Introduction

First, let me assure you that your relationship can change, and for the better. How do I know? I’ve been the fortunate witness to a great many transformations . . . relationships some people were ready to end. Yet they discovered the relationship of their dreams.

I’ve worked for a decade and a half, helping couples to find ways to create and recreate relationships. During that time, my ideas of what helps have changed. My commitment to relationships is unfailing. I start with the key belief that people find each other for very deep reasons. In fact, I would say that the overwhelming majority of people find the perfect person for them.

You may want to reread that last sentence. People find the perfect person for them, not the perfect person. That person doesn’t exist. People, instead, seem to find the person that has the potential of creating an ideal relationship . . . and has the potential of creating a most painful relationship. And all that in the same person!

People often come to my office convinced that they have found their arch-enemy. It is clear to me
they are only a “shift” away from the perfect relationship. That is the deep paradox of relationships. The potential for the best and the worst relationship is wrapped up in the same two people. The task of relating is finding how to get to the best.

Marriage is, among other things, a deep psychological process that shakes the foundations of our own identity. We are, in the often quoted biblical description, “two becoming one.” This in spite of the fact that we have all been raised on the myth of the “rugged individual.” Probably because of this cultural myth, marriage is at once enticing and scary. Are you ready for the journey to the relationship of your dreams?

I hope you will join me in this text to find the way to a new relationship. Do I really believe things can change, even if only one of you does the changing? You bet, because a marriage is not two individuals. As you will discover in the following pages, it is a system. And as with any system, if you impact one part of the system, you impact other parts. Change how you interact and you will change how the other must interact.

Some of these are changes in behavior and others are changes in perception. Some things you will be able to change in the blink of an eye. Others will take time and nurturance. But that is growth . . . and marriage is partly about growth.
You will notice that the writing is not academic. It is a conversation. You will get a good deal more out of this conversation if you carry on your part. I have included an area to the right of the text for your conversation. Write when something strikes you. Argue with me in your mind. Jot down what you want to change in your relationship. The space is yours for your conversation. And let me know what you discover.

I’d love to hear from you about how your relationship has changed. Also, let me know what was helpful and not helpful in this e-book. So please, feel free to email me at mailto:Lee@SaveTheMarriage.com.
Chapter 1
Why Traditional Couple Therapy Fails

Like countless other couples, you may have already tried therapy . . . and discovered that your relationship is not “fixed.” You are in good company. According to several studies, almost 50% of couples in therapy end up divorced. Only 10 to 20% of couples in therapy see any significant help from counseling.

Are you amazed? I was when I read the studies. We seem to believe that therapy is the automatic fix for problems in our culture. These statistics don’t play that out.

Don’t get caught up in the figures. It isn’t the couples that are the problem. It’s the therapy. There are several problems with traditional couple therapy. First, it is built on a central faulty assumption, and second it is based on an idea that dooms a relationship to failure.

The Faulty Assumption
Traditional couple therapy is most often based on communication theory. Simply put, this theory says that if a couple has better communication skills, they will be healthier in their relating. This theory assumes that the heart of a problem is misunderstanding and miscommunication. Fix the communication and you fix the problem.

In my mind, the real problem is misperception. How we perceive one another (and ourselves) creates many more problems than communication. We’ll spend a good amount of time looking at this misperception in the following pages.

Many couples enter my office asking for help with their communication. They have heard elsewhere (and have read) that this is their problem. I firmly believe that if I merely teach them communication skills, I will only make them more efficient in their fighting. They will be much better at verbally sparring but with little hope of resolution!

To me, communication is more like plumbing in a house. It is a method of delivery, a conduit for something else. When a house is well plumbed, it provides the basic water resources for the inhabitants. And if that plumbing is attached to a clean spring, the inhabitants get fresh water! But if that plumbing is instead attached to the sewer . . . that is what they get!

Don’t get me wrong. As you will see, I think communication is a very important factor in the
success of a marriage. It is, however, not the lead factor. It is secondary. Clear up the misperceptions and the communication becomes easier. Work on communication first and the misperceptions will poison the communication.

Yet therapy continues to insist on working from the communication model. We have created great resources to help people communicate better, but as the studies demonstrate, that does not translate into better marriages.

An Example

Many couples, in all good intentions, have been taught to use “I” statements. You may know the pattern, “I feel ______ when you _______. I would like you to do _______ instead.” Fill in the blanks with an emotion, an action, and a preferred action. That’s the formula and, according to many, the panacea for couples to have a happy marriage.

The problem is, when you use an “I” statement, the other person still knows you are angry. After it is used a few times, the “I” statement gets the same defensive responsive that pre-“I” statement discussions created.

Therapy is full of tricks and techniques that address the communication problems for couples. The problem is, these ideas will not work unless the basic issues of perception and understanding evolve first.
The Doomed Idea

Couple therapy is closely related to individual therapy. In fact, most couple therapists are individual therapists who decide to see couples. Even family therapists often find themselves caught in the trap of individual psychology.

Nothing is necessarily wrong with the ideas we have in individual therapy. Many people have found them very useful in improving their lives. But they were created to help an individual, and not a couple. That creates the trap.

So here’s the trap: psychology has long been the cultural force pushing people to be more than they are, to find enrichment and happiness—to “self-actualize” in Abraham Maslow’s ideas. There is no inherent problem with this . . . except in how it competes with the goal of couple counseling—to make the relationship the most it can be.

While these two goals are not necessarily polar opposites, they can be competing. If one person in the relationship feels that he or she is not getting all that he or she wants out of life, and the relationship is part of that, the goals become competing. The question arises; do you search for happiness by leaving the relationship or by honoring a commitment to the relationship and making that the best it can be, which may lead to personal happiness?
A good couple therapist is fully committed to the relationship. Personal happiness is pursued through the relationship, and not first by the elimination of the relationship. While anyone with any realism would recognize that not every relationship could be saved, good couple therapy works from the assumption that it can be, then waits to be proven differently.

If Not Couple Therapy, Then What?

Good question. Actually, I do think therapy can help. But it has to be therapy aimed in the right direction. The content of this e-book was created in my work with couples and my studies of what works.

It is possible for a couple to find ways of improvement, as my clients have proven. However, it is very difficult if the starting point is communication. That limits the potential for change, because it isolates the problem to an area that is really a symptom. Most people who come to my office wanting to work on communication already know how to communicate.

The real problem with their communication is that it has become destructive. No longer is it a useful and connecting function for the couple. Restoring the connection has less to do with communication and more with clearing up misperceptions. You will see that dealing with these misperceptions is a central theme in the following text.
Chapter 2
Moving From You & Me
To WE

Successful marriages are relationships that have moved to WE. In over 15 years of seeing couples, I have yet to see a failed relationship that moved to WE. In fact, the central trait of failed marriages is the failure to escape the You/Me Trap.

The You/Me Trap can be subtle, but is highly destructive. When couples are caught in the trap, each is concerned about what he/she is getting out of the relationship. It’s like a balance sheet or ledger—do both sides equal Zero? If not, the losing one is upset. Successful businesses are built on a balance sheet. Ledgers maintain them. Business survives by these accounting principles.

Successful relationships are never based on a ledger. An old adage says marriage is not 50/50, but 100/100. This is reflected here. Sometimes one gives more and sometimes the other gives more. In the end, it is not a meeting in the middle. It is a matter of going beyond.
The ledger idea is destructive in marriage because it denies the reality of a WE. While it may even have a place in friendships, rarely can a marriage survive keeping such a ledger, long-term. WE is destroyed by keeping track. Marriage is never “tit-for-tat.”

(And by the way, “giving everything” to the other is rarely accurate. We sometimes fall in the trap of being the Martyr. The balance may still be there. In other words, Martyrs have power, sometimes more power than anyone else. “After all I’ve done for you” is a comment that points toward the ledger, not away.)

So, what is WE? WE is not easy to point to. It is an invisible but very real entity. In trying to create an understanding, I often liken it to the business idea of creating a corporation. People “incorporate” in order to create a new entity, a business entity.

A corporation only exists on paper; it can be treated like a real entity. Accounting procedures, legal processes, and everyday work builds and reinforces the reality of the corporation. The more the corporation is treated like an actual entity (remember, the word corporal refers to the body), the more real it becomes. Corporations take on their own personalities and realities.

Likewise, the more a marriage is treated as an actual entity, a WE, the more real it becomes to the couple and others—and the more the entity takes on its
own personality. The marriage begins to create boundaries that protect the WE. The relationship takes on stability that is impossible to attain without this sense. There are some things that get in the way of WE. (You will find more about boundaries and stability later in the book.)

Controlled/Controlling

One of the dynamics that keeps us away from WE is getting caught in a common marital trap: Controlled/Controlling. This is the game: one tries to control the other, and the other lets him/herself be controlled.

“Sharon” and “Bert” came to my office in great pain. They had enjoyed a loving relationship, but several patterns were beginning to erode their feelings. Sharon and Bert worked together in a business Bert created. The business gave Bert a great deal of satisfaction, but weighed heavily on Sharon.

Sharon functioned as support staff, and Bert was the heart of the business. Bert functioned as “boss” at work, and had a hard time turning the switch off at home. In fact, it was partly a matter of personality. He liked to be in charge. More accurately, he needed to be in control.

The stereotypic engineer, Bert had a great disdain for the messiness of life. He much preferred
the manageable and controllable. And so, the control issues popped up in the relationship.

The start was with the pregnancy of their first child. Bert was already thinking 18 years down the road, and stared straight at the college tuition. He panicked and dug into work. Sharon tried to keep up, but the work was not her love. Soon, she began to feel the resentment.

That brewed for years, through the births of two more children. It finally erupted, and Sharon would push against any suggestions or requests from Bert.

At times, Bert expressed his concern for Sharon. Sharon missed the concern and only felt the control. In fact, their relationship quickly bogged down in a fight for control. For example, while going to a meeting, Sharon found Bert offering to drive her. He was concerned that she might drink alcohol and put herself (and the business) at risk. He offered to drive her, and Sharon immediately found herself angered at his attempt to “control” her.

Bert managed to express his concern; it was heard as control. Problem was, Bert did like to have things under control. He never figured out that “under control” did not equal “controlling another.” Sharon’s response was to rebel—she ended up drinking and driving that night, just to make a point.
I had another couple that came to me. “Sue” made the decisions. She decided on what they would spend, and where they would spend it. “Bob” was allowed no voice. If he needed something, he had to “plead his case.” Sue even kept a list of rules for Bob. It helped him know how he should behave and what his life should be about.

At several points in his career, Sue decided Bob needed a bigger, better job. He left positions he loved for “better” (e.g. more prestigious) positions. Most left him miserable.

When Sue and Bob came to my office, Bob was tired of the cycle. He found himself retreating more and more. Finally, he ended up in the arms of a co-worker. That is when he realized how far in trouble they were.

As the three of us talked, Bob was rarely allowed to have his opinion. When he voiced his feelings, Sue would respond, “You don’t really feel that way.”

Sue’s major complaint was how little Bob shared with her, especially about his feelings. Usually, he simply responded with, “I don’t know.”

When we talked about the written rules, Sue responded, “I just want him to be the best he can be.” Instead, Bob began to ignore the rules, to sneak around, and to act like a child.
This made sense, since Sue treated him like a child, as if she were the parent. When one is the “parent,” the other becomes the “child,” and vice versa. And once that role has been set in motion, the rest is inevitable.

Here’s why: children grow up under the care (and some control) of their parents. At some point, the child begins to push against the control—to rebel. The rebellion is what helps the child leave the family. It is the natural progression. We start with a child that needs to be cared for, to have rules. That child will be a teen that despises the rules.

In a marriage, it is no different. When one gets in the role of parent, the other may start in the role of child, but that will only go so long. Eventually, there will be an angry, rebellious “child” who will pull away.

Besides, controlling another person is rarely the goal. Normally, the true agenda is about controlling one’s world. A spouse just happens to be the closest in proximity. So the spouse becomes the target.

The need or desire to control is almost always based in fear. The fear is rarely rational; it is a dominating force. People may fear being left or losing something. People may also fear being controlled, losing their own control. In either case, people can fool themselves into believing that by attempting to control the other, these things will be avoided. Sometimes,
ironically enough, the control achieves exactly what was being avoided.

In trying to control, people fail to take into account the capacity of another to act in unpredictable ways. As one attempts to control, the areas that can be controlled begin to dwindle, as the other chooses responses that may not have occurred to the controlling person. In the end, attempting to control is thwarted, often with the person ending up feeling a total lack of control.

It is easy to see the evolving process: one attempts to control, and is unsuccessful, fueling the fear of being out of control. This fear of being out of control leads one to attempt more control. The lesson that controlling does not work is somehow missed. And the cycle repeats with the attempts at control thwarted, elevating the fear, et cetera.

By the way, “it takes two to tango.” To have the controlling/controlled relationship, one must agree to control and the other must agree to be controlled. I don’t mean that this is a conscious agreement. It works at a deeper level. It is an unconscious agreement. It happens over time, slowly pulling the relationship off-balance.

If either chooses not to participate, the relationship must reconfigure away from the controlling/controlled relationship. And while the decision to participate is unconscious, the decision not
to participate is always conscious. It is made when the pattern becomes clear and one or both decide not to participate.

**Under/Overfunctioning**

A related, yet separate dynamic is the pattern of underfunctioning and overfunctioning. That is, one overfunctions in certain areas, allowing the other to underfunction. One underfunctions, forcing the other to overfunction. The areas differ by couple, but may center around the emotions of the couple or the duties of the family.

When “Jack” and “Kay” came to see me, it was clear they were locked in this under/overfunctioning pattern. Kay was constantly trying to attend to Jack’s emotional needs. She tried to make him happy, to cheer him up, and to get him to “open up” to her. Jack had no emotions. He refused to admit to any feelings (other than annoyance at her questions about how he was feeling).

Kay, on the other hand, carried an inordinate amount of anger. She also attempted to force herself into always being upbeat. In the end, she only managed to be angry and exhausted.

Jack’s responses to “how are you feeling” were always met with “I don’t know.” And he didn’t. He didn’t have to. Kay felt the feelings for both of them. Her anger was more than sufficient for both. She kept
trying to get to Jack’s feelings—which managed to relieve him of that responsibility.

For his part, Jack refused to look at the normal emotions of life. Instead, he forced Kay to do that for him. That is the key. These dynamics easily become destructive; while each blames the other, both participate in the dynamic. Indeed, it does take two to tango.

The under/overfunctioning can take place around family duties. For example, one may find him- or herself with the majority of responsibility in taking care of the children, the home or the finances. One client told me about how her husband never wanted to know anything about the finances. He brought home the check, turned it over to her, and she was responsible for the bills.

When it was time to make a financial decision, he would say, “I don’t know—you know what we have, so you decide.” Unfortunately, this meant that when things did not go well, he could blame her. Therefore, she felt overly responsible for their financial well-being. When he abdicated responsibility, he placed it all on her. She had to overfunction so that he could underfunction.

The under/overfunction process is an important one, because it is often the beginning of a shift in the marriage in ways that will eventually undermine the ability to relate.
When “Tom” came to see me, the problems in his relationship had deep roots. In the beginning, Tom’s and his wife’s relationship was evenly balanced. Both had careers they enjoyed. Both enjoyed spending time together.

After the birth of their first child and a car accident, things shifted. Tom was in constant pain from the accident, and both were adapting to a new family.

