

# FRIENDS, PARTNERS, AND LOVERS

WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE  
YOUR MARRIAGE WORK

KEVIN A. THOMPSON



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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In memory of Coy and Ella Vest,  
whose seventy years of loving one another  
was a form of loving me.

To Jenny.  
This book is a feeble attempt  
to help others experience  
what you have given me.

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## Acknowledgments

I never set out to be a writer about relationships. A few years ago, I began [www.kevinathompson.com](http://www.kevinathompson.com) with the intention of writing about leadership and current events. A few months in, I wrote an article about marriage, and the response was immediate. While other articles received attention, the topic of marriage found an audience. What began as happenstance became a weekly habit of writing about marriage. Much of this book is an overflow of that. The ideas found here were formed and tested on my website. As readers responded, questioned, and told me their stories, I became convinced of the need for this book. Without those readers and their willingness to share, like, interact, question, and encourage, this book would have never been. Thank you.

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# 1

## The Number One Cause of Divorce

Eugene and JoAnn were the oldest members of our church. They had been married for seventy years and were inseparable. Having never had children, they treated me like one of their own. As Eugene's health began to fade, our visits became more special. One day they dropped by my office to give me some banana bread they had made. Knowing our times together were limited, I dropped what I was doing and engaged them in conversation.

After a half hour, Eugene turned to JoAnn and said, "Well, are you going to give him the bread?" She looked confused and said, "Me? You brought the bread." After a terse back-and-forth, they realized they had left the bread on the kitchen counter. Being in better health, JoAnn drove back to their house to get it.

As she made the drive back, Eugene and I spoke with several co-workers who dropped by to see him. One asked, "Mr. Eugene, what's the key to being married seventy years?" Without hesitation, he said, "Tell her every day that you love her."

Minutes later JoAnn returned with the loaf of bread and a hint of frustration. Trying to mend fences between them, I asked, "JoAnn,



what’s the key to being married seventy years?” She quickly responded, “Tell him every day that you love him.” Those in the office were awed by how swiftly they had given the same answer. They had what we all desired—a lifetime love proven over seven decades of dedication and commitment.

A few months later, Eugene was near death. One day I dropped by the hospital and JoAnn took that opportunity to run home and check on their dogs. With it being just the two of us, I was able to ask Eugene some serious questions about love and life. I recounted the story from my office and asked, “Tell her every day you love her—is that really the key to marriage?” He paused and then said, “Yep, that’s the key—memorize her answers.”

If only marriage was like a third grade spelling test—we could memorize our spouse’s answers and be assured of a perfect life. But marriage isn’t that easy. Eugene knew the truth, which allowed him to joke as though success in marriage was some trite act of memorization. Seventy years had taught him otherwise. He knew that marriage was far more complicated than a simple answer.

But he also knew that a successful marriage doesn’t happen on a whim. It isn’t a fortunate twist of fate. While marriage can’t be drilled down to a simple formula, it does have a basic design. When we comprehend its structure, a happy marriage is far more likely.

Eugene and JoAnn symbolized what marriage could be. When we consider an elderly couple celebrating seventy years together, holding hands on the nursing home porch, many things come to mind. But one thing is never felt—pity. No one feels sorry for the couple who experienced only one love. Instead, we feel envy. We want what they have. As a pastor, I’m honored to know many couples whose love has lasted through every stage of life. But sadly, I regularly see the other side of marriage. I interact with people in broken marriages on a weekly basis. On most occasions, by the time those couples call me, the marriage is over. There is always a reason:

“He loved his work more than me.”

“She just never let me in.”

“The other relationship started innocently.”

“He is so stingy with money.”

“She was so ungrateful.”

The list is endless. Nearly every person comes into my office with a reason why their relationship ended. Much of the time they blame the other party. Sometimes they are right; often they are wrong. On occasion, they take personal responsibility for what has happened.

But rarely does a person properly diagnose the true reason for why the relationship didn't make it.

I'm convinced the number one cause of divorce is not adultery, financial problems, or irreconcilable differences. Those issues are real, and they might be the most pressing issues the couple feels as the relationship heads in a negative direction, but they are not the root cause.

