

Sacred Privilege

THE LIFE AND MINISTRY
OF A PASTOR'S WIFE

KAY WARREN



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Kay Warren, *Sacred Privilege*
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To four pastors' wives whose lives inspire me . . .

Amy Warren Hilliker,
Bobbie Lawson Lewis,
Dorothy Armstrong Warren,
and Chaundel Warren Holladay



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A PERSONAL TRIBUTE FROM RICK WARREN

Before you read this book, I want you to know
that none of my life's contributions would have happened
without Kay's enormous influence on me,

her *belief* in me,
her *prayers* for me,
her *grace* toward me,
her *advice* to me,
her *support* of me,
and her *partnership* with me.

Without Kay, there would have never
been a Saddleback Church,
there would be no Purpose Driven Life,
no Global PEACE Plan,

A PERSONAL TRIBUTE FROM RICK WARREN

no Daily Hope Broadcast,
no Celebrate Recovery movement,
no Daniel Plan or Orphan Care Initiative,
no HIV&AIDS or All-Africa Initiatives,
no Purpose Driven Fellowship of Churches,
or any of the other ministries and tools
that Saddleback Church has brought to the world.

I've never known anyone more *committed*
to *courageously* facing personal faults and fears,
more determined to grow in *Christ* regardless of the cost,
and more *devoted* to treating everyone with dignity
than my wife.

She has made me a better man, husband, pastor, and leader.

And she is *amazing*.

"[Pastors], love your wives just as Christ loved the church."

Ephesians 5:25 (GNT)

PREFACE

When I began sharing this material with pastors' wives almost thirty years ago, I was young in ministry with plenty of questions and not a lot of answers. I titled my message "The Changing Role of the Pastor's Wife." As Saddleback grew and our ministry expanded, I changed it to "Growing with Your Church." Then life and ministry got pretty intense, which was reflected in the next title: "How to Keep the Ministry from Killing You!" Now at this point—after decades of serving God in ministry—I've realized it's best titled "Sacred Privilege: Your Life and Ministry as a Pastor's Wife."

If you and I could sit down and have a cup of tea together and you felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable, I wonder what you would tell me about being married to a pastor and your life in ministry. I wonder how you would title your own talk or book.

Many of you knew before you married that your husband was headed for the pastorate, but some of you did not see it coming! Your hubby was actively working in another career when

God called your family to radically shift direction and enter the ministry. Some of you are married to the senior or lead pastor, and some of you are married to a pastor in a staff position. Some of you are total newbies. You're recent church planters on your own, or you're helping to launch a video campus in a location separate from the "mother ship," or maybe you didn't grow up in a Christian home and absolutely everything about a life in ministry is still a mystery. Some of you are seasoned veterans. You've been at this for decades and might even be approaching retirement. You know ministry like the back of your hand. Others of you are smack dab in the middle; you're not newbies, but you're not near the finish line either. You've got a few years of experience under your belt—enough to have a pretty good feel for what life as a pastor's wife is going to be like for you.

Recently, I took a nonscientific survey of more than three thousand pastors' wives who follow me or Rick on social media and heard four distinct responses to questions about life in ministry. There is a group of you that is genuinely excited. You consider ministry a privilege and an honor, and you love your life as a woman married to a pastor. Yes, there are some real ups and downs, but there are more positives than negatives to living a life of full-time ministry, and overall, you'd choose it again.

Then there is a second group of you that is not quite as excited as the first group. The stresses and difficulties have made ministry challenging beyond what you were expecting, and honestly, the jury is out. You could go either way. If you stay in ministry, you know you'll survive, but if your husband decides to pursue another profession, you might be relieved.

Then there is a third smaller group. You have been broken by a life in full-time ministry. Your dreams are shattered; your

patience with criticism, change, and financial struggle is long exhausted. Your family has taken “one for the team” one too many times. You constantly have to fight against bitterness and disillusionment taking over. When you look ahead to more years of living this way, you get a desperate sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. Frankly, you are done.