Eventually, his wife was asked to move to another state. In fact, to another country. This immigration changed Tom’s ability to work. It was no problem since his wife’s job provided enough. So, Tom stayed at home, now with three kids. He became the “Mr. Mom.” Problem was, he began doing everything. This was justified in his mind as helping his wife in her career.

Soon, the relationship was out of balance. Tom was doing everything at home without assistance from his wife. Then Tom began taking care of all the emotional stuff of the relationship. Soon, his wife was answering with two words—at the most, two sentences.

Tom was shocked when his wife told him the marriage “was not working,” and that she wanted to move into an apartment. Tom’s wife had disconnected, a result of how much she was underfunctioning.
In response, Tom sent flowers, sent love notes, and panicked over his wife’s leaving. He was hard at work, overfunctioning once again in an attempt to win her back. They had established a painful and destructive pattern. His only chance at recovering the relationship is to begin to shift the functioning back between the two of them. This is no small task, since his wife rather enjoys her lack of responsibility in the family.

The under/overfunctioning pattern may center around the “practicals” of family life: getting done what has to get done, caring for kids, housework, making the money, etc. It can also be around emotional issues: one being angry for both, or happy for both, or engaging for both.

Couples do not consciously decide to get into a pattern of under/overfunctioning. The pattern emerges over time, often little by little. Deciding to change the relationship is a conscious decision. It may also be a movement toward health in the relationship.

All of this does not mean that every example of under/overfunctioning will lead to the demise of a relationship. Some couples live their entire lives with this process happening. So I am addressing relationships where this is not working. If both are happy with the way a relationship is working, it will most likely not change. If, however, that is the pattern in your relationship and it is causing problems, you may wish to make a change.
Power Struggles

Couples often find themselves locked in power struggles. Instead of giving up control, both are attempting to wrestle control from the other. Power struggles are the number one symptom that \textit{WE} is missing from the relationship. Power struggles are one’s attempts to maintain autonomy, to keep out of the \textit{WE}.

Unfortunately, life gives a couple ample opportunities to let power struggles get the best of them. Points of struggle often center on those areas that are particularly personal and symbolic: sex, money, children, and careers.

When a couple locks horns, they find themselves paralyzed to move forward. Winning is usually hollow, since it is very costly. Losing is painful for the same reason. And “giving in” feels invasive in such personal areas.

Power struggles are always a symptom of lacking \textit{WE}, because a \textit{WE} does not need for one to recover power. It sees that power was never the issue. Instead, the couple comes to understand that power is what keeps one away from \textit{WE}.

The struggle is often a result of feeling out of power or overwhelmed. My experience shows that when a couple is caught in a power struggle, \textbf{both} feel
overpowered, and therefore, **both** are trying to regain their power.

In actuality, neither has lost power, because *power is not the issue*. Loss of control is the concern. Part of this is the strong sense of individuality we have in the West. We have been raised to protect ourselves, to maintain our autonomy. Don’t get me wrong, as you will see in the later chapter about **Boundaries**, I do not think the answer is merging with the other and losing identity.

The answer is seeing the third option of *interdependence*, rather than dependence or independence as the only choices.

Dependence is a loss of self, giving the sense of self up to the other. Independence is a refusal of letting the self be impacted. It involves *pretending* that the other is not needed. This is also untenable in a relationship.

What an interesting issue. Both move to capture power because neither feels any sense of power. Most likely, both feel a real sense of powerlessness. That is the nature of a power struggle. If either listened to the other, each would discover the sense of powerlessness that is between them. Both choose to struggle to gain power. The pattern of two opposing forces, equally
matched, trying to gain power, is not the recipe for success.

Our sense of powerlessness comes from something mentioned in the opening words of this ebook. We are raised in an atmosphere that encourages the individual spirit. We are raised on the myth of the “rugged individual.” This is well and good in noting the spirit of a country. It is less helpful when we are trying to create a lasting relationship.

Power has its place. If you are a manager, you need some sense of power to get the job done. If you are leading the troops, you need to know they will respond. But when power gets into intimate relationships, the end result is destructive. Marriages are based on sharing and cooperation, not on power.

Again, don’t get me wrong. I do not believe many couples find themselves locked in a power struggle by their own choice. Shifts happen in the relationship that steer them down this path. As time goes on, the shifts become more and more pronounced. When a crisis occurs, unfortunately, the shift in power is well under way. The couple has managed to “lock horns” in painful ways.

The question is not “how did we get here.” You could spend a lifetime trying to figure that one out. The question is: how do we get out of this?
Your Turn

Before considering how to get out of it, consider how these interactions occur in your relationship.

- To what degree does one or more of these patterns emerge in your relationship?
- Which position do you play in the pattern?
- What starts the pattern? (By the way, this is a difficult question—kind of like the “chicken or egg” question. The purpose of asking is for you to be actively examining your role in the pattern.)
- Are there other patterns you see that undermine WE?

The Physics of Relating

Here’s a metaphor that might help. Imagine a sailboat. On board the boat (your relationship), there are two people attempting to maintain a balance. Likely, the balance always feels precarious on the boat. Whenever the weight shifts on one side, the other side must mirror it, or the boat feels like it will tip.
When both are upright, the boat feels pretty secure. The relationship is in balance, and both can feel secure in their existence. Neither is likely to tire.

However, if one makes a shift backward, the boat no longer feels secure. In fact, unless there is some shift, it will feel like the boat is in great danger. The key here is that it will feel this way. In reality, this is not the case. But the feeling of danger creates the actions that are attempts at stabilizing the relationship.

Anxiety is a feeling that comes up in every relationship. Anxiety pulls us out of natural balance. It is also anxiety that molds our relationship into the painful dynamics noted here.

When our anxiety comes up, we are likely to make a mirror shift with the other person to stop the feeling of danger. A mirror shift is a shift in the relationship that is equal but opposite of the action of the other.

Once we have made that shift, we have pulled the relationship back into a balance, albeit unsustainable. Both partners will tire of their position. In fact, both will quickly become exhausted; yet both hold on for dear
life! The stability evaporates from the relationship because all are uncomfortable, but they are also stuck in an attempt to maintain the balance of the relationship.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that the same effect can work in the opposite direction. In other words, if someone who is “hanging over” decides to move to an upright position, the other has no option than to shift positions.

The shift toward an upright position can happen whenever one realizes it is anxiety that keeps people in that position. In all truth, any good sailboat will not tip from a shift in weight. A good keel and a decently designed boat shape will keep the sailboat upright. The crew might shift weight to “trim” the boat—to make it more efficient. Those shifts are temporary and based on good seamanship, not anxiety.

What this metaphor points toward is the “physics” of a relationship. There is an interplay between the two people, not a vacuum. Thus, as you remember from physics, “any action creates an equal and opposite reaction.” One makes a shift, and the other must make a shift. It’s the way we naturally respond.

To do otherwise, to consciously change, means to shift to what may feel like an “unnatural” response. In fact, it can mean feeling a great deal of anxiety. Over
time, however, habits change. And at least in a relationship, you are free to violate laws of physics.

Focus on the ways you can intentionally begin to shift the balance of the relationship. Remember, when both of you are hanging over the edge of the boat, it is no time to simply stand up. Movements must be balanced to some degree. It took some time to lose the balance in a relationship. It will take some time to reestablish the balance.

Many people tell me that maintaining this balance is the more challenging period. I just got off the phone with a client that is attempting to make these changes. She is just beginning to rebalance the boat. Her place of change is in setting boundaries (see the chapter on Boundaries), which her husband is not used to. So he resists. That should come as no surprise. He has never had them. Sometimes, change takes time. Give it the time it takes. Be assured, there are other changes that happen in the blink of an eye.

**Your Turn**

As we wrap up this section, consider these points and act on them:

- What places have you and your spouse continually moved apart?
- What examples from your own life came to mind as you read the material, particularly the two examples?
What are 5 things you can shift that would slowly begin to move toward balance? (Be sure these are a) do-able, and b) incremental enough not to completely destroy the balancing act.)

Remind yourself that you and your partner did not get to this point overnight, and it will take some time and effort to restore a natural balance.
Chapter 3
Recipe of a Successful Marriage

The above illustration is a Venn diagram. It comes from mathematics, but don’t let that put you off. It is merely a great way of looking at the elements—the
ingredients—of a successful marriage. It shows the elements and the interplay between them.

There are three ingredients: Accurate Perception, Clear Communication, and Right Action. All three are present in a successful relationship. Any two have an important interplay, but always lack something without the third.

**Accurate Perception**

Accurate Perception indicates that each person sees the other through fairly realistic lenses. What does “fairly realistic” refer to? In all honesty, as the section on Paradigms shows, it is impossible to have an absolutely accurate perception of reality. We have too many lenses that skew our vision.

*First*, an accurate perception really is about understanding the worldview or paradigm of a spouse. We will look at how to understand the *paradigm* of a spouse later in this e-book.

*Second*, it is realizing that we interpret a spouse’s actions through our own paradigm, not that of the spouse. Thus, these perceptions are flawed and incomplete. So *third*, we strive to somehow maintain our response in balance with our spouse’s intentions.

Accurate Perception comes from working to be intentional in an awareness of our own perceptions. Most of us move through life unaware of how often we
jump to assumptions and conclusions that are only partially rooted in reality.

**Clear Communication**

Clear Communication evolves from accurate perception. In fact, it is impossible to have clear communication until there is an accurate perception of a spouse. The communication gets too clouded by assumptions and misunderstanding.

As I said in the opening pages, couples therapy has long had a problem, thinking that communication was the lead issue. It reemerges as an issue here. Communication is the lifeblood of a marriage, but when the arteries are constricted by the perceptions, circulation is a problem.

Clear Communication is a skill. A great deal of the skill naturally emerges when one becomes aware of one’s perceptions. For example, I have a friend that constantly sees the world as being angry at her. She repeatedly tells me how such-and-such is angry with her and that she doesn’t care they are angry. That is really just her perception.

Being on the outside, I am well aware of the fact that often the other is not at all angry with her. Instead, the other may have made a response that merely felt angry to my friend. Unfortunately, communication then gets murky. Since my friend perceives anger from the other person, she
communicates in a way that works from this perception.

My guess is that at times the other person does become angry with her, especially since her communication is based on the perception they are angry. Finally, she elicits the response she expected.

This is not an example of clear communication. It is bound in the perception of people, and the responses to that.

Clear communication has other components. Clear communication takes *Time, Intentionality, and Execution*, which you may remember by the acronym *TIE*. All three are necessary for the health of communication in a marriage.

Some time ago, I read that the average time a couple spends together in conversation about their relationship per day is—not ½ an hour, not 15 minutes, not even 5 minutes—but 3 ½ minutes per day. That is the *average*. That means many spend less, and many spend more. (By the way, if you go out on a date and talk with your spouse about things for an hour, think of the days that equates to no discussion.)

Relationships cannot prosper on 3 ½ minutes per day. So, one important factor is making *time* to have discussions with a spouse. This is an important priority for a couple to make.
Second, clear communication takes *intentionality*. Couples must make a *conscious effort* to relate together about their relationship. Otherwise, a couple may take the time, then find themselves talking about work, the kids, the mortgage—anything but their own relationship. Intentionality refers to making sure the conversation includes the relationship.

Forgotten how to do that? Perhaps you can reflect on the things you talked about when you were first in the relationship. What are your hopes and dreams? What are your concerns and fears? What does each of you want out of life?

Finally, we get to *execution*, the matter of carrying out communication and making it a habit. Couples can create the time and intentionality, *and* they must carry through. Continued habit forming creates the crucible of communication.

Often, when people tell me they have “grown apart,” what they are telling me is that their hopes, dreams, concerns, fears, and desires haven’t been shared in such a long time that, unbeknownst to either of them, they have diverged. Decide to change this now. You are always closer now than you will be down the road. Divergent roads often move further apart.

Back to metaphor, Chaos Theory emerged in physics when the slightest difference (1/10000th of a difference) in a calculation completely changed the
outcome of a computer weather model. Slight variations in the beginning would be unnoticeable in the weather. As the calculations continue, the differences become so pronounced as to make the similar beginning points impossible to see.

The fact is that couples may have only small variances in the hopes and fears areas of life. These differences progress to greater variance unless the couple stays in touch with each other. That is the corrective action. When we stay in touch with each other, the “calculations” stay on track—we become “self-correcting” in our relationship.

**Right Action**

Right Action is a term borrowed from Buddhist thought. I use it here to talk about relating in intentionally healthy ways. This is opposed to destructive action. Here is the key: when a couple has accurate perceptions, they begin to communicate clearly. When they communicate clearly, they begin to act in constructive ways. When they begin to act in constructive ways, their perceptions become accurate. And so the cycle continues.

Right Action happens when each person takes the other’s needs in balance with his or her own needs. In other words, Right Action pulls the couple toward WE.
To be clear, Right Action does not mean merely putting the other first. It is a matter of balance, a practice of looking at the WE, and acting accordingly.

Sometimes, Right Action calls us to move toward each other, even when we do not feel like it. This is a point when we may separate our emotional state and our choices. (See the chapter, Don’t Ask If You Still Love.)

When we wait for our emotions to lead us to action, we may move from the wrong direction. Psychology has long known that acting a certain way can make you feel a certain way. In other words, if you act lovingly, you will begin to feel loving. If you wait to feel loving, you may lose many opportunities to enrich a relationship.

So Right Action calls us to move beyond our normal feel then act pattern. We move to a sense of acting, not in spite of, but regardless of our emotional space.

It is not that I think emotions are useless. I just think that if we hold ourselves hostage to our emotional state, we have limited ourselves, and the potential of our relationship.

Right Action often leads to a reciprocating spouse. That is where the shift can begin. Even if a spouse is not wishing to change, one can change the
relationship by responding and reacting differently—by focusing on Right Action!

When we leave a relationship to be buffeted by the actions of the other, we are very close to making ourselves paralyzed. We depend on the other to fuel our actions/thoughts/feelings. And, given the cyclical nature of a couple, this begins to play off each other. The result: two people frozen from action and emotion, waiting for the other to take an action that will free them. It is up to each of us to begin the thawing. Right Action is one path to reversing this.

Once the couple has reversed the path, Right Action keeps the couple moving forward. It is one of the places that can begin to shift the momentum.

The Interplay

When any two of the three areas of Accurate Perception, Right Action and Clear Communication are present, there is interplay between those two. This interplay is an important aspect in understanding the elements.

Between Accurate Perception and Right Action, there is Direction. When a couple has accurate perceptions and is engaged in right action, the relationship gains direction. It is propelled by the actions, but aimed by the perceptions. There is a clear direction that emerges from this combination.
Between Right Action and Clear Communication, there is Connection. The feeling of being connected is facilitated by the existence of caring action and communication. This nurtures the sense of being supported and loved between the two. This connection, again, begins to increase the sense of *WE* between the two.

Between Clear Communication and Accurate Perception, there is Understanding. This understanding is rooted in the fact that each of the persons feels heard and accepted.

Feeling understood continues to build on the sense of *WE*, because it begins to weave a feeling of being “in it together.” When one feels understood, it is very hard to have a sense of “me versus you.” The lack of clear communication and inaccurate perceptions quickly lends itself to a breakdown in relating. It becomes hard to see the *WE*.

**Pulling It Together**

We often strive to have that understanding, connection, and direction in a relationship. Yet we fail to see that this results from an interaction between elements we are less likely to focus on.