The number one cause of divorce is a lack of intentional investment in the marriage. Far more marriages die of apathy than adultery. They end more from a failure of intention than a failure of finances. In nearly every instance in which a marriage ends, a couple or individual has failed to do the work necessary to make the marriage succeed. Rarely will they see their failure. They are far more likely to blame a reason other than the real source of the problem.

Why do so many marriages end because of a lack of intention? I believe it is due to one of these three reasons:

1. Some are lazy and don't want to do the work.
2. Some believe marriage is magic, so they shouldn't have to do the work.

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*Far more marriages  
die of apathy  
than adultery.*

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3. Some are deceived into thinking marriage is a flip of a coin, so there is no use doing the work.

All three are dangerous mistakes.

### **Laziness Born of Fear**

Some spouses refuse to make any serious effort at marriage. It's frustrating and confusing. Whenever a person says "I do," they are also saying "I will," but sadly, too many people say "I won't." They refuse to learn, grow, or understand. They demand much from their spouse but give nothing in return. They either know nothing of what it takes to make marriage flourish or simply refuse to do anything necessary for success.

While these characteristics likely reveal themselves during the dating process, the behaviors are often overlooked or justified. Although there are times when both spouses are lazy and refuse to make a marriage thrive, more often one spouse is willing while the other is not. There are few things more tragic than when one spouse desperately desires a marriage to succeed and the other is unwilling to make any effort. Maybe the couple got married without understanding what is necessary, and once they were married they regretted it. But more often, a person gets married and then gets scared. Laziness is often born of fear.

Afraid of what marriage demands of them, fearing they may not have what it takes, unwilling to admit weakness or failure, some spouses shut down. They feign apathy in hopes of masking their fear. And it works. Their spouse never sees their fear but quickly sees their apathy.

Marriage demands courage. It requires strength when we have none to give. It calls for transparency when we want to be secretive. We have to run toward problems when we want to run away. We have to admit fault when we want to deny. We have to recognize ignorance and do something about it. Where inaction feels easier in

the moment, success in marriage requires us to regularly refuse immediate gratification in order to choose the hard road of discovery and growth. And some people refuse the road. Unfortunately, there is nothing a spouse can do if their husband or wife chooses the lazy way. As a husband, I can do many things, but one thing I cannot do is force my wife to care. Similarly, my wife cannot change my will.

But I can do that. It's an empowering feeling to understand the amount of control I have over myself. While I can't dictate my marriage, I can greatly influence it by controlling what I control—myself. As I work with intention on myself, the marriage is changed.

### **I Love You, but You Are Not My Soul Mate**

The good news is that the lazy are not the norm. Far more often, couples do not put in the work because of one of two misconceptions. The first is that marriage doesn't require work because our spouse is perfect for us, and the second is that marriage is just based on luck. We long for the idea of a soul mate. We think every Adam has an Eve, every Romeo needs a Juliet, and every Kate Middleton has her Prince William. A good number of people believe that there is one perfect person who was created for them and that the great challenge of life is to find him or her. Until they do, they will have a second-rate life, but when they find that person, everything will be perfect.

This is the story most often told in Hollywood. It's romantic to watch two people struggle to find each other or to realize that they were meant to be together. And when they are, the music plays and the movie ends. Yet what we never see is that a few years after the storybook wedding, the perfect movie couple is struggling to make marriage work in the same way that every other couple struggles. Romantic comedies hit on a serious truth—we all want to experience meaningful love. However, they present that love in a false form—just find the right person and all will be well.

If soul mates existed, I would believe that Jenny is mine. I can't imagine someone better for me. Yet if Jenny and I weren't married, we would probably both be married to someone else. Jenny could have a happy, satisfying, and meaningful life with one of many different men. She has simply chosen me. She loves me, but I'm not her soul mate.

The idea of a soul mate comes from Greek mythology. Legend holds that the Greek god Zeus looked down on four-armed and four-legged humanity with fear. He was afraid we could become too powerful and might overtake him. In an effort to weaken us, he cut us in half so that we would spend our days searching for our twin soul—our soul mate, or our other half. It is from Greek mythology that some believe there is only one person created exactly for you. If the idea of a soul mate is true, then so are these:

Marriage should be easy. If someone was created just for me, we should fit together like a perfect glove. Every one of my weaknesses should be compensated by her strength, and each of my strengths should compensate for her weaknesses.

