than any other relationship, bears

more potential to draw our hearts to heaven, it can more readily give us a taste of hell.”¹⁶

I know that marriage can be one of the more challenging things we experience in life. And I know that at times, it demands far more than we feel we can give. I know there are moments when walking away seems like the only sane and rational thing to do. Yet I also know that marriage multiplies what we can become—both as individuals and as couples.

Marriage, even though it will introduce us to some of life’s most arduous moments, has brilliant intentions in mind. It’s unapologetically interested in chipping away at our dysfunctional thoughts, patterns, and postures in life and inviting us—and our spouses—to become the best version of ourselves.

When we remember this brilliant intention to liberate us—the beautiful statues trapped within our own mess—we begin to see a hopeful view of the relationship, even in its darkest times.

This vision of marriage takes the expectation off of our spouses to make us happy and re-creates the expectation that our marriage exists to help us grow.

It turns our focus from personal fulfillment to mutual personal development.

It exchanges our goal of happiness for the far more valuable goal of wholeness.

And yet . . .

As any growth in life, our “becoming” is dependent upon our choices and engagement. Once we understand this unique intention of marriage, the journey now becomes about learning how to participate in the liberation process.



LOOK IN THE MIRROR

How Your Spouse Helps You Become More Beautiful

“One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, ‘Here’s to helping you discover what you’re really like!’”

—Gary and Betsy Ricucci

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

—Katherine Anne Porter

I used to think I had my stuff together. Then I got married and quickly realized that I was simply undisturbed. Of course, I didn’t stay undisturbed for long. But as it turns out, I was never meant to.

When we see that marriage is actually a divine tool for our holistic healing—this in itself is a life-altering truth. It’s often even more than we signed up for—because it implies that our spouse is a God-given gift to help us “work out [our] own salvation.”¹⁷ It implies that regardless of his or her own jagged edges or even lack of intentional participation, our spouse is a chisel in Divine hands used to liberate us into becoming our best, beautiful selves.

THE MIRROR PHENOMENON ACCORDING TO A KING AND A JEWISH RABBI.

One of the especially unique dynamics of this new—and often ironic—role our spouse assumes is what Solomon of the Bible

alludes to when he says, “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man.”¹⁸

Shalom Arush, a Jewish rabbi and counselor, paints the picture of what I like to call the mirror phenomenon even more clearly. He says, “You didn’t get married to correct your spouse. You got married to be corrected, by using your spouse as a mirror.”¹⁹

I know. I didn’t buy it either. The suggestion that she—with her free choice, separate past, and unique set of issues—was a mirror for me to see and deal with my own issues felt far-reaching and irrational at first. Yet after experimenting with the idea, my practical experience seems to agree with the rabbi’s bold idea.

To the open-minded, here are a few pieces of advice I’ve been given that are worth experimenting with when it comes to this mirror phenomenon. In fact, the more I’ve tinkered with them, the more obvious it becomes that I really do wake up every morning next to a mirror—and she shows me the good, bad, and ugly.

1. *Don’t criticize—internalize*

In *The First Two Years of Marriage*, Kathleen and Thomas Hart write, “Sometimes what is hard to take in the first years of marriage is not what we find out about our partner, but what we find out about ourselves.” They give the example of a woman who has been married about a year, who says, “I always thought of myself as a patient and forgiving person. Then I began to wonder if that was just because I had never before gotten close to anyone. In marriage, when John and I began . . . dealing with differences, I saw how small and unforgiving I could be. I discovered a hardness in me I had never experienced before.”²⁰

If we look in a mirror and see that our shirt is wrinkled, we don’t iron the mirror. No, we iron our shirt.²¹

It's the same with our spouse.

Internalizing is all about taking inventory of the things our spouse does that we've been quick to criticize or be annoyed by in the past and to ask, "How might my spouse's action or attitude be a reflection of my own dysfunction in the way I treat them?" The point is to transmute the very natural critique of our spouses into a self-evaluation that inevitably identifies broken thought and character patterns within us.

2. Don't try to fix him or her— take 100 percent responsibility

Marriage is *not* a fair deal and has little to do with equality. Though a popular sentiment, you don't simply take 50 percent of the responsibility for the relationship and expect your spouse to meet you halfway. From my observation, the healthiest marriages are the ones when both spouses fully own the relationship and take 100 percent responsibility for its condition.