We must find the way to understanding, connection, and direction through the elements, as by-products. These are not the starting points, merely the results.
The starting points are Accurate Perception, Clear Communication, and Right Action. And to focus on these three elements in the ways noted in this e-book is to discover the resultant side effects, the areas of overlap in the Venn diagram. The end result, a successful marriage, is also noted by the emergence of WE.

When Accurate Perception, Clear Communication, and Right Action meet, the results are understanding, connection, and direction. When these elements are present, the relationship finds strength and solidity. And as this process continues, the end result is your ideal relationship and WE.

Your Turn

- To what are you willing to commit in order to create time and space for communication?
- How can you schedule in time together?
  - Scheduling can be putting into the planner.
  - Or Scheduling can be setting a time in the day for connecting to happen (just before bedtime, first thing in the morning, lunchtime, etc.)
- What came to mind as you thought about perceptions that interfere with your communicating?
Finally, what are 3 things you can do that would be *Right Action* in relating to your spouse?

**Exercise: Me, You, *WE***

This exercise examines how you and your spouse see your lives overlapping, places that create a *WE*. There are always parts of the relationship that do not overlap. These areas may be differences in interests. More than that, it indicates that marriages do not encompass all of us.

The amount of overlap can vary from couple to couple. Really, there can be any amount of overlap. There is no right answer. However, the extremes can be problematic.
The ends of the scale are dangerous because they are motivated by similar emotions: fear. The barely touching areas are motivated by a fear of intimacy, of being connected. At the other end of the scale, the total connection, which is a lack of individuality, is motivated by a fear of separation.

These positions are dangerous, but not impossible. Some couples stay together without much connection. Many refer to this as a relationship of convenience.

At the other end, couples do everything together. They maintain a “superglue” relationship. The relationship is in danger when one decides that he or she does not like everything the other does. Because of the intensity of this relationship it can quickly find itself in trouble.

Healthy relationships are less focused on how much is WE, and instead are focused on the strength of WE. So the discovery of this exercise is to determine how closely you and your spouse view the above overlap.
Below are two circles, one that is marked “Me,” and one below marked “You.” Draw another circle that makes each look somewhat similar to the drawings above. In other words, use the circles to represent your relationship. How much overlap do you see? That is the first drawing. Then, either have your spouse complete the second, or complete it as you think your spouse would view things.
When couples have similar views on the amount of overlap, it is easier to work on strengthening the WE. When the amount of overlap has a great deal of difference, the couple must find ways of solving that difference first. Otherwise, attempts to strengthen will be frustrating for one or both. The person viewing less overlap will feel threatened, and the person viewing more overlap will feel distanced.
Chapter 4
Finding The *North Star* Of Your Relationship

One of my loves is sailing. While I’m not qualified to cross the Atlantic, I have read some about navigation. In navigation, before the advent of GPS (and still when the batteries die), a sailor had the skies to use.

In using the skies, there is one central component: the North Star. No matter where one is, locating the North Star allowed the sailor to orient where he or she was, and more importantly, where the boat was headed.

We all have a North Star for our relationships. However, there are some North Stars that allow for a more true orientation. Sometimes, we look to the sky and choose a star that looks promising, but will lead us astray.

**False North Stars**

Recently, I asked a group of people to answer this question: “What is the purpose of marriage?” The group gave me many interesting replies, many of which I would consider to be “false North Stars.” Here’s the list:
- Sex
- Children
- Companionship
- Tax Break (*Perhaps they haven’t heard the truth!*)
- Promise & Commitment
- Support
- Happiness

These are not atypical responses. In fact, most of us grow up and are raised in environments where these reasons are why we get married.

I then asked this same group to rank the above purposes or reasons for marriage on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most important. Here is what they came up with:

- Sex - 8
- Children - 8
- Companionship - 9
- Tax Break - 1
- Promise & Commitment - 7.5
- Support - 8
- Happiness - 9

Here is the problem with the list they created: what do you do when one or more of these purposes is missing? In fact, what do you do when THE purpose you have chosen is missing.
For example, when a couple is in trouble, they are rarely happy. Yet in the above list, Happiness rates a “9.” So if there is no happiness, but that has been the “North Star” for that relationship, there ends up being no reason for the marriage.

The number of people who tell me they are leaving a relationship because the two of them “just aren’t happy together” never surprises me. I guess I’ve become used to it—but aware of the tragedy of it.

(A side-note about happiness: a study was recently released that showed couples who “stick it out” instead of divorcing when they are unhappy will report being “happy” when they are surveyed six years later. Apparently, this has little to do with what has happened in the interim. So, sure enough, “sticking it out” is often the best choice.)

Finding A True North Star

Okay, so we can see what the false North Stars are. Let’s look at the true North Stars. But before I “pull the curtain back,” let’s remind ourselves about North Stars.

When sailors are navigating, seeing the North Star does not calm the waters or stop the storm. It only means the sailor can find his way through the rough ocean. A North Star can pull us toward safe harbor. It does not create the safe harbor.

Knowing your North Star of the relationship will not calm the hurts, arguments, or pain of a
relationship. It will simply keep you moving forward toward calmer seas.

So, what is the North Star of a relationship?  
After reflecting on the nature of true and false North Stars, here is what the same group came up with:

- Self-Improvement
- Spiritual Growth
- Team
- Grow Old and Love Together
- Become Everything Each Can Be

This is a much more useful grouping. Each of these items are within our control. We can always work on self-improvement. Sometimes, spiritual growth emerges from pain more strongly than from pleasure. Teams can function even when there is a difference of opinion. We grow old together when we choose to. And when we decide to become all each can be, we move in that direction.

But there is one more piece to this puzzle, what I consider to be the truest North Star: commitment. When we start with the fact that we have made a commitment, we have room for all the other points of navigation.

I have often had couples tell me, “well, if it doesn’t work out, we can always divorce.” I predict that when this is the mindset, divorce is almost guaranteed.
When we start with the idea that “I am in it for the long-haul,” our mentality changes. We move toward working it out. As a billboard I recently saw points out, “Don’t stare at the problem—look for a remedy.”

Culture has reinforced for us that marriage is not permanent. We have created the “no-fault divorce.” We have made it easier to get divorced than just about any other legal process. But, this violates the commitment that is the foundation of marriage.

Those of us who were married in a church likely promised to stay married, regardless of health, good and bad times, money or no money, ending only with the death of one or the other. But we take that commitment lightly.

I would suggest that when commitment is made the North Star of a relationship, we honor our commitment and we act in ways that move us toward success, rather than failure, in relationships.

When commitment is the North Star, we design our lives to work through problems rather than getting mired in problems. We see the relationship as a challenge, not a problem that we need to leave.

**Your Turn**

- What has been the North Star of your relationship?
- Is it a true North Star or false?
- If it is a false North Star, what would it mean to the relationship to change the focus?
- How did each of you frame your commitment when you married?
Chapter 5
3 Simple Secrets to a Successful Marriage

After years of watching couples, both successful and unsuccessful, I have noted three strategies that seem to be hallmarks of successful marriages. Sure, there are other contributing factors, and not all successful marriages maintain all three secrets. Most have at least two, and many have all three. Follow them, and success moves closer.

These three strategies are, more than anything, shifts in perspective that lead to shifts in behavior. At a deeper level, focusing on these three areas leads to greater shifts elsewhere. Mind you, these secrets are not easy to institute. They are worth the effort. And by the way, if only one of you wishes to take these actions, the other will be affected.

**Secret #1: Give Up On Arguing**

I know, you may be thinking “no arguing, no communicating.” I know this because I have heard it from countless couples.
Unfortunately, many couples find themselves stuck in the habit of arguing, and usually with little success. Arguing is not communicating.

Arguing, boiled down to basics, is two people with two different points of view trying to convince the other of being right. It is a “tug-of-war” with no winners. Arguing is successful in only one arena: Court. There, you have a judge to decide whose point of view is the most accurate. Outside of that (and kids don’t count as judges) arguing is a losing proposition. So give it up. Find something else. What else? Ask this question: “Help me understand how you see it that way?” This is a powerful question.

The question moves us away from winning and toward understanding. The question establishes that you don’t see it the same. It establishes the existence of a variety of worldviews.

While it may seem obvious, couples seem to forget that everyone has a different way of seeing the world—a different paradigm, to use a buzzword. A paradigm is neither right nor wrong, it merely is. It acts like a filter, preventing us from seeing some things and causing us to focus on others.

So the task is to understand the other’s worldview. How does he or she see it that way? Make that a research project: How does my partner see the world?
And remember this very crucial distinction: You can understand how someone sees something without agreeing with it. *Understanding* is not the same as *agreement*.

Don’t believe me? Consider this. It is possible to write a research paper (think back to high school) about Adolf Hitler. In that paper, you may consider all the elements that went into who he became. You would probably note the familial issues and the cultural issues of Germany at that time. You may even entertain the possibility that Hitler became caught up in something more than he could control. You could note all of this and understand who Hitler was without agreeing with what he did. *If one can do that with Hitler, surely one can do that with a spouse.*

**Secret #2: Focus on the Complementarity**

Remember Geometry in school? While it is fairly hazy in my mind, one concept stands out: Complementary Angles. Imagine a straight line (180°). Drawing another line, creating an angle, leaves another complementary angle, which completes the 180°.
In essence, these angles complete each other. That is at the heart of marital relationships. We complete each other; we make each other whole. At least we have the potential to do this. We also have the potential of destroying each other.

It is interesting (and distressing) to watch the destruction when couples forget how they complete each other. Since I see many couples for pre-marital counseling every year, I know that they are aware of how they are complementary before they marry. They may not have thought about it, but they can describe how they make each other whole. In other words, they can talk about how one’s weakness is the other’s strength, and vice versa.

Fast-forward some years, and the couple in trouble is in my office. The only thing they can tell me is how different (in fact, opposite) they are. They have lost the complementary nature of their relationship.

For example, a pre-marital couple may tell me how he is very focused and organized, while she is
spontaneous and fun loving. What a picture of balance, since they can name this in the other person and see how it improves him or her.

Let’s pretend they return in 5 to 6 years. Life has taken a lot out of them, and their relationship is in trouble. They usually come in with a list of complaints. So I hear “He is so anal. Every nit-picking detail has to come through him. He is smothering me.” Then I hear “She is so irresponsible. She is always late, always changing the plans, and never follows through.”

I know this couple has lost their sense of complementarity. If I then ask a simple question, “What attracted you to each other in the first place?” they always get a moist, far-off look in their eyes and tell me about the focus and organization or the fun and spontaneity.

As you may have guessed, when you lose sight of the complementarity, you begin to move further and further apart. When couples are aware of their complementarity, they tend to move toward each other over time. They find that their life is about balance, and the spouse helps create that balance.

Complementarity is really a thought away. Remember how your strengths supplement your partner’s weaknesses. More challenging, remember how your partner’s strengths supplement your weaknesses.
There are two sure-fire methods to discover the areas where you and your partner are complementary with each other. First, focus on what originally attracted you to each other. These areas of attraction are often around points of complementarity.

Second, look at points where he or she is driving you crazy! Yes, that’s right. Those areas of conflict and frustration often point to the areas of complementarity. Looking at these areas in a new light, perhaps with positive words, can lead you to see new areas of complementarity.

**Secret #3: Make Decisions Based On What Is Good For the Relationship**

Many times, we get caught in the bind of decisions. If we make a choice that is best for Me, we feel selfish. If we make a choice that is best for You, we feel slighted. Sometimes, this leaves us in a lose/lose situation.

A third option is available—making a choice based on what is good for the relationship, the WE. That creates a way around the personal dilemma, and forces us to be more creative. Usually the Me/You is easy to create. The WE choice is less automatic.

When decisions are based on what is best for the relationship the couple is forced to treat their relationship as a real entity. This brings the relationship out of the ethereal and puts it in the
practical. This is a powerful exercise, and one that can shift the relationship in amazing ways.

Making decisions that are based on the relationship pulls a couple toward a stronger sense of *We* and creates a strong sense of “being in it together.” Since decisions often make or break a relationship, nurturing this approach can alleviate many points of stress.

This simple technique is applied when a decision needs to be made. Simply ask yourself this question: “What would be best for the relationship?” Be open to surprise on the answer!
Chapter 6
Create an Upward Cycle

Couples often find themselves in a downward cycle. In order to get to your best relationship, you will find it necessary to change the momentum—to get the relationship moving upward. Remember physics? Momentum is the energy that pushes an object in the same direction it is already headed. In other words, wherever a relationship is headed, it will continue in that direction, **unless you work to change it**. The good news is momentum works in both directions. Good relationships can carry a good distance on momentum in a positive direction.

Momentum can be changed through two means: 1) Change in Thought/Perception; 2) Change in Action. They are intertwined. Changing action changes thought/ perception, and changing thought/perception changes action. (By the way, don’t confuse
thought/perception with feelings or emotions. They are hard to shift, as you will see later in the book.)

The direction of movement is up to you, whether you realize it or not. Most people discover that they have not chosen the direction of the relationship, at least not consciously. Instead, it has had a chance to gain more and more power and strength as time has gone on.

Sure, upward momentum takes more energy than just letting things gain downward momentum... just like gravity. Life can exert a downward pull, but as long as you keep the momentum moving in a positive direction, you will find that the relationship naturally maintains that direction.

In fact, the hardest part of working on a relationship is reversing the momentum, and getting it going in the right direction. Once the momentum is shifted, life is much, much easier.

**Shifting Momentum**

A change in momentum begins with a shift in the relationship. And that relationship shift can happen with only one person making a shift in perception.

That is why the subtitle to the e-book is so important: “even if only one of you wants to change.”
A relationship can begin to shift, even if the other person is unwilling or unable to invest in the shift.

When one begins to relate differently, the other has to begin to relate differently. It is just part of human nature. We cannot help but change how we respond when someone shifts how he or she is responding to us.

Think back to a time when you were caught in an angry relationship, yet one of you decided to apologize. Suddenly, the relationship shifts. You may have found yourself connected in ways that seemed just the opposite of the moment before the apology. When one shifts, the other has to shift. That is the power of relationships. We are connected in ways that cause us to be affected by how another responds.

As in much of this book, you will discover that this shift is mostly about making a conscious decision to do things differently. At times, I will ask you to take action, in spite of where you are in your emotions. At other times, I will ask you to find a point of understanding about your spouse. And at times, you will discover the importance of choosing how and when you respond.

**An Instant Shift**

Let me give you an example of a shift that was instantaneous and long lasting. One of my clients came to me in part because of her marriage. She
struggled with the relationship, and though he was not a part of our therapy in the beginning, her husband played a central role.

“Amy” wanted more from her husband than “Jerry” was willing to give. Amy was upset that Jerry had more free time, but didn’t understand her need for “down time.” She wanted more romance, more attention, more care. Not exactly a new or different list of wants and desires from many other couples.

Amy and I struggled together to help her gain a clear understanding of what she wanted and needed from the relationship. We focused on changes she could make that might improve the relationship. Finally, Amy invited Jerry into our sessions.

To her surprise, he accepted. They struggled with how they might adjust their individual needs and desires into a workable relationship. However, in spite of changes made on the part of Jerry, Amy continued to be dissatisfied.

The momentum continued to carry their relationship downward. Amy’s dissatisfaction worked in a negative direction for Jerry. The less satisfied Amy was with their relationship, the less willing Jerry was to work on changing it.

The shift came in a frightening way. Jerry discovered a lump on his throat. He went to the doctor, and quickly found himself caught in the web of
the medical world. The lump turned out to be cancerous. Given the location, the doctors were concerned about Jerry’s survival.