Not only would it be possible to marry the wrong person, but it would actually be likely. If there is just one person I can marry, the chances of me finding that person—especially on the first try—is slim. If I marry the wrong person, either I'm destined to failure or I need to divorce.

If I'm single, my life is not complete. If I'm looking for my other half, then I'm just half a person until I find them. In this line of thought, the single life is a second-class one that should be pitied.

However, all of these are lies. They interject stress into dating relationships, weaken marriages, and create discontent in anyone who believes them. The truth is that we have the choice to marry or not to marry. Either way, our lives are meaningful

and complete. Chances are that our life satisfaction will be the same once we are married as it would be if we didn't marry at all. Marriage doesn't make life satisfying as much as it reveals how we already feel.

Knowing our spouse isn't our soul mate allows us to expect problems. We aren't surprised by frustrations. We understand differences. When we fight, it doesn't cause us to wonder if we married the wrong person. We know it is just part of marriage. The great challenge of relationships is not to find the one person created specifically for you. It is to pick someone and work at the relationship to such an extent that eventually you feel as though there could never be anyone else for you.

My wife is not my soul mate. She does not complete me. As romantic as it sounds to say she was created for me, it is far more truthful to say she chose me. If soul mate mythology were true, love would not be a choice but an uncontrollable urge. But the truth is much more beautiful. My wife wasn't forced to love me; she has chosen to love me. She wasn't created for me; she has given herself to me. The idea of a soul mate might look more appealing on a card; it might feel more romantic in a movie.

But in truth, it is only a mirage of something far better—a truly committed relationship based on the individual choice of love.

Which is better, a love of choice or a love of force? I'm grateful my wife is not my soul mate. It reaffirms her true love for me. She was not forced to love me, but she has freely chosen to do so. Those who believe in a soul mate are tempted not to work at marriage, believing they don't have to because their spouse is made for them.

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*The great challenge of relationships is not to find the one person created specifically for you. It is to pick someone and work at the relationship to such an extent that eventually you feel as though there could never be anyone else for you.*

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## Marriage Is Not a Flip of a Coin

I hear it all the time: “Marriage is just a flip of a coin.” Based on this “fact,” an online writer made the case that being a swinger is an acceptable lifestyle and one that should not only be accepted but actually encouraged. It’s depicted in television shows. I’m sure the writers think they are dictating absolute truth. Look around. Failure in marriage is everywhere, so anyone who has a good marriage just got lucky.

There is no doubt that a good marriage feels like luck. Jenny and I regularly discuss how lucky we feel. I see friends, talk with readers, and sit with those whose marriages are failing, and often-times it seems as though some people are just unlucky.

Not long ago, I received a phone call from a man who said the magic was gone from his marriage. He thought he had made a mistake. He didn’t “feel it” anymore and thought he never could. “I guess I flipped the coin and lost,” he said.

A girl does everything right, but a few years into marriage the guy cheats and the relationship ends. A guy lives radically differently from his friends and finds a great mate, but she refuses to grow up and the marriage dies. A young couple is the epitome of how a young couple should be, but within a decade they are not together anymore.

A good marriage can feel like luck because there are many people who have experienced the sting of divorce yet haven’t done anything more wrong than the rest of us. They weren’t perfect, but their mistakes should not have ended in a divorce. Still, their marriages dissolved and they are feeling the weight of trying to put their lives back together. Individuals can have bad fortune. They can be perfectly willing to do whatever is necessary to make a marriage work, but their spouse is not. Where one is unwilling, both suffer. To them, it feels like a flip of a coin.

Yet marriage isn’t a flip of a coin; it’s a flip of the will. Unless two people are willing to submit their individual wills to that which

is best for the couple, a marriage will likely fail. While marriage might seem like a great mystery that is highly unpredictable, it is actually fairly simple to predict if a marriage will last. When a couple believes that marriage is a coin toss, they are tempted not to make any effort. Why put effort into something that may not work? Why not just keep flipping the coin until it comes up a winner?

### **Work Matters**

The work of marriage matters in many areas, but it is most notable in our emotions. Couples rarely understand the extent to which they control their feelings toward their spouse. By intentionally investing in our marriage, our affection for our spouse will grow.