The mirror phenomenon tells us that our spouse's dysfunction is not our responsibility to fix. Once we resist critiquing and make the correlation between their actions and something that needs to change in us, our job is to simply own our issue and fix us—to take 100 percent responsibility.

"Every married individual should feel," says Rabbi Shalom Arush, "that he or she alone bears the responsibility for peace in the home. Neither should police the other because a person that's occupied with finding fault in someone else fails to see his or her own faults."²²

3. Watch your marriage change

"A fundamental law of relational theory," renowned psychiatrist Marina Benjamen reflects, "is that when any part of a sys-

tem changes, the entire system—meaning all other parts—will be forced to change in response.”

So what does this look like in marriage? She continues: “What this means in a marriage is that if I create a change in my own attitude and behavior, my spouse and the marriage itself will automatically be forced to change. This is a powerful truth to embrace but, unfortunately, most of us are so busy blaming our partners for their shortcomings that we neglect to assert our power to create the very changes we want.”²³

The best part about the mirror phenomenon is that, according to relational theory, the more we fix *ourselves*, the more our spouses change as well.

Marriage is committed to making both you and your spouse more beautiful, more functional, more vibrant people. And the sooner you accept that you wake up every day next to a mirror exposing all of your personal good, bad, and ugly, the sooner you will begin to take advantage of marriage’s beautifying intentions.



FEEL THE FRICTION

How to Leverage Conflict for Good

“What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility.”

—Leo Tolstoy

We all bring our baggage of bad choices, unhealed hurts, and ungodly beliefs to the marriage altar. Unfortunately, most of us—

including me—have no idea we’re carrying this baggage until the covenant is made and the chisel starts chipping.

Conflict in marriage isn’t a fun pastime for anyone. And though everyone has their own way of dealing with it, we must learn to leverage conflict in our relationships as an opportunity for growth. Why? Because without friction, those beautiful figures inside the rock won’t ever have the chance to exist.

Jared Black is a speaker, author, and long-time friend and mentor.²⁴ In fact, he and his wife were the ones who hosted the marriage day that proved so important for Analee and me.

Recently I was spilling to Jared about the latest challenges in my and Analee’s marriage—most of which revolved around tripping up each other’s same old emotional land mines to disastrous effects. He was patient with me as I divulged our situation. When I was finished, he shared a play on words that changed everything for Analee and me in moments of conflict.

Enter Jared.

“My wife and I have discovered that our primary goal isn’t learning to be married in a static sense so much as learning the art of marrying our own individual responses, desires, and efforts in any present moment.

“It usually looks like this: When we have a conflict, it is most often caused by a difference in the way we see a certain situation—unspoken expectations that aren’t met, or general frustration at the way the other person handled something. We each solved whatever situation is now in question in our own, individualistic way; through our own lenses, valuing in our decision and actions only what was important to us individually.

“What is needed to accomplish the marrying of lives at that moment is to practice a method of resolving (read: *re-solve*) the situation through communication. Since it is clear that I have solved the situation a certain way and she has solved it a different way, then it becomes equally clear that on that particular issue, we now have an invitation to marry one another again. This is nothing to freak out about, but something to verbally acknowledge so that the work of re-solving can produce the intimacy that only the ongoing marrying of our two individual lives can bring.”

I had never heard anyone describe conflict this way. Jared went on . . .

“The practice of re-solving marital issues revolves around learning to communicate well with your spouse. This takes practice. Two individuals are almost always terrible at this at first. Most unresolved issues in marriage stem [from] each person’s inability to effectively hear what the other person is saying, and more importantly why they are saying it. Ironically, quality communication begins not by being a good talker, but by becoming a great listener.

“Think about it. Most conflict revolves around each person trying their hardest to be heard! Steph and I now jokingly say that the first one of us to hear the other wins the argument. Why? Because it is only by focusing on what the other is saying—getting into their head, seeing the values that were driving their decisions and actions in the moment—that we can finally get about the beauty of marrying our two individual worlds into a shared, exciting world of marriage.”

Exit Jared.

With Jared’s advice on seeing conflict as an opportunity to grow even closer, Analee and I began to see changes—some small, some

radical—in our marriage. I'm confident this perspective can do the same for you.

In the end, marriage—like fire—is designed to pull all our inner dysfunction to the surface of our lives, refine it, and help us grow. When we're willing to see the rougher parts of marriage in this light, this friction quickly becomes a gift that constantly invites us into a fuller and more fulfilling experience of life together.

And if you were to ask me, that's a far better deal than happily ever after on a white horse.

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