When I saw Amy the next time, a radical shift had taken place. She realized how insignificant the little issues were in the face of death. The issues that created so much discord in their relationship disappeared. What was left was love. Amy said, “Those other things don’t mean anything when I think about not having Jerry around.”

The momentum of their relationship shifted and propelled them in a positive direction. The change happened on the heels of a scary shift. It could have happened at any time. Either could have realized how precious their relationship and their health are. Both could have realized that life was far too significant to lose time on the insignificant. It just took a “wake-up call” to shake them out of the trance.

My hope is that you will not wait for that “wake-up call.” Sometimes it comes too late, and sometimes it doesn’t even come. And always, people lose out on valuable time that could be spent in a loving, harmonious, supportive relationship.

Consider: how does the momentum in your relationship need to be changed? Most importantly, what changes are you willing to make to create the shift? Remember, some are only perceptions.
One perception I would urge you to shift is the perception that there is always later to focus on the relationship. I hear too often from parents that have put their relationship “on the back-burner,” waiting for more time, resources, energy, etc., to put into the relationship.

The Law of Momentum is at work. Those relationships will begin to gain more and more momentum in the downward spiral. By the time the couple might choose to put that relationship on the “front-burner,” the momentum is many times more difficult to shift. Notice, I said “more difficult,” but not impossible.

Make it your desire to keep an eye on the momentum of the relationship, lest you find the relationship moving faster in a negative direction than you had expected.

By the way, the Law of Momentum says that shifts in momentum can happen in small stages. You don’t have to turn around a relationship in one instant. You may choose, instead, to slowly nudge the relationship in a deliberate and concerted effort to create a reversal. A $180^\circ$ turn can happen in one quick turn, or one large circle. Either way, it is important to work on making that shift.

Your Turn

Where are you?
- Where is the momentum in the relationship?
- Which direction is the momentum headed?
- Did any shifts in understanding happen as you were reading the material above? What came to mind?
- Did you have any ideas, while you were reading, on how to shift your perception of your spouse?
- What keeps you from making a shift in perspective? (Some people feel the need to keep thinking the way they have about a spouse, falsely believing this kept them from being hurt.)
Chapter 7
Don’t Ask Yourself Whether You Are Still In Love

Love is too often linked to emotion, not to action. When we ask ourselves whether we are still in love, we end up wondering if we still have the emotional connection to the other person.

Unfortunately, even the action of questioning leads to more doubt, not less. When we raise the question, we begin to ponder the question. When we ponder the question, we can often create the answer.

So, instead of asking whether we love our spouse, it is much more useful to begin treating our spouse as if we do love him or her. As we treat someone “as if,” we often find the emotions that once felt lacking, to be returning. The question needs to shift from “do I still love (emotion) him/her?” to “how do I love (action) him/her?”

The simple task of asking this question shifts our perspective. When our perspective shifts, the relationship shifts. The heart of improving a relationship is usually a shift in perspective. Rarely do
people “work” themselves to a better place. Instead, we shift there.

Ask the question, “What can I do to show my love?” And here is the difficult part: we rarely have the best way of showing the other our love. Our actions usually come from an understanding of what lets us know that we are loved. And here, the specifics run up against the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” For this point, it may be rephrased: “Show love to others as they wish to have love shown.”

We all have different ways of feeling loved and feeling accepted. The problem is that we usually assume the way we feel love is also the case for others. There are many, many ways to show and be shown love.

Some find love in words, others in touch, others in deeds, and still others in gifts. Within those broad means, there are many specifics. Our task, as lovers, is to discover how the other yearns to be loved. This is the learning task of any successful relationship. Discover that and you discover the deepest yearnings of a spouse.

**Why Not Emotions?**

Unfortunately, we have all been raised in a culture that finds the romantic notion of love to be supreme. Sure, those emotions bond us together in the
early days of a relationship. But emotions are not the “North Star” of a relationship. Life cannot be navigated based on the presence or absence of these feelings. The true North Star of a relationship is commitment, which is based in action, the “doing” of a relationship. This sometimes entails continuing to love (action) someone even in the absence of the feeling of love.

On a basic level, emotions are reactions in the chemistry lab of our bodies. Sure, they are wonderful when they are around, but the fact that they are missing doesn’t indicate the death of a relationship. This is when the hard work begins!

Even more importantly, when the emotions are missing, we often try to find some way to recapture the emotions. This is a losing proposition. It moves from the wrong direction. Emotions are not the goal, but a side-effect (albeit quite pleasant) of the action of loving.

When one acts lovingly toward another, one naturally begins feeling more loving toward the other. Feelings follow action and not vice versa. More than that, most find it a losing proposition to try to “make” themselves feel a certain way. It is easier and more effective to choose to act in a certain way. Anyone can “make” themselves act in a chosen way. From that, feelings emerge—almost without fail!
Many of us are aware of the fact that emotions ebb and flow in the life of a relationship. Even with this knowledge, we seem to forget it in the day-to-day life. When the emotions are missing, we begin to believe, “I’m not in love anymore.” When, in actuality, the relationship is in an ebb pattern. The flow, if allowed, will return. That simply is the nature of relationships when we don’t interfere.

“So, What Should I Do?”

At this point, that may be the question you are asking. If emotions are a dead-end, and our first instinct is to show love the way we wished to be loved, you may be wondering, “How do I show this person love?” Two answers: 1) Consider what the other person does (or did) to show love; 2) ASK!

Even if the two of you have lost the habit of treating each other in loving ways, you may have the opportunity to think back on how love was expressed to you earlier in the relationship, and particularly during periods where the feeling of love was evident. This can provide some clues on how the other person feels loved. If you show love in ways that love was shown to you, you may discover the key to best showing love for that person.

And best of all, ASK the other person how to love him or her. Think to yourself, what would it be like to have your spouse ask you how you would like to be loved. Would that not be a powerful discussion?
Would that not make you feel loved, even in just having that discussion?

One *relationship trap* is to assume that we must know what the other wants, or it isn’t genuine. “Mind-reading” is a high standard to hold another to. In fact, it has been the death of many relationships. Give up on thinking about what you or your spouse is “supposed” to know, and concentrate on discovering what you and your spouse haven’t known about each other.

Relationships cannot be sustained on the illusion that the other should “know” if it really is love. Instead, healthy relationships are all about discovery and growth. Make it your task to learn about the other, to discover their secrets. And don’t trap yourself in expecting them to know your secrets. Share them. Seek to have your spouse share his or her secrets with you.

Discovering the secrets of each other lies at the heart of successful relationships. It is a discovery process unlike any other. This is a shift in understanding. It is the difference between seeing a marriage where both are on the same “wavelength” to seeing marriage as a discovery of the other’s wavelength.
Your Turn

- What, specifically, are the top three ways your spouse best feels loved? (Consider specific actions or ways of responding.)
- What, specifically, are the top three ways you best feel loved?
- In the next week, what are 5 ways you will commit to showing love to your spouse? (Write them down, with specific dates.)

When the Emotions are Missing

Sometimes, the emotions just seem to have escaped you. You may feel completely incapable of feeling love, passion, or any other emotion toward your spouse.

I have good news for you! There are some specific things you can do to get back in touch with those missing emotions. However, the first thing you must do is to commit to sticking in there. As I said in the last lesson, asking the question of whether you still love someone completely misses the action part of being loving.

But more dangerously, asking that question continues the loss of emotion. You can become so
focused on the lack of feelings that you miss the opportunities to rediscover the feelings.

Reconnecting With The Emotions

Here are several specific strategies for moving toward the feelings.

1. Remember that at their essence, feelings and emotions are cyclical, somewhat like the tide. They move in and move out. And there are some extremely high tides and low tides. But, sure as the pull of gravity, low tide moves to high tide, and vice versa.

So, when feelings are low, instead of getting concerned, choose to wait. Soon, the feelings will move in a more positive direction.

Don’t get too caught up in wondering why this is the case. Just accept that it is the case, and move forward. Sometimes, a change of emotion is as simple as waiting for the emotions to change on their own.

2. Choose to be playful. When people begin to feel less loving and warm toward their spouse, their first reaction is to retract, get serious, and work hard to change the feeling.

This ends up being particularly counter-productive. Few relationships rediscover the passion by working harder. Usually, the working
harder is what caused some of the loss of passion in the first place.

So try to find some activities that might be lighter. Take up a new hobby together. Go for walks, hikes, camping, trips, etc., together. Perhaps you can think of the things that used to make you laugh together—take that skinny dip in the pool, sneak away for a dessert together, whatever it was. Remember it and do it again.

3. Remind yourselves of how the relationship started. When I am with a couple that seems to have lost their warmth toward each other, I often ask them a simple question: “Tell me about how your relationship started.” Suddenly, their whole demeanor changes.

Where once, they were critical of each other, they suddenly find loving eyes (both metaphorically and in reality). The room is transformed from one of coldness and distance to warmth.

Is this connection fleeting? Often, it is. But it reconnects the couple to a feeling they have forgotten how to have. Sometimes, they just need to be reminded that the feelings are still there, even though they are buried.

4. I save the most powerful method for last. Psychology has long known that we create some of our reality. We unknowingly have a great deal
of control over our perception of reality and situations.

The secret is known as “Acting as if . . . .” Here is how it works: imagine what you would be doing if you felt differently, and act as if that feeling is there. If you were feeling loving toward your spouse, what would you be doing? How would you be looking at him/her, acting toward him/her, responding to him/her? Do those things.

The amazing thing about this technique is it works in so many areas. When someone is talking to you (spouse included) about something with which you are not interested, act as if you are interested. I’ll guarantee that within 5 minutes, you really will become interested.

When you are feeling down or depressed, act as if you were happy and joyful, even forcing a smile. Within 5 minutes, your feelings will shift away from depressed and toward joyful.

This powerful trick can dramatically transform a relationship. Your task is to discover the many ways you can “act as if . . . . in your relationship. Your relationship will be transformed because you have discovered a method of transforming your feelings toward the relationship.

Your Turn
As you discover the best way to regain the lost emotions of your relationship, decide to act on some of the points below.

- Create a list of 10 to 15 ways you and your spouse have had fun in the past.

- Choose one to do in the next three days.

- Make a conscious choice to not dwell on emotions not being there. As an experiment, instead, trust that emotions are like the tide, and the tide will come in.

- Remember how your relationship started. Perhaps you could even reminisce with your spouse about those days.

- Create a list of 20 ways you would act, if you felt the way you want to feel toward your spouse. Beginning acting on those items.
Chapter 8
When Emotions Are Amiss

Sometimes, the problem with emotions in a relationship is not that they are missing, it is that they are amiss—they are not what they should be. Instead of love, there is anger; instead of warmth, there is cold.

I would like to spend some time in this lesson discussing a very common pattern, which creates a great deal of discomfort for couples. For many couples, a great deal of animosity is formed from this pattern.

**Intimacy & Abandonment**

People have an inherent fear of two things: *intimacy* and *abandonment*. We both fear people being too close to us and too far from us. But we all have different levels of this fear, and different amounts of closeness and distance that triggers the fear.

The balance between the two points of fear ends up being the boundaries of a relationship. These two points are *connection* and *distance*. 
First, a little explanation of each fear. The *Fear of Abandonment* part is related to our concern of losing those whom we need for survival. It is rooted in being helpless infants completely dependent upon another for all assistance, care, and nurture.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for any caregiver, no matter how great, to meet all the needs of a helpless child all the time. (If you are a parent, reflect on this reality.) So we all leave childhood with some level of fear that we will lose people whom we desperately need.

While this fear makes perfect sense for the infant and child, it is far less helpful for the adult. This fear does not have to be a rational fear (in fact, it is not) for it to affect our lives. When we are captured by a fear of abandonment, we tend to hold on to the person we fear will leave us.
The Fear of Intimacy is at the other end of the continuum. But think, instead of the infant, to the two year old. As the two year old is actively saying “no” at every turn, he or she is really establishing that he or she is separate and different from his or her parents.

The fear at that age is that a parent will overwhelm the child. As the child is beginning to be aware of his or her separation, he or she is also aware that a parent is far more powerful and capable of inflicting parental decisions against a child.

This same awareness that is part of the development of a child—discovering that there is a separation between the child and the rest of the world, creates a fear of being overwhelmed and lost in relationship with another. Again, a perfectly appropriate response for a child creates a deep-seated fear in the adult of becoming lost in a relationship.

**Between The Fears**

Between the fears of intimacy and abandonment lie the points of a relationship: connection and distance. Every relationship struggles to find the appropriate and healthy point between having connection and distance between the two people.

Unfortunately, there is no correct point for the balance. And unfortunately, it is unlikely there will be a match between the two in the relationship. In other words, at various times, and about various issues, the
two people will feel different needs for connection and distance.

With two different people, and two different expectations for distance and connection, the potential for misunderstanding quickly escalates.

The possibilities begin to emerge. When one needs more distance, the other might desire more connection, and vice versa. The two find themselves creating a back-and-forth dance to regulate the amount of connection and distance in the relationship.

Now add in the two points of fear. When one needs distance, the other may discover a strong fear of abandonment. When one needs more connection, the other may discover a strong fear of intimacy.

Suddenly, the dance between a couple to maintain closeness and distance becomes laden with difficulties. There are multiple opportunities for misunderstanding, hurt feelings, unmet needs, and complete bewilderment.
Dealing With The Mix

Emotions are often amiss because of this powerful mix of interaction. Over time, the inability to match distance and closeness with each other transforms into hurt. This hurt often builds to resentment, especially when one or both feel that needs are not being met.

Because of our culture, it is particularly difficult for someone to tell another that he or she “needs” something. We have been raised to reject our own needs. Unfortunately, this has a boomerang effect. We end up trying to get our needs met in manipulative, indirect ways.

Marriages are partly based on a willingness to acknowledge the existence of these needs, and angry to meet these needs together. And by the way, having needs is different than being a “needy person.”

I recently had a discussion with a group about needs. One of the members felt that marriages should be between two needless people, independent of the other.

The thoughts I shared reveal that I do not believe people are designed to be islands, separate from each other. Instead, we are designed to need and be needed. While this can become pathological, it is not necessarily so. In fact, too much independence can be just as pathological.
Understanding Anger

Many people experience anger in their relationship, but find themselves at a loss on how to “get rid of it,” as I often hear. Part of the difficulty in moving away from anger is rooted in our understanding of what anger is about.

Since we often feel anger as a lead emotion in a given situation, we begin to believe anger is the primary emotion. In other words, we believe the angry response is really about anger. IT IS NOT!

Anger is a secondary emotion. It is not the primary emotion. But since it feels so strong, it often drowns out the true primary emotion. The primary emotion is more often something in the neighborhood of hurt, disappointment, or dismay.

This is not to say that anger is not an important emotion. It is. It lets you know that a part of your Self feels under attack.

Anger’s role is to protect the self, to push away the perceived threat. But when we forget about the primary emotion, that emotion is never addressed. Over time, the relationship gets more and more rooted in anger and resentment.
But this misses the reality of the relationship failing to meet the needs of the individuals. And equally important, it misses the reality of hurts and disappointments that are never addressed.

The task of marriage is to move beyond the emotion of anger and toward the true primary emotions. Dealing with those emotions causes the anger to evaporate. But when the primary emotions are ignored, the secondary emotion of anger only gains extra strength in an attempt to protect the Self from any further damage.