It's a reciprocal relationship with powerful implications:

We invest toward our affections.

Our affections go toward our investments.

Consider where you put your money. Few things reveal our heart as much as money. We give to those things that are important to us. There is likely a specific reason why you give to one charity and I give to another. Both likely do great work, but you are passionate about one. Why? Chances are you had some personal experience that gave rise to your passion. A mother had cancer so you give to fight breast cancer, or a child got sick so you give to St. Jude. I have a daughter with Down syndrome, so I often give money and time toward Special Olympics. Our resources can reveal our hearts.

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*Marriage isn't a  
flip of a coin; it's  
a flip of the will.*

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Yet the reverse is also true. If you picked a stock out of the blue and invested \$10,000 toward it, several things would happen. You would find yourself watching the stock price. Anytime a news story on that stock sector made headlines, your attention would



be drawn to it. You might even begin to research more about what that company does and what the future looks like for it. Your investment would influence your affection.

Healthy couples leverage this reciprocal relationship to the benefit of their marriage. First, they love one another, so they naturally invest in each other. They spend time together. They study one another. They notice what is taking place in their spouse's life. They invest because of their affections. They also invest in order to change their affections. They don't just wait until they feel something to do something. They form the discipline of doing things so they will feel. As they invest in their spouse (even when they don't feel like it), that investment influences their affections.

The most common statement I hear from couples who are divorcing is "I just don't love him/her anymore." Many couples even rewrite history to say they have never loved one another. What they fail to understand is that they have the choice of whom they love. They control their feelings. What most often happens when love is lost is that a couple lives in an apathetic season in their relationship. They stop intentionally investing in one another and the marriage, and over time the feelings of love wane. This pattern often happens when the chaos of parenting tempts a couple away from working on their marriage.

Brandon and Lana met in college. She caught his eye the first time he saw her. She was slower to warm up to him. Eventually he wore her down and she agreed to a date. One date led to another, and within a year they were engaged. Both partners were career driven, but family was of utmost importance. Three kids were born within their first eight years of marriage. Life for Brandon and Lana was chaotic but fun. As the kids got older, the family's schedule was demanding. They juggled two work schedules, multiple sports schedules each season, and the desire to travel on the rare weekends they were free.

No matter the day, there was always something on the schedule. Neither spouse noticed their feelings for the other fading. By

the time Lana recognized it, she thought it was just the normal ebb and flow of married life. She wouldn't have done anything about it had she not met Mark. He was a colleague at work. Their families interacted on occasion. Lana knew Mark's wife, but they weren't close.

It began with simple conversation. He was thoughtful. He remembered small details and asked about them. Whereas Brandon would have to be reminded of the most obvious aspects of Lana's life, Mark noticed when she got a haircut or had new shoes or was worried about her mother's diagnosis.

Nothing had happened between the two, but Lana was in my office because she could see the direction the relationship was headed. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Brandon or her kids or Mark's family, but she loved Mark. While she said she still loved Brandon, it was a cognitive love. She felt nothing for him. Now she was asking what she should do.

It wouldn't be easy, but the solution was simple. Lana needed to cut all communication with Mark and reinvest in her relationship with Brandon. It would take some time, but if she would intentionally reconnect with Brandon, all those old feelings would come flooding back. As a matter of fact, she could have many more feelings for Brandon than anyone else because he was a good dad to her kids, they had a long history together, and they knew each other unlike anyone else. Lana's feelings for Brandon were dead, but they could be resurrected. It was in her best interest (and everyone else's) to bring those feelings back rather than end two marriages and try a new relationship with Mark.

One of the greatest failings we will face as couples is not being aware of how much control we have over our emotions. Too often we see love as a force that overpowers us rather than a choice we make. We choose whom we love. Most often that choice is determined by our investment.

Consider any relationship. Two people find each other interesting. Clearly it doesn't begin as love. Maybe it's lust or infatuation

or just interest, but it's not love. Yet they begin to spend time together. They go on dates, have conversations, and get to know each other. Over time, love grows, but it only grows because they have invested in each other. Without the dates, phone calls, and interactions, they would not have fallen in love.