Your Turn

- When your spouse responds to you angrily, remind yourself that this is not the primary emotion. It is your task to move toward the primary emotion, not react to the anger.

- When you respond with anger, remind yourself there is a primary emotion, and work to identify that emotion. That is the emotion that must be addressed in the relationship. Anger often prevents that from happening.

- Also, shift your understanding of anger from an attack on you to the revelation of something by the other person. It is a gift, albeit much like being handed a porcupine! Still, there is something soft inside, because it is really
someone sharing something important to him or her.

- Finally, work on accepting the idea that dealing with the primary feelings will cause the angry feelings to dissipate—on their own!
Chapter 9
We All Have A Paradigm

Please excuse my using a “buzz-word.” It is just the best description of the problem. A paradigm is a model, a way of seeing the world. It helps us process information without being overloaded. Paradigms act like filters, and when information comes toward us that challenges our view of the world, we tend to ignore it or to reinterpret it.

Paradigms are neither good nor bad, they simply are. People cannot exist without them. The challenge of each person is to examine when a personal paradigm is failing and to be willing to change it.

Unfortunately, paradigms are most easily seen in hindsight, and not in the moment. For example, at one point in history, people believed the sun revolved around the earth—the center of the universe.

When astronomers looked at the movement of the stars, their movement did not correspond to the idea of all celestial bodies revolving around the earth. The stars moved in seemingly erratic directions. This was a challenge because the theory would have the movements tracking in orderly ways.
The scientists made their observations “fit” their model (or paradigm) of the universe. They failed to let the evidence challenge their worldview. Copernicus saw things differently. He let the evidence challenge the paradigm and determined that the earth revolved around the sun.

This was a revolutionary idea at the time, though we can now look back and see how obvious it is. Few people would claim that the sun revolves around the earth. Those that do only prove the potential of maintaining a paradigm in the face of insurmountable evidence to the contrary.

Paradigms like the one noted above are easily seen. We can laugh at those who refused to see the truth, but we fail to realize that we all live in a paradigm. We all miss facts that would challenge our view of the world. We all make decisions based on facts that may or may not be complete.

An individual’s paradigm is neither right nor wrong. It is, however, incomplete. In college, I had several courses in psychological and sociological experiments. Two concepts remain with me: validity and reliability.

When examining an experiment, it is considered valid when the experiment follows a logic, and makes sense internally. You ask the question, “Did the experimenter test what he or she said was being
tested? Was the experiment logical in its construction?” If so, you have a valid experiment.

An experiment is **reliable** if the results can be applied anywhere else than the subject of the experiment. In other words, do the experimental results create any greater knowledge than just within the experiment?

**So What’s the Tie-In?**

We all have individual paradigms. They are the result of our life experiences, gender, age, education, and a multitude of other variables. Those paradigms are **valid**, but they are not **reliable**. Paradigms are valid because they make sense to us. We do not see the inconsistencies from inside the paradigm. It looks logical and all holds together. But externally, no paradigm is reliable. It cannot be applied to everyone else.

I usually find the inconsistencies in my own paradigm when my wife points out the places where I say one thing, then another, and they cannot both be true. Suddenly, I have to face the fact that my paradigm is imperfect, and I can either become defensive or I can modify the paradigm.

You may recall from Psych 101, the idea of Johari’s Window. The idea comes from a researcher, Johari who believed we all have visible and hidden parts. These parts are often even invisible from us.
There are parts that are visible and known to us and to others. There are other parts that are visible to others, but not to us. There are parts that are visible to us, but not to others. And finally, there are areas that are hidden, not only from others, but also from us.

Paradigms have this element to them. Our paradigms are somewhat known to us, and somewhat known to others. But never is the entire paradigm known both to us and to others. There are hidden, unknown parts. As people get to know us, they begin to see more and more of how we see the world. It is there that another can see the inconsistencies in a paradigm.

But we must acknowledge there are those areas that remain hidden to all, and will always be hidden. That is the nature of paradigms. They operate in the background, a “software operating system,” that limits what we recognize and how we interpret. It has its place. But there are also weaknesses.
The Paradigm Problem

The problem with paradigms is not that we have one, it’s that we forget that we have one. We begin to believe that the way we see the world is the right one, instead of one way. It happens throughout life, but it is particularly painful in the context of a marriage. Most couples begin to assume they see things alike. When it becomes clear this is not the case, the couple begins to try to get each other “back on track,” back to seeing things alike.

This is rarely successful, since neither saw things identically in the first place. Sure, couples often see many things very similarly; this compounds the problem. The more things are seen the same, the easier it is to assume you are seeing things just alike.

A Paradigm of People’s Paradigms

When a couple is dealing with the paradigms of each other, it may be helpful to have some model (a paradigm) of understanding. I caution that this is only a model, and not meant to be definitive. It is a “paradigm of understanding,” and is therefore limited.

People have three different layers to their paradigm. The top layer consists of our daily “stuff”—movies we like, books we read, food we eat. It is really a reflection of our preferences. In the overall scheme of life, it gives the flavors of living. However, in the
overall scheme of a relationship, this may be less important.

Interestingly, it is here that a couple first discovers their differences. They end up not liking the same movies, books, etc. However, a relationship with some depth will look beyond this. Each will seek to benefit and learn from the other’s interests.

Couples can, if they desire, quickly move beyond this layer. They may decide to do things separately, or compromise on a movie or restaurant. This level is the easiest to navigate.

The next layer down comprises our worldview. It includes how we think about money, what we do with our time, and how we deal with problems.

This is the area that often “trips” a couple. We come to believe that these areas must be in concert for a relationship to work. This is not the case. There is more than enough room for differences in perception and worldview in a relationship. But the differences cannot be ignored. Room must be made for them.
The bottom layer of a person’s paradigm is the most crucial. It holds one’s beliefs, standards, and values. Standards are what we expect of ourselves; they are what we “live up to.” This is the bedrock of existence. We may be able to compromise on the top and middle layer, but the bottom layer creates the foundation for living.

When this bottom area is not very similar for a couple, problems will emerge. For example, if one of the couple expects honesty and integrity, and the other does not value this, problems will emerge. The two will take these beliefs into their communication, which will have a large effect on the outcome of that communication.

A more extreme example: if one believes in absolute fidelity, yet the other does not value this, there will be a large split between the two. These levels of difference are very difficult to overcome. They cut to the core of who we are as people. Fortunately, people typically find their mates to have very similar points of agreement in this third layer.

It is truly the middle section, our worldview that seems to give us the most trouble. When couples learn to navigate the paradigm issues, couples often find themselves on their way to a successful relationship.

Your Turn
What came to your mind as you were reading about the three levels?

Are there areas in the 3rd level, the area concerning core values, that are different between the two of you?

If there are differences, how can the two of you find some resolution? There is an important distinction between shades of difference and seeing core issues from opposite directions.

Work to become aware of differences in the middle layer. It is less important to resolve those differences, and far more important to become aware of the differences. Awareness always precedes acceptance, which precedes treasuring the difference.

Escaping the Paradigm Trap

There is an alternative to getting caught in the mire of battling paradigms. This alternative requires waking up to the existence and influence of paradigms. There are several steps in this process.

First is acknowledging the existence of a paradigm. Our paradigms are a result of many factors, including our race, gender, age, upbringing, education, and life events. And since these factors and others create an infinite number of variables, there are that many paradigms.
I am not disputing the fact that there are some basic areas we can all agree on. For example, we may all see a piece of wood supported on four legs, and readily see this as a solid table. We can agree upon that meaning (though quantum physics would question the solidity).

But let’s assume I am standing behind this table. I could ask, “Who put this table here to block my way? Who is trying to stop me from getting where I need to go?” I have suddenly moved into my paradigm.

I could have just as easily have asked “who put this table here to hold my books?” Either interpretation may be correct (or both could be incorrect). It is through our paradigm that we make the assumption.

The fact is, few of us understand how much our paradigms affect how we interpret the world. Some people carry around a paradigm that the world is not to be trusted. They find plenty of evidence to back them up. Others find the world trustworthy and full of opportunity. They find the evidence to back that assumption.

Our paradigms become like glasses we forget we are wearing. We think we see clearly, but we are always looking through lenses that alter reality from how others see it.
And everyone is wearing a pair of glasses! But most have forgotten. What is your paradigm? This moves us to the next aspect of escaping the paradigm trap.

The second aspect is acknowledging that your own paradigm is not the correct paradigm, but merely a paradigm. Once that happens, you become free to see that someone else’s (particularly a spouse’s) is not the incorrect paradigm, but merely another paradigm. Ah! The freedom of that discovery!

We Are All Doing The Best We Can!

When I realized, truly realized, that we all see the world from a different perspective, I realized something even more powerful: We all do the best we can, where we are! That does not mean we are all operating at our optimum capacity. Instead, it means that at this place in time, given the current circumstances, we are doing the best we can. Sure, we all could do something more, something different. But that would be by shifting our understanding . . . our paradigm.

If that shift happens for you, what you may discover is a great deal more compassion. You may give yourself more room, and others more room, to fall short and try again. Why? Because this perspective allows us to relax our judgmental side, and to accept people and ourselves where we are.
We All Operate From Our Own Perspectives

My wife was attending a professional conference. All the people present were therapists and social workers (theoretically a self-aware crowd!). At lunchtime, she approached a table of strangers to join them. She asked about a couple of empty seats. Each time, the person responded that it was “saved.” My wife realized that some things never change. Suddenly, it was high school all over again. People were saving seats for their friends—their safety zone.

There is a joke: “Haven’t you heard? It’s all about me!” And that is correct when we are examining our worldview. Rarely are we able to move outside ourselves and see it clearly from another’s perspective. We see it from our own position.

For example, when someone says something critical, we feel attacked, failing to see it as being about the other person. When someone tells me they are angry with me, I can take it as an attack on me or see it as a confession of where the other is. Their anger is about them. It is only partly about me.

While I am responsible for my actions, it is impossible to control how the other person responds to my actions. The other person’s reaction may or may not be in line with my actions. I am responsible, therefore, for my actions. They are responsible for their reactions.
Doing TO You vs. Doing FOR Themselves

When we feel slighted we lose track of an important distinction: Doing to you vs. doing for themselves. People rarely are doing something to someone as much as they are doing something for themselves. Even when someone attacks another, it is often in response to feeling attacked. It is a defense.

This distinction is critical. It helps us to realize that even personal attacks cannot be taken so personally. Instead, they can be seen in the context of the other person’s state. When this is the case, it is possible to see beyond the attack, to see that the other person is responding out of his or her own need.

In our higher moments, we can often move outside of ourselves and recognize the impact of our actions and responses. But in the midst of stress, this rarely is the case. Our most natural response is self-preservation. This creates the position of acting for (in defense of) ourselves.

While we can move beyond this on a conscious basis (that is the essence of empathy), it may be important to remember that just because people can move beyond themselves, they may not do so in any given situation. When we feel slighted, it is important to understand the distinction between to us, which hurts us, and for themselves, which requires understanding of the other person.
What This Doesn’t Mean

Okay, so now your understanding may be shifting. When you feel attacked or hurt, you may now begin to recognize the fact that the other is responding from their own reality. You may recognize it is truly about them.

Does that mean you excuse the behavior? NO! It merely means you understand the behavior for what it is. You can still hold that person accountable for the behavior. This moves us to the issue of **Boundaries**, which you will find in another chapter.

The implication is that people really are doing the best they can, where they are. People are rarely as mean-spirited as we make them. Their actions may seem mean-spirited to us, but often have another interpretation for them. The meaning for them is likely to be far more benign than that which we assign.

We are also left with a clear understanding that we all live from our worldview. We respond in protective ways to ourselves. This helps us nurture a more compassionate view of the other person. The other person can be held accountable for their actions, while also being seen as innocent. What a paradox!
Chapter 10
Boundaries: Where You Begin and End

Boundaries are an important concept. It is a concept that gets far too little attention in our culture. I realized this when I led a workshop on “balance in life.” One session was about boundaries. The next week, my phone was ringing off the wall. I was inundated with people realizing how much of their lives revolved around a lack of boundaries.

In short, boundaries are the first points of our defining ourselves. People with poor boundaries find they have little definition of themselves. The fact is that the choice is not between having boundaries and no boundaries. It is between healthy boundaries and poor boundaries, which really is a choice between owning our own lives, or others owning our life.

Boundaries and Standards

First, I need to make an important distinction that has been made by Life Coach, Thomas Leonard, the distinction between Boundaries and Standards.
Boundaries are those things that we will not allow to be done to us—they are the “No’s” of our lives: “No, I will not let you . . . .” Boundaries let people know how to treat us; they also help people see where they end and we begin. Our boundaries, whether weak or strong, teach others how we can and will be treated. They are the instructions for how others may interact with us.

Standards are what we expect to live up to. Standards define who we will be and how we will act. They are the “Yeses” of our lives: “yes, I will be . . . .” Standards create the instructions for how we will treat others and ourselves.

While boundaries may be enforced with others, standards are ours alone. And so, it is important to be clear about the difference between the two. Standards and boundaries cannot be treated the same for this reason.

For example, you may make it a boundary that you expect full honesty from those communicating with you. If you find that someone is dishonest, then the boundary can be enforced. However, you cannot place upon another person the standard that he or she will always be honest. You may expect it of yourself, but not of another.

I make this statement, not as a philosophical idea, but a practical idea. When you expect someone to be honest with you, it is only partly in your control. If
you discover their dishonesty, you may choose to respond to that. But expecting the other to be honest in all areas of life becomes impossible when the other is interacting away from you.

Parents often discover this painful truth in their children. No matter what they do to instill a standard, the child must one day choose that standard or reject it. With adults, “instilling” is usually not an option.

**Setting Boundaries in the Relationship**

There are four basic steps to setting a boundary in a relationship:

- Inform
- Ask
- Tell
- Consequence

Here’s how it works: when you realize that your boundary has been violated, you must move to reassert the appropriate boundary, giving the other person multiple opportunities for rectifying the situation.

The first step in reestablishing the boundary is by *Informing* the other person of the incursion. You let them know what they have done (or are doing). And you inform them with a voice that is reminiscent of
reflecting on the fact that the sky is blue, i.e. dispassionately and even-voiced. No anger, no sarcasm—simply telling them what they have done.

Let’s “for instance” for a moment. Let’s suppose that the boundary you feel is being violated is that you are being yelled at. This is a pretty basic boundary. But here is the other person yelling at you. First step: (in your dispassionate, logical voice) “Do you realize your voice is raised?”

First, notice that I did not use the term “yelling.” This is a rather loaded term for many people, and is very subjective. What is yelling to you may not be to someone else—and they are glad to tell you this! Don’t get side-tracked with that discussion. Simply observe that their voice is raised.

Second, make sure your tone is the same as “Do you realize the sky is blue?” That means you are respecting their boundary by not responding with yelling back.

For many people, and many circumstances, this will be enough. The other person will immediately respond to the boundary and quiet their voice. But some may not.

So step two is Asking them not to yell. So as they continue, you assert “Please don’t raise your voice when you are talking to me.” Again, remember “the sky is blue” tone of voice. The reason why you can do
the calm, peaceful tone of voice is because you know you still have options for resolving this.

Many people will be surprised by your calmly requesting an action, and they will comply. Others may choose to continue, especially if you are out of practice in setting your boundaries.

That leads us to step three, **Telling** the person not to violate that boundary. You may say “You may not raise your voice at me.” Again, be aware of the tone in your voice.

And you are adding one more part. You are informing the other person of what will happen if they choose not to comply. “If you do not stop, I am leaving the house for an hour.” Create your own consequence. Just make sure you can live with the consequence you threaten. Otherwise, you will have a much more difficult time setting the boundary down the road.

But this person continues through your telling them how to treat you. That leads to step four, which is following through on the **Consequence**. If you said you would take a walk, do it. If you said you would leave for an hour, do it. If you said you would hang up the phone, do it.

This format will work on any number of boundary issues. Remember to **Inform, Ask, Tell, Consequence**, and remember your tone of voice, and you will have the toolbox to reset your boundaries.
One boundary I need to mention as being outside the four steps is that of physical violence. If you are hurt (or almost hurt, or even threatened to be hurt), you need to leave the scene immediately. Set your boundary on this with an immediate consequence, not so much so that they will learn a lesson (they probably won’t), but so that you are safe.

*A final footnote about boundaries:* most people discover that when you begin working on boundaries, other boundaries that are being violated become apparent. For example, a client that was finding herself the object of the yelling set a boundary against that. Then she realized that even in a non-raised voice, name-calling was not appropriate. When she got a handle on this, he got creative and used letters to stand for the inappropriate words (rather creative in violating boundaries, I’d say). She stood her ground and set her boundaries. You can do the same.

**Why Boundaries Are Important For You**

So now that you have a sense of what boundaries are about, and what standards are about, you may be wondering how that applies to your work on your marriage. After all, I have spent some energy expounding upon the idea that marriages are *WE*.

Here is the number one rule of lifesaving in water: you don’t put yourself at too great a risk to save the other—they will pull you down and both of you will drown. As people work to save a struggling
relationship, they may find themselves pulled under. In other words, they may find they have lost their own identity in order to preserve or find peace/calm/tranquility.

For example, in an attempt to not escalate the other person, some people think it best not to have an argument. The end result is the person loses a part of themselves by giving in, and the other person soon believes he or she must be right.

I had a client that found himself apologizing for everything in a relationship. Why? To keep the peace and not cause his wife to leave. Over time, she began to lose respect for him, to see him as a doormat. In the rest of his life, nothing could have been further from the truth. But in his marriage, he had “given it all away” to preserve peace.

As he gave way on his boundaries, she moved further and further into his boundaries, causing him to have to give more. One day, it occurred to him that he could not be a “total jerk.”

Even if he was mostly a jerk, that should leave 10% or more where she was at fault. Yet she apologized 0% of the time. And since most people thought him to be a pretty decent guy, he thought it possible that she owed him an apology maybe 40-50% of the time.
That woke him up. That day, he began to reestablish his boundaries. Surprise! She came to respect him, which led to further movement towards health.

This chapter may be the most important information in this ebook if you are currently trying to convince a partner to stay in the relationship. If you work to save the relationship, and in the end, lose all respect for yourself and respect of the other, the relationship will likely not be saved.

However, if one of the issues at hand is loss of respect on the part of your spouse, creating boundaries may begin to roll back the tide. By setting and holding boundaries, you are changing the balance in the relationship, helping to restore health to the situation.

**Boundaries and Standards Exercise**

*The task of this exercise is to begin examining areas where your boundaries need to be extended. From that point, it is also possible to discover areas where your standards can then be raised.*

**Step 1: Boundaries**

*Use the space below to note 5 Boundaries you need to enforce or enhance that are routinely violated.*
When you consider these boundaries, what feelings come up in you?

How are these boundaries related? Do they have a common theme?

What are 5 ways you can strengthen these boundaries?
1)
2)
Boundaries Of The Relationship

One of my clients pointed out the need for relationships to have boundaries. While I had given that some thought, I was surprised to see I had left that out until he pointed it out to me.
Here is where the concept of boundaries impacts WE. If WE is this entity created in a marriage, it needs its own protection: things, actions, etc., that must be avoided or kept at bay. Chosen boundaries create the points of differentiation between what is acceptable in a WE and what is not.

Each couple must decide what is acceptable in terms of how each person interacts with the world. For example, some people would consider it a violation of the boundaries of the relationship to have dinner with a person of the opposite sex. For other couples, that would be fine. In other words, there is a wide range of what is acceptable or not.
Chapter 11
The Practices of Marriage

Couples have the opportunity of consciously making several practices a part of their relationship. Some of these practices extend into everyday life and can lead to renewed peace throughout one’s life.

Don’t worry. None are difficult. They won’t leave you tangled in meditation; but they are, in some sense, spiritual practices. They are Habits of Mind that can be nurtured and developed.

Practice “Benefit-Of-The-Doubt” Thinking

I often suggest that people change how they look at their spouse. It is interesting that we often fall in the trap of thinking that our life partner is not on our side. Instead of assuming that misunderstandings and mistakes are merely that, we think these things happen with hostile intent.

In psychology, there is the idea of the Attribution Error. Simply stated, it is this: when someone makes a mistake, we assign a character flaw to him or her. When we make the same mistake, we see it as a momentary slip. We attribute to them a flaw that we do not attribute to ourselves.
“Benefit-of-the-Doubt” thinking starts with the assumption that the other did not intend to hurt us. In fact, it assumes the other merely made a mistake.

In my meetings with couples, this has come up over and over. One assumes that the other meant to hurt him or her. But when I question the other, he or she clearly meant no harm.

Moreover, the person is hurt that the other would think so poorly of him or her. In other words, the attitude is returned. The hats have changed, but each begins to assume that the other meant to be hostile.

When couples live within Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking each assumes either a positive or neutral stance toward the other. This means assuming the other is not out to do you harm. (We are obviously talking about the general population, and not about those who intentionally abuse a partner!).

Such a stance means that when we are hurt, we can begin to understand the other as having unintentionally causing the pain. This is far more benign, as it assigns no guilt.

Many couples assume, however, the opposite stance. They assume that the other means to hurt them, that the other is “taking aim” at them.

Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking understands that most of us operate first out of self-interest and second out of interest for those closest to us. When our
worldview is threatened, we respond in ways that preserves it. When we are threatened, we respond in ways that try to minimize the threat.

Unfortunately, part of the difficulty with Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking lies in human evolution. We long ago developed a survival technique of “Fight or Flight.” This worked effectively long ago. When the threat was around every turn, with a saber tooth tiger waiting for dinner, the instinct kept humans alive.

The brain can’t distinguish between spouse’s words and saber tooth tiger. The brain only registers a threat to be defended—even when the words are not meant to threaten! This is why it is necessary to cultivate your Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking.

Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking is usually lost after hearing words and registering them as a threat. Once we begin to interpret these words as a threat, they always register as a threat.

That is part of what makes Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking a deliberate practice. It is not automatic. It must be nurtured. Part of nurturing it is being aware that this is not instinct.

Part of the process is in reminding one’s self of the need for WE. When a couple focuses on being a WE, the Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking is much more natural and, in reverse, when a couple practices
Benefit-of-the-Doubt thinking, the couple moves toward WE.

Practice A Sense of Gratitude

Often, as relationships get into trouble, we begin to look at our spouse, the relationship, even our lives, from a point of ingratitude. This creates a cycle that becomes self-perpetuating. A lack of gratitude causes us to look for other things causing problems—other things for which we shouldn’t be grateful. It is this cycle that can develop into the downward momentum of a relationship.

Gratitude can be nurtured. When we begin to look for things for which to be thankful, other things come into focus. Once you look at something for which to be thankful or grateful, other things seem to emerge. Our perception changes in many ways, freeing us to be caring and loving.

Below is a graphic of this dynamic at work. The starting point can be at either the top or the first stop on the right. From there, the cycle begins. Once the cycle begins it is difficult to note the starting point. But you can make a decision to “do it differently,” to be
Practice Continual Forgiveness

Perhaps the natural outcome of Benefit-of-the-Doubt Thinking and Gratitude Thinking is a process of Continual Forgiveness within the relationship. Continual Forgiveness does not wait for an “I’m sorry” to begin the process of forgiving. It is built into the fabric of the relationship.

When a “slight” happens within the relationship, it is seen as a slight, not an assault. And when one is aware of the good in the other, it is easier to let go of the times when the other shows his or her humanity—in the mistakes.

Forgiveness is not only beneficial to the other person. It is beneficial for the forgiver. In fact, it probably has greater benefit for the one forgiving than for the one forgiven. When we don’t focus on
forgiveness, we begin to accumulate points of pain we refuse to give up.

Note: Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. It is, however, a process of remembering differently. It is remembering without being attached to the pain. It is remembering through non-judgmental eyes.

In fact, part of the nurturing of Continual Forgiveness is seeing the other person as an innocent person. Perhaps he or she is not innocent of doing something. But he or she can still be seen as innocent. Doing and being are different. What the person does and why he or she does it are separated. Someone can be held accountable for an action, yet still be seen as innocent in their lives. How we experience the outcome is different from what might have been their intention.

I firmly believe that few people in their world have the sole purpose of hurting another. Those that do are truly injured individuals. More often, pain is created unintentionally or in reaction to feeling hurt.
Chapter 12
The Path to Intimacy

In his book, *A Different Drum*, Scott Peck discusses how we move to true community. After working with his model with groups, I realized it is also the path to true intimacy for a couple. After all, community is just intimacy among a large group of people. (I have altered the titles for Peck’s stages, and have applied them to couples rather than a group, but I am grateful for Peck’s inspiration.)

There are four stages to intimacy. Each can be described and felt. Unfortunately, the path is not straight, and it is certainly not without false paths.

**Stage One: Pseudo-Intimacy**

This is where we all start. Nearly every relationship starts with the assumption that “*We are just alike!*” Sometimes, a couple is amazed to discover such common things as favorite foods, music, books, movies, similar values and beliefs. The couple looks at each other lovingly, amazed to have found someone with such similar interests and loves.

Pseudo-Intimacy is based on these similar interests. In fact, the individuals may find that they
tend to ignore the differences at times, and may choose to accentuate the similarities. This maintains the sense of connection and of being alike.

The area of Pseudo-Intimacy exists in the upper level of the personal paradigm. At times, it extends into deeper areas, but the first points of connectedness are often around that top layer (see the chapter on paradigms for more discussion of the layers).

Eventually, one takes a risk and disagrees. This marks the beginning of the end of the stage of Pseudo-Intimacy. Some couples are years into a marriage before they risk this. Others find this on the first date. Either way, both find themselves in a new relationship. This leads to stage two.

**Stage Two: Chaos**

Suddenly, the couple is aware of the feeling that, “You changed. I need to get you back.” This would be far less chaotic if each could see these differences were there all along, but we all cling to the feeling of being alike.

So, the stage is set. Two people who are very different are each trying to get the other back to seeing things like he or she did. The Chaos stage is marked by unproductive struggle. Each states his or her view, but fails to listen to the other’s. Why? Both are convinced that their view is the correct view.
And so they struggle—arguing, debating, haranguing, and pleading; but both have discovered their voice and neither budges. (Why would they, since they feel “right”?) In the end, neither moves, but both are amazed at how quickly someone can change.

**Stage Three: Emptiness**

After the stage of Chaos comes the most painful stage, the stage where the relationship is most likely to be abandoned. In Emptiness, there is a deep pit of emptiness in one’s stomach. It feels like the relationship is mired and lost. The good news, however, is that this comes just before true intimacy—if you hang in.

If Chaos is the discovery of differences, Emptiness is the discovery that “We are nothing alike, and I don’t have a clue what to do with you.”

Unfortunately, the stage of Emptiness is a very vulnerable point for the

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<td>Chaos</td>
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<td>Emptiness</td>
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<td>Intimacy</td>
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relationship. People often assume, “it is all over,” even though this stage is so close to intimacy. When our stomach feels the empty pit, we become frightened. When we don’t know what to do with our partner, we begin to feel hopeless.

Great! That means you are ready to move on. It is hopeless to change the person back to something he or she never was. It is possible, however, to move to something new. That something may be a renewed and fulfilling relationship.

Emptiness has to be waited out. There is no way to avoid it if the goal is intimacy. There are ways to lengthen the stage of Emptiness.

One way of lengthening it is to decide to move back to Chaos. At least it feels like you are doing something. Perhaps the fighting is pointless and useless, but it is active. Unfortunately, this is a move backward. While it does feel like some connection, there is deeper connection beyond emptiness—much deeper than the connection before.

Moving back to Chaos does little but prolong the movement toward intimacy. But it is a strategy that many try.

Another strategy is to move back toward Pseudo-Intimacy. There, the couple felt the connection. Each knew how to interact, even if it was just on the surface. But again, Pseudo-Intimacy is no shortcut. It, too,
prolongs the necessary movement. It pretends the everyday similarities are deep enough to maintain a relationship.

The only way to intimacy is through emptiness. Going around Emptiness is impossible, and going backward is counterproductive.

If you find yourself in the stage of Emptiness, there are some strategies you may wish to use to continue moving through the feelings of emptiness.

I suggest four strategies for moving through the stage of Emptiness.

- **Decide to hang in.** When couples are experiencing the feeling of emptiness, it is easy to consider dropping out, getting away from the feeling. Make a decision to hold on, to continue moving through this stage. People often fail to realize they can make the decision. There is more destruction by moving back and forth, vacillating on whether to give up or hold on. Make the decision to hold on, and trust that this is a stage.

- **Decide that things must improve.** Unfortunately, it is at this stage that we feel little energy to improve the relationship. In fact, we often feel drained by the feeling of emptiness. So make a decision that things must improve in the relationship, and take it upon yourself to make
some of these changes. It is possible to own the situation without owning the problem.

- **Decide how to re-energize, re-invigorate and re-impassion the relationship.** What would it take to bring energy into the relationship? Do you need to play more? Do you need a fresh perspective? And what will bring the passion back? Part of the antidote for emptiness is fullness; bringing the creative side of you back into the relationship will fill the relationship.

- **Move toward acceptance of the other.** This is key. If the statement, “I don’t know what to do with you,” marks the stage of Emptiness, the answer is simple—accept each other for who the other is. Love them for their differences; cherish what they bring into the relationship.

These strategies move you forward through the emptiness, and move you to the final stage: Intimacy.

**Stage Four: Intimacy**

After viewing the first three stages, you are probably anxious for the good news. That would be Intimacy, the goal of this journey. Intimacy is an appreciation of the differences, an understanding that these differences cause growth in both and add strength to the relationship. At the stage of Intimacy,
the meaning is “We are nothing alike, and that is what makes our relationship so wonderful.”

Intimacy is a full appreciation of the other. It is when we move beyond our “projections” about the other and see them for who they are. When we are caught up in our projections, we see them for who we want them to be, good and bad. Some people see only the bad in the other, while others are only able to see the good. In actuality, neither is fully correct.

Yet how we see the other person so profoundly impacts how we treat them that we must take the risk and see them for who they are.

It has never ceased to amaze me to meet the partner of someone I’ve seen in my practice. When there are problems between the two, and especially when there is a divorce on the horizon, the view of the partner is skewed. I hear about the evil of the other, of their lack of love, kindness, etc. Yet when I meet them, I never find the horns and pointed tail that I would have expected to find.

Instead, I find another human who is just as hurt and just as confused as the person in my office. For deep reasons, neither can see the other for who he or she is. That is the task of intimacy: to see the person for who that person is—and treasure it!
You have a choice in how you relate. You can relate from a low mood or high mood. I suggest high mood. What’s the difference? One will head you toward problems; the other will move you away.