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*Apathy will slowly erode a marriage, but intention will cause it to continually grow.*

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In the same way we fall in love, we stay in love. We invest in each other, which causes our affections to grow. If your marriage requires anything, it requires intention. To the extent that both spouses are intentional about keeping the marriage healthy, it will thrive. Apathy will slowly erode a marriage, but intention will cause it to continually grow.

### **Work *In* and *On***

When it comes to marriage, we work in two specific ways—both *in* and *on*. In his book *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do about It*,<sup>1</sup> Michael Gerber makes a distinction between working *in* your business and working *on* it. His point is that for a business to grow, a leader must spend some time thinking about the big picture of how the company is operating. Too often a small business owner is so busy with the day-to-day operation of the business that they cannot do the necessary work to help it grow.

The same is true for marriage. For marriage to succeed, each spouse must be working *in* it. Money has to be made. Kids have to be raised. Bills have to be paid.

The to-do list of my average day—between work, marriage, parenting, civic duty, personal goals and aspirations, and a laundry

1. Michael Gerber, *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do about It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

list of other categories—can be overwhelming. It takes work, and oftentimes a lot of it, just to keep the household up and running. Yet it is still easy to feel like a continual failure. I've got to skip one meeting for another. I returned three phone calls but never got to the fourth. I helped my wife with a couple of things, but she could really use my help with another. Do I take a few moments to study with my children, or do they deserve some playtime? We don't have time for both.

It takes a lot of work *in* marriage just to get through a day. And many couples fail at this. Laziness destroys a marriage. Often a couple may remain together because the lazy spouse could never make it on their own and the working spouse is too busy to end the relationship. Yet a marriage with a lazy spouse is never healthy. (Note: Do not confuse “working” with “having a job.” By “working” I mean someone expending mental, physical, and emotional energy to keep the family running. A lot of people have jobs but aren't working in their marriage.) Marriage takes so much effort from a day-to-day perspective that it is easy for a couple never to take time to consider the big picture. They get so busy that they cannot see past today in order to determine if they like the direction their marriage is headed. This is a recipe for disaster. A couple must take time to work *on* their marriage.

Finding the time can feel impossible. As parents are raising children, the idea of adding one more responsibility is overwhelming. Yet if a couple will intentionally set aside specific times to work *on* their marriage, they will be better able to work *in* their marriage.

Working *on* one's marriage does several things:

It re-creates a sense of partnership and togetherness.

It makes each spouse feel heard and respected.

It allows a couple to renegotiate responsibilities and expectations.

It provides a break from day-to-day demands.

It gives perspective and time to consider new possibilities.

It reminds the couple the world continues to go on even when they take time off.

It creates opportunities for growth and encouragement.

It reveals strengths to appreciate and weaknesses to improve within the relationship.

Working *on* the relationship is an important part of having a healthy marriage. Without intentional time to reflect, discuss, and plan how they will work *in* a marriage, a couple is left hoping things work out in a positive way rather than determining how they will make things work. There are several ways to work *on* a marriage, but there is one common key—intentional communication. This is what prevents most people from ever looking at the big picture. It is always easier in the moment to avoid intentional communication about the marriage and to simply run the kids to the next soccer game or discuss what you should eat for dinner.

It is far more difficult—and risky—to ask questions like these:

Are you happy in this relationship?

What am I not doing for you that you need me to do?

How am I making you feel used rather than valued?

Is the housework properly divided, in your opinion?

Do you feel your heart coming more alive or dying?

There is a host of other questions that can and should be discussed. Discussions like these do not have to happen every day or every month, but there should be some time in which an open dialogue can take place and each spouse has the ability to safely communicate how they feel. Working *in* a marriage is necessary, but working *on* the marriage is just as important.

Divorces seem to happen for a variety of reasons, but no matter the presenting symptom, nearly every failed marriage has died because one or both spouses have neglected to intentionally invest in it. Thankfully, the number one cause of divorce is completely

avoidable. We can become aware of the danger and intentionally choose a different way. Intentional investment can become the number one cause of a successful marriage.

## BE INTENTIONAL

1. Which is the greatest temptation you face regarding apathy in marriage—you don't want to work, you don't think you need to work, or you don't think your marriage is worth the effort?
2. When can you set aside time to work *on* your marriage?
3. How would you and your spouse answer the five difficult questions above?