*Low mood* relating works from a “what’s wrong” perspective. It is rooted in the fact that we usually address problems at the worst possible time: when our mood is at the lowest. When our moods are low, our perspective is limited. The more our perspective is limited, the less we see our options.

We all have moods. We have little choice but to interact regardless of our mood. This idea is more related to when we *choose* to relate, especially about important things. When we are at a low mood, we may
choose to be more careful in our relating, knowing that we do not see things as clearly.

I often have couples tell me that they have chosen never to go to bed angry. This causes some concern for me. I understand the sentiment, but I’d bet they are often tired and grouchy the next day. Sometimes a good night’s sleep gives you a different perspective on the problem. In fact, sometimes you may have a hard time remembering what the problem was.

This tactic is not about ignoring an issue. Instead, it is an acknowledgment that when we only relate from a low mood, some things become bigger issues than they really are.

**Focus on Options**

When our focus is on problems we lose our creativity. We lose our possibilities. Here’s an important quote:

*Life is a mystery to be lived, not a problem to be solved.*

*John Yates*

This applies to all of life. For our purposes, it applies to our partner. What if we were to see our
spouse not as a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived? How would that change our perspective?

When we are caught in *low mood relating*, we see our spouse or the relationship as a problem to be solved. Paradoxically, we lose all ability to solve a problem. When we look upon something as a problem we move to an analytic mindset.

An analytic mindset is not, in and of itself, a problem. If you are balancing your checkbook, such a mindset is useful. If you are an engineer calculating the weight that can be held by a post, the mindset is critical. But it rarely works when we take our analytic mindset into fixing relationships and dealing with people.

In therapy, I used to see people who seemed to be in good moods, relating to their spouse in positive ways. Then, they would come into my office and begin to tell me what was “wrong” with their relationship. In no time, the mood had changed. Just looking at their problems pulled them down, and away from an awareness of their health.

Does this mean that problems in the relationship must remain unaddressed? Absolutely not. But rather than asking the question, “What’s wrong?”, you may choose to ask the question, “What are our options? What is possible here?”
This question starts with an understanding that “this is where we are, and this is where we want to be.” A couple that understands this position can then ask, “What is possible?” This understanding encompasses difficulties, but it also includes strengths and joys of the relationship. If a person is stuck in the low mood relating, seeing any of the positive may be impossible.
Chapter 14
Living a Relationship
In the Present

Time is an interesting concept. At least it is interesting to us humans. The rest of the biosphere doesn’t seem to give a hoot about time. We humans can find ourselves existing in three different possible times: the past, the present, and the future.

Many relationships get trapped in living in the past. More successful relationships live the present with an eye toward the future. Those who are most successful in their relationships learn to live in the present, leaving the past where it should be . . . in the past.

Don’t think you live in the past? Experience tells me that this is a major barrier to change for a couple. They may not live the majority of their relationship in the past, but they surely move there when it is time to change.

Often, as I work with a couple, we create a possible change plan, and then I ask, “so, will this work?” And one or both often tell me they don’t think
Wayne Dyer uses a powerful metaphor in his writing and his tapes. Dyer asks the question, what pushes the boat forward? It is possible to believe that the wake is pushing the boat, but that is not the case. The wake is in the past. The boat leaves it behind, rather than being propelled by it. It is the motor that pushes the boat forward.

Change is free to happen in the present and into the future. This notion cannot be underestimated. When you find yourself believing nothing can change, at least ask if that feeling is because of a reflection on the past.

I would even caution about living toward the future. One client was telling me how he hoped to spend time with his wife when they were older, but he also worried. His father suffered a debilitating brain condition that almost killed him. Fortunately, surgery was able to return him to normal after several years in a virtual vegetative state.

My client feared that he would be robbed of time by such a problem. I noted his problem of living in the future, not the present. He commented that he thought he was living in the present, since he was concerned that there would be no future. I told him that cramming all the future events into today, in case tomorrow didn’t happen, was living in the future. It is
not possible to live everything in the present from the future. The present simply is.

That doesn’t mean you don’t plan for the future. Lack of planning leaves you vulnerable. You do your planning, and then you live. Let the planning take care of it.

Living in the present is learning to have an appreciation and awareness of what is going on around you. When you are having a conversation, it is truly listening to what the other person is saying. That is different than what we often do, hearing enough to move us to think about our own response. We suddenly leave the present and move into the future—what we are going to say. Or we get caught in the past, considering what we said or what the other person said another time.

Living in the present is cultivating an awareness of the food we are eating, the fun of playing with a child, the feel of the wind on your face. It is an intimate interaction with your surroundings, a connection that moves you out of your head and into your senses.

While doctoral dissertations tend to be pretty dry stuff, a colleague of mine made a quote I remember 10 years later. He states, “We create the past and remember the future.” What a twist on what we expect. Most of us think we remember the past, and that the future is for us to create.
Not according to my colleague, John Gray (not the Mars and Venus one). John believes that we use the present perception to interpret the past events. This creates the past. Then, we use what comes from the past to steer our destiny. Our future is “remembered” as we experience it.

In other words, our perceptions of the past are never accurate. They are our views of the events. These events have been registered through our paradigms, leaving imperfect viewpoints.

Further, our future is affected by that created past. That is when I hear comments from couples that nothing will change, since it never has. The past is inaccurate, and the future can become caught in this inaccurate viewpoint.

The alternative is to live in the present, to stay in the moment. When we feel pulled toward the past, we must remind ourselves that this is an imperfect memory, and not entirely trustworthy.

Pull toward the future is also countered by recognizing that we can be held back by the limitations of our memories and perceptions. The future unfolds when it is allowed to unfold. Otherwise, we find ourselves unfolding our lives in costly and painful ways.
Chapter 15
Sex Is About \textit{WE}

There are two special areas of concern for how the struggle for power (and against \textit{WE}) emerges in a relationship. These two areas are sex and money. No doubt, these two areas encompass a great deal of our attention. They get a great deal of attention from our thought and in their symbolism.

In fact, one theory holds that arguments about money and sex are rarely about money or sex. But arguments in other areas may be arguments about money and sex. Both areas have a great deal of emotional “baggage” attached, as well as the deep symbolism.

In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to money. Here, we will look at sex. In particular, how sex moves us toward or away from \textit{WE}.

Many of the premarital couples with whom I meet are quite open with each other about their sexuality. For some reason, this seems to shift over time. As best as I can tell you, this seems to be the evolution of that shift:
In the early part of the relationship, both are more available about their sexuality, since there is little “baggage” in the relationship. Then, over time, the frequency, timing, and type of sexual relating moves toward a more natural state for the individuals.

Unfortunately, it is impossible for our preferences of frequency, timing and type of relating to be a direct match. There will always be a variance between two people.

At some point, usually late at night, one is interested in making love, and the other is not. Unfortunately, this seems to be the time that many couples talk (argue) about their sexual relating.

One or both are hurt by the exchange, creating a small “nick” in the sexual self-esteem. Now, that sexual self-esteem is held more closely and more personally than many other areas of self-esteem. Over time, these small “nicks” scar over until there is more scar tissue than healthy tissue. Soon, the healthy discussions about the sexuality of the relationship disappear. Silence or arguing is all that remains.

Yet sex is one of the unifying aspects of marriage. It can be a source of intimacy or its demon. There is the ancient Greek myth that originally, people were two headed, four armed, and four legged. But these people kept trying to get to the gods. Over time, the gods tired of this behavior and decided to split the
people in two. The separation left male and female. And in sex, we are trying to unify our lost parts.

You don’t have to have any belief in the Greek pantheon of gods to see the symbolism so powerfully displayed in this story. Part of relating is an attempt to bring wholeness to us. Remember the idea of complementarity, finding wholeness in relationship. Sex is the physical symbolizing of this.

In Christian faith, the idea of “two becoming one flesh” is also symbolized in sexual union. While we might point the finger of blame at the church for many of our hang-ups about sex and our own sexuality, Christian theology leaves us with a powerful image for the potential of sexuality.

**The Reality of Sexual Issues in Marriage**

Many people are amazed to discover that sex is not just a way of “getting off.” It has the potential of being a deeply bonding experience for a *WE*. Because of the sexualized nature of our culture, that part is often missed.

Instead, we create an illusion of the sexual encounter. We are left to fantasize based on magazines, advertising, movies, soap operas, and many other areas. Our encounters rarely live up to those expectations . . . and they shouldn’t have to! Unfortunately, we generally don’t have trainers working to help us create the perfect bodies, directors
to script the perfect scene, and writers to tell us what to do.

Sex is, contrary to the media depiction, imperfect, messy, and way more spiritual than any love scene could portray. In other words, we have missed out on a great deal in sex because we have bought the media package.

But marital sexuality potentially has a greater depth than many couples ever experience—it is just devoid of the “stuff” we have been sold by the media. If you find that your sexual relationship is not what you wish, you may want to make some shifts.

The Energy of Sexuality

Sexuality and sex is a matter of tapping into our sexual energy. Unfortunately, this energy rarely flows as freely as it should. Most people have various blocks to their sexuality. Many of these are a result of earlier life experiences.

Few of us are raised in environments devoid of negative messages about sexuality. In fact, many find their sexual energy curtailed by shame. Many are shamed at early ages about their bodies, causing difficulties in allowing their sexual energy to be later encompassed in their bodies.

Still others have their very sexuality shamed, either by abuse, teasing, or punishment for natural developmental points. When this happens, our sexual
energy is affected in profound ways. It takes an extra effort to recapture and enjoy one’s natural sexuality.

For some of us, the shaming leaves us unable to participate in sexual relating as often as we would like. For others, the shaming has the opposite action. It propels us to sexualize everything in an attempt to overcome the shame.

And by the way, traditional sex therapy may be of little help. The approach in sex therapy is generally to try to “ramp up” the sexuality of the one less interested in sex. Many sex therapists recommend artificial means of creating arousal. They may recommend provocative dress, pornography, losing weight, or other external means.

But that misses the fact that the sexual energy is blocked for a reason. That reason may be left for the individual to determine, but external means do not fix the problem.

A Different Approach

That may lead you to wonder what the answer is. Since sex is both a fuel for WE and a side effect of WE, the first point of exploration is the condition of WE. If the WE is in good shape, it is more likely that there is a “holding place” for the couple’s sexual relating. If there are problems in WE, there are likely to be problems in sexual relating.
So first, intervene in the areas where there are problems with \textit{WE}, and then return to explore the sexual relationship.

If \textit{WE} is in place, consider these points in exploring your sexual relating:

\textbf{1) If you can’t say NO, you can’t say YES.} This is a central point to boundaries, and it is also a central point to sexual relating. Until you can really say “no” to sex and to a request for sex, you cannot fully participate in sex.

\textbf{2) Sex and sexuality grows and deepens in the course of a relationship.} What many couples interpret as a “cooling” of their relationship is really a deepening of their connection. Perhaps the physical intensity has shifted to a lower level, but the psychic connection has likely increased. A couple, over time, learns what works for each other. The excitement of discovery is replaced with the comfort of familiarity, allowing intimacy to deepen.

\textbf{3) “New and different” can be attempts to artificially heighten the excitement.} That moves us in the wrong direction. While it can often be fun to find different ways of relating and responding, there is a danger when this becomes a pursuit in order to recapture something. “New and different” is the icing on the cake, not the
method of treating a less than fulfilling relationship.

4) **Sex is deeper than we make it, and less difficult, all at the same time.** Couples can err on either side. A “quickie” is rarely fully satisfying as the standard. It can be nice as a part of a full sex life. Sex takes time, not just for the act, but also for the connecting necessary for fulfilling sex. At the same time, we often miss opportunities for sexual connecting, concerned that there isn’t enough time. Most studies show that a normal (as opposed to the “gourmet” sex of special occasions) period of making love ranges from 15 minutes to ½ an hour. We often act as if we need all night. If we wait until we have all night, not much will happen in the sexual relationship of a couple.

5) **Generally speaking, there are some gender differences in sex.** For many men, sex is a way of connecting, of building intimacy. For many women, sex is a result of connecting. It is the by-product of intimacy. While this is not absolute, it is a strong enough issue to cause difficulties for many couples. Assume a couple is trying to reconnect after a long day. He may see sex as a way of creating that connection. She may see the need to be connected before relating sexually. A conflict can quickly emerge. Ironically, that conflict is a result of both people
trying to connect. That is the tragedy of this gender difference.

6) Create non-conflict times to discuss your sexual relationship. Since many discussions about sex occur in the midst of conflicts over sex, it is important for couples to explore their sexual relationship when there is not a conflict. This can allow more realistic sharing of feelings and concerns. In fact, such discussions are deeply intimate. They involve sharing parts of ourselves that we normally keep hidden, even from our spouses.

7) Making love is not just about intercourse. While we often lose track of this, intercourse is only one part of sexual relating. Making love can run the gamut from holding hands and kissing to full intercourse. If we limit making love to intercourse, we miss some great times of relating. Cuddling in the morning, or kissing on the couch all can be about making love. The problem is that when we limit sex to intercourse, we are caught in the position to see whether all our connecting leads there. But what if we enlarge the definition? Then we can all find times for those moments of connection. The result is that our sexual energy is released and flowing more than just in the moment of intercourse. The goal is no longer orgasm, but connection—WE!
The danger of sexuality in the marital relationship is erring at either end: making it too important or not important enough. Every couple must struggle with the fact that we are not going to have identical needs or preferences as our spouse. Again, that is the magic of a marital relationship. It pulls us toward balance when we attend to what our spouse adds to the relationship. When we remember the lesson of paradigms, we recognize that our sexuality is not the right one, but merely ours. It is not better than another’s, nor is it necessarily worse.

Our task in marriage is to discover a sexual relationship that is fulfilling to both, and that propels the relationship toward WE. Part of that task teaches us a great deal about ourselves.
Chapter 16
Money, Power & WE

Money is the second area where the power struggles over WE often emerge. Money is a very symbolic object. In fact, it is deeply symbolic in culture. It should be no surprise that this same symbolism emerges in marriage.

The symbolic nature of money has evolved over time. I understand that the priesthood created the first coins. One side of the coin would contain a sacred image. The other would contain an image of the government. Within the same coin was found the sacred and the profane.

Freedom Versus Security

Many couples find one central area of symbolism to capture their money struggles. Money often carries a polarized meaning based on two points: freedom and security.

These polarizations are marked by the following traits:
1) **Freedom**: people who see the freedom side of money want to enjoy their money by doing and having. Having money means being able to do things. It means being able to afford luxuries, buy nice things, take nice trips, have nice meals out.

2) **Security**: people who see the security side of money tend to see money as a way of not worrying. They often plan for the future, putting money away for the kids’ education, retirement, etc.

Neither side is wrong . . . and both can be wrong. Both the security side and the freedom side of money are important in a relationship. It is necessary to be secure in life, but it is just as important to have some freedom to enjoy.

And here is the rub: put any two people together and they will fall at different places on the freedom—security polarity. And at any given minute, their decisions reflect different priorities.

The problem is not that there are differences between the two. The problem is how these differences are treated. It is a strength of a relationship to contain both a freedom person and a security person. They both have something to learn from each other.

I once worked with a couple that had money as one of the central points of disagreement. It seemed
that no matter what else was happening, when all things settled down, their financial relating reemerged.

“Cal” was a salesperson that needed only to work part of the day to fulfill his job responsibilities. “Beth” worked in a professional field, and took great pleasure in being able to handle the demands of her job.

Both made good salaries, but they were always living month-to-month. This in spite of Beth’s careful planning. The problem? Cal was all in favor of the freedom side of money. He loved to go out and pick up a new golf club or a new tie. He loved going out for a “night on the town.” He loved having a good time. And he hated planning for the future. Sure, he wanted to make sure they were secure in the future, but not at the expense of his daily enjoyment.

Beth, on the other hand, felt guilty buying anything for herself. She had a hard time enjoying time out (other than the carefully budgeted vacations that always went over budget). When it came to freedom, she saw the time for freedom sometime down the road (like at retirement).

The two continuously “butted heads” over their finances. Beth wanted Cal to reign in his spending. Cal wanted Beth to ease up and have a good time. They wanted someone to tell them which way to go.

Imagine their surprise when I said that each needed to learn from the other. I asked them to
explore what was attractive about how the other dealt with money. I then noted that those things that were attractive were the areas each needed to learn from the other.

Did they get it right? Not the first time. Cal decided to let Beth do her planning (as she always had) without his complaining. Beth decided to set up a spending account for Cal to manage—his “mad money.” Problem was, Cal always outspent his account and Beth was never able to execute her plans. They thought that they could fool their relationship into thinking they had compromised.

But neither had learned from the other. Sure, they were willing to concede that the other’s perspective had a point. They were unwilling to be affected by this viewpoint.

So we tried again. I suggested to Beth that Cal was the perfect person to teach her how to have a guiltless good time. He could teach her to be more of a “free spirit.” Cal, on the other hand, could stand to learn the importance of thinking now about the future. He could learn the lesson of careful planning.

That idea scared them to death. It was not so much because of seeing the validity of the lesson, but fear that one might make a move, and the other would refuse.
More accurately, Beth feared that she might make a shift, but Cal would only use that shift to spend more freely. And Cal feared he would make a shift, but in the end, that would mean that the fun for both would be compromised. What they realized, in the midst of their fear, was that Cal was having the fun for both of them; and Beth was doing the planning for both of them.

I suggested that each needed to make the learning shift, regardless of what the other did. I even suggested that doing otherwise would replicate how they got to their current position. Remember the metaphor of the boats? Each person began to move backward, away from the middle, in an attempt to maintain balance. But the more one shifted to maintain balance, the more the other side shifted. Soon, they were at polarized points in their dealing with money. Neither was at a healthy point. Both found themselves personally out of balance in an attempt to maintain the balance of the relationship. The task, therefore, was to create balance by moving toward the middle, not in reaction to how the other moved. Instead, it was to be proactive. Balance for the individual and balance for the couple would be the result.

The Role of Money in a Couple’s Life

I’ve asked people to tell me how they deal with money. I’ve gotten many answers, but they seem to fall in a few categories.
1) **Win/Lose.** Some people see discussions of money as either something you win or something you lose. So you negotiate to win. This approach assumes that there is a scarcity of resources, and you must grab all you can. Otherwise, you will lose out. This leads many couples to keep careful track of money coming in and money going out. Contributions allow more power in determining expenses.

2) **Ignore it.** Couples in this category want to pretend that there are no money issues. They move forward not noticing the debt piling up, or seemingly unaware of their financial position.

3) **Minimize the bills, and then pay them.** This is more of a strategy. It is based on the notion that fiscal responsibility is found in minimizing all possible bills, then paying them. Whatever is left over goes elsewhere: savings, spending, or both.

4) **“This is as good as it gets.”** Couples settle on the present as the only position available to them. When they settle here, their hopes stop. This doesn’t mean you make unrealistic goals. It merely points to a self-limiting position. Opportunities are missed when this is the framework.

Which may leave you asking the question: What is the alternative?
The Alternative View

The alternative is for the couple to see the money as a tool of self-evolution. Money gives freedom and security—it is both. But more than that, money allows a couple to follow their passions. It can open opportunities, point out options, and allow the couple to expand their relationship and themselves in amazing ways.

For example, when money is not seen as a limitation, it becomes a tool of choice. One or the other, or both, may decide to expand personal gifts and skills to move their lives in different directions. When money is a limitation, it may be hard to see how less money might be beneficial.

But when a couple sees the options available, money can open doors and allow for future growth. This means that money must be viewed as a tool, not an end. It is the means to an end. That end is personal and couple growth.

This does not mean that you may decide to be irresponsible. Just the opposite. It means you begin to see the true power and worth of money and what it can mean for personal development.

Couples constantly have squabbles over small purchases and minor money disagreements. Rarely do these financial disagreements carry forward very far. Most budgets adjust to those expenses.
Two Keys To A New Perspective

In his great book, William Francis Devine (Women, Men & Money) writes that there are two keys to developing an approach that sees money as the tool for development.

1) **Develop yourself.** Couples with this approach work on developing their skills, their craft, and their intellect. They work on their relationship and how they love each other. This becomes their starting point in what they bring into the relationship. The couple makes a commitment to self- and couple development.

2) **Focus on what you bring to other people.** When this is the focus, there are powerful changes underway. This unleashes the power that is bound up in WIIFM (What’s In It For Me!). This energy is released by asking the question of service: What can I offer my customers? (Define customers in whatever makes sense to you. A customer may be coworkers, colleagues, clients, etc.) When this is the focus, opportunities emerge for offering more and more. Creativity begins to emerge as you seek better and better ways of providing service to customers.

This is a shift away from the scarcity ideas that seem so prevalent in our views of money.
Exercise: Your Money Autobiography

The following exercise is designed for you to begin exploring from where your feelings about money were formed. Answer each question as truthfully as you can. Let the answers sit for a few days, then re-read what you wrote. See what emerges for you. What surprises you? What notions arise in you concerning your financial life? Write your thoughts.


1) What were your family’s financial circumstances when you were born?

2) When did you first learn about money? Was it from your father or your mother? How old were you? What were the circumstances?

3) Did you have an allowance? Did you have to work for it, or was it given to you even if you didn't do chores to earn it? If you have children, does this affect how you handle allowances with them?

4) When was the first time you bought something with money you had saved? Where were you? What did you buy? Was it money you earned or money someone gave you?
5) Do you remember your first paycheck? How did you earn it? How much was in it? What did you do with it?

6) Do you remember ever losing money? When was the earliest time? What happened? Has this happened to your children? How did you handle it?

7) Did you dream of one day having a particular job or career? Have you achieved this? Why or why not? Was the amount of money you could earn a factor in your choice of careers?

8) If your relationship with money were a personal relationship, how would you describe it? Do you fear, love, hate, depend upon, feel possessive of, or feel generous with money? Just write whatever comes to mind in this area.

9) How do you related to people who have more money than you? Less money?

10) Do you recall your mother's or father's relationship with money? If you didn't live with them, then pick people who were your primary caregivers for this question.

11) How did the above people's relationship with money affect you? Did they have expectations of you? What were they? Were there some aspects of money that were not discussed? Even if they were not discussed, you may have known what they were. If you have children, do you have similar expectations of them? Do you treat them the same way you were
treated? If you are married or in a committed relationship, do these expectations affect your partner?

12) Have you accomplished an important task or project involving money? What was it? What did you do that made you successful?

13) Was there a time when you tried but did not accomplish a task or project regarding money? What was it? What did you do that made you unsuccessful?

14) Have you ever given or received gifts of money? If yes, how much? For what reason(s)? How did you feel about this?

15) If you were to characterize your own brand of "money craziness," how would you describe it?

16) Where do you want to see yourself ten years from now regarding money? How much in savings? How much in investments? How much do you see yourself making ten years from now?

17) Regarding money, for what do you want to be known? If people were talking about you and your relationship with money, what would you want them to say?

18) Are you afraid that money is not spiritual enough for you or that your spiritual path isn't compatible with financial success?

19) What do you spend money on?
20) What do you not spend money on?
Chapter 17
Don’t Just Grow; EVOLVE!

Here we are at the end. We have looked at the power of perception and the importance of *WE*. Our observations have focused on specific practices that might offer change to a relationship, examined some important shifts in perception, and explored the areas of growth and development for a relationship.

I want to make a challenge to you. Decide that it is not enough to merely grow. You must go beyond that and *evolve*. This is a powerful idea. Growth is developmental, but evolution is a leap.

When we grow, there is a natural and built-in maturation process. When we evolve, there is an ever-present possibility for exceptional change. Sometimes that change is not even linear. That is the power of a *paradigm* shift.

A relational shift happens the instant the old model no longer works. When that happens, a whole new relationship comes into being. That is evolution.

Think back to evolution in nature. It is a constant testing to see what has the best ability to survive and thrive in a given ecosystem. What once
was the status quo begins to fail. It is not the best suited for survival. Another species emerges with the potential for survival. Later, that species is likely to be replaced. In the end, evolution picks the strongest contender to thrive in that arena.

So evolution is about change that can be stark in contrast. The old relationship may have been good enough, or it may have barely held on. Either way, when you and your spouse evolve, your relationship evolves to a new place, one much better equipped to survive.

In that instant, the new relationship may look nothing like the old. The relationship takes on a whole new set of qualities that allow it to survive better than the old. One day, that model will cease to be the best, and another can take its place.

That is the natural rhythm to survival. We have examined this idea in-depth when we looked at paradigms. Paradigms are always being outgrown. When it finally reaches a critical point, the old paradigm is replaced with a new paradigm. In that instant, the person’s thoughts have evolved.

Relationships are no different than these individual paradigms. What we hold to be the truths of our relationship will one day be less capable of carrying the relationship forward. It faces the choice of evolution or extinction. Growth is too slow to keep up.
But as the relationship evolves, it is constantly looking for better places to which it can move. It is never at risk of being outdated. Instead, it is always looking at the new point of truth. Those who believe there is a right way to be and do will be disappointed by these words.

But the eminent psychiatrist, Carl Jung stated “what is true in the morning is a lie in the afternoon.” He applied this to midlife, but it is true at many other times in life. What we hold to be truth at one point will not be the truth at another point. When we are too closely aligned to one perspective, we lose the ability to change to the new truth.

The Current View of Relationships

We all expect (in spite of evidence to the contrary) that our lives, our finances, and our relationships should follow a certain path—upward toward better.

I say in spite of evidence to the contrary, because we believe it should be a constant process of improvement, and getting better. But life does not
seem to point in this direction. I would encourage you to give up on this model. It mostly leads to disappointment and frustration.

We have bought into the “American dream:” life, liberty and happiness. Just a reminder, we are guaranteed the pursuit of happiness. Sometimes, we must struggle to discover happiness, but it is a task worthy of the effort.

Unfortunately, when relationships are caught in our beliefs that they should follow a constantly improving direction, we are constantly disappointed when this is not the case. Perhaps even more damaging, we are left without the resources for dealing with the fact that this is not the case.

A Paradigm View of Relationships

Instead of relationships following the constant growth model, I propose and believe that relationships follow a paradigmatic process of development. In other words, relationships, when allowed to, EVOLVE!

Remember the model of paradigms: slow, steady development of the paradigm until the evidence erodes away the usefulness of the paradigm. Then, a new paradigm must emerge.

Emerging and evolving can be the same process. When applied to relationships, paradigms can erode and destroy the relationship—it can become extinct!
Or the paradigm may erode, leaving room for an evolutionary leap in the relationship.

The relationship may move along, without much growth. But over time, the relationship begins to push against assumptions. It is like a hermit crab caught in the confines of a shell too small.

Eventually, the crab must leave the safety of the current shell to find a shell bigger, and more capable of holding its body. During that change, the crab is vulnerable. It may perish, or it may find a shell that can hold it until the next growth period.

Relationships often find themselves caught in a cycle of conflict, disagreement, struggle, or painful existence together. At the end of this struggle, the relationship can go in either of two directions. Either the relationship moves to a higher level of evolution, or the persons in the relationship decide to end it.

Over the course of a relationship, this process occurs again and again. In hindsight, some couples
In the moment, however, the couple is most aware of the struggle at hand. And since we have been led to believe that relationships are supposed to follow a steady degree of growth, the points of conflict feel like trouble points.

They are, instead, opportunities for growth. Indeed, they are crises, but crises that open the opportunity for growth. I have been told that in the Chinese language, the word symbol for “crisis” contains the symbols for “danger” and “opportunity” wed together.

Each crisis point marks the place where an old paradigm is failing, and where a new paradigm is needed. It is not the failure of the relationship, merely the failure of the current paradigm.

When the failure occurs, it is time to create a new paradigm—and not return to an old paradigm! Wanting to get back to the “way things were” may be a natural feeling, but it is not helpful. The old paradigm has no chance of fitting.
The new paradigm may allow for more of each person in the couple to emerge. More of the individuality of each must be included in each succeeding paradigm, encompassing more and more of the whole of each.

We finally arrive at a place where we are allowed to be who we are. We become who we are in the context of a relationship that includes where the WE is!
Epilogue
Where Do I Go From Here?

It is my sincere hope that this e-book has led to some shifts in your understandings about your relationship. I don’t expect for your relationship to be resolved in the moments it took to read the material. Some of the reading will need to be digested. It will emerge over time. Some will take an effort on your part to change your habits.

Many will want some additional help in resolving the places that keep your relationship from being all it could be and all that you might want. I offer several additional resources below. You will find ways of contacting me for additional help, and also some reading recommendations I find useful.

Relationship Coaching

This e-book has shown you a great deal about my approach to helping couples. Some people find themselves needing to have more direct assistance. I provide coaching to a limited number of couples over the telephone. These sessions can be held from anywhere, since they are by phone. If both people want to be a part of the meetings, you simply use your
extensions, or a conference call if one or the other is away. Billing is based on hourly charges, with minimum amounts.

The system is basically a “retainer” system. You can buy an amount of time, and use it as needed and scheduled.

As a buyer of this ebook, you are entitled to a substantial savings over my normal coaching fees. In fact, I am offering the basic level at almost ½ of my normal fees.

If you are currently connected to the internet, you may find the rates for relationship coaching on a special link by CLICKING HERE.

To schedule sessions, please check the web link above or contact me 502-412-8863, or email me at mailto:Lee@SaveTheMarriage.com.

**Save the Marriage Teleclasses**

We also periodically hold teleclasses on the ideas presented here. Teleclasses are really seminars that are held on the phone. You dial into a “telebridge,” and join the group. Since these are only periodically scheduled, if you are interested and are currently connected to the internet, CLICK HERE for a current schedule.
Books and Resources

There are a number of excellent resources available for further exploration of yourself and your marriage. The resources noted below are hyperlinked for your convenience. If you are connected to the internet, click onto those items that interest you. You will be taken to webpages that offer these items. Books are offered through Amazon.com.

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

This book by John Gottman is based on his research into what causes the failure of relationships. Gottman runs a research program in California that has been videotaping and studying couples for decades. His principles have the backing of research, unlike much of the theory bases of therapy.
**NOTES:**

**Women, Men & Money : The Four Keys for Using Money to Nourish Your Relationship, Bankbook & Soul**

This excellent book was the basis for my understanding of money, as presented in this book. It provides a new paradigm for dealing with money, providing elaboration on the chapter in this ebook. It is currently out of print, but there are often used copies available through Amazon.com.

**Discovering Sexuality That Will Satisfy You Both**

Another excellent book that provides an alternative view for your relationship. This is not a “how to have wild sex” book. Instead, it is a book that places the sexual relationship solidly into the arena of WE. The author does not use that term, but that is what she describes. Also
included in the book is a good understanding of the
destructive nature of sexual addictions in relationship.

You can find more resources on the Resource Page of
the website. If you are currently connected to the internet,
just CLICK HERE.