There is yet another group of you that is deeply frustrated by the state of the Western church—angered by its silence or stance on injustice, racial reconciliation, poverty, sexuality, the environment, and any number of other social concerns—and you find yourself either emotionally or physically distancing yourself from church as you’ve known it.

I found myself nodding my head in understanding and empathy as I read the comments from thousands of my fellow pastors’ wives. So much of what they said rang true in my heart. I could identify with the range of emotions and reactions. Their stories made sense to me; I’ve lived many of them myself. That’s because ministry is the only life I know. No matter which way I turn, I am surrounded by the ministry. I’m a pastor’s daughter and a pastor’s wife. My daughter is married to a pastor. My sister-in-law is married to a pastor. My nephew is a pastor. My niece is married to a pastor. Three of my grandchildren are growing up in a pastor’s home. My son is the president of a ministry that serves pastors. Starting with my birth and continuing for six decades, ministry has defined my existence. That means I am intimately acquainted with the world of the local church and the people who populate it—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I’ve known some of the truly great Christians in ministry—simple men and women who bravely, repeatedly, and sacrificially serve Jesus with every fiber of their being. I’ve

witnessed the scandals and exposés of those in highly visible ministries as well as the mistakes and sins that never reached the public eye. I think I’ve seen it all in more than forty years in ministry, and I still say it’s been a sacred privilege to give my life in full-time ministry.

As you read, you need to know my bias. I love the church of Jesus Christ—I mean I *really* love the beauty, the promise, and the potential of the church. To be honest, my love and respect for the church have waxed and waned over the years. At different moments, I’ve been disgusted with the church and some of its scandals; hated the injustices and prejudices; been embarrassed by the failures of highly visible leaders; and been completely frustrated by tunnel vision, small thinking, and petty arguments over what color to paint the church kitchen while the world around us goes to hell in a handbasket. At the end of the day, though, I have learned to genuinely admire God’s brilliance in creating an entity called “the church”—the *only place on earth* where eternal souls are meant to find salvation and safe harbor; sacrificial servanthood is routinely practiced; cultural, racial, economic, gender, and ethnic differences are abolished; and true oneness and unity can occur.

My goal is not to write the quintessential book for pastors’ wives—the one and only book you’ll ever need as you navigate the tumultuous, often murky waters of ministry. This is not a one-size-fits-all book of advice because I don’t pretend to speak for every pastor’s wife! Pastors’ spouses come in every variety, size, and shape imaginable—some are men! Over the decades of my ministry, the role of women married to pastors, as well as of women in general, has radically evolved. From behind-the-scenes, mostly-in-the-home pastors’ wives of my

mother's generation to women copastoring or serving as the senior pastor—as well as everything in between—the role of the pastor's wife has not remained static.

That means every generation has to adapt to a changing culture and contextualize ministry—and that includes books about serving in ministry. Some of the pastors' wives' books that informed and inspired me forty years ago are ridiculously out of date. No young pastor's wife today could read them without laughing at instructions to keep cans of tuna on hand for a quick tuna noodle casserole when church members drop by unexpectedly at dinnertime. Or advice about the amount of makeup to wear or the admonition to wear simple jewelry and dark colors.

Though times and our culture change, I do believe there are some timeless lessons to offer—lessons I learned first as a pastor's daughter, then as a youth pastor's wife, a church planter's wife, and eventually a lead pastor's wife. I want to pass on the hard-won truths, the foundational principles, the anchors for your soul, the survival techniques, the never-forget certainties that will keep you steady and stable, even joyful, on the journey. Maybe I can save you from a few mistakes, point you in a healthy direction, give you comfort and solace when the bottom falls out, and help you make the most of the time God has allotted to you. My experiences will resonate with some of you—“Yes, that's the way it is for me!”—but some of you may say, “That doesn't fit my situation at all.” That's okay.

One last thought as you start to read. This is not a book from a perfect woman telling you about her perfect life. I intend to be *really* honest—sometimes uncomfortably so. My biggest complaint about books written for pastors or pastors' wives is

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that they're not honest enough about how hard a life in ministry can be; the challenges our marriages and families face; or the internal struggles, wrestling, anxieties, and doubts that can occur. I will be as direct, raw, and transparent as I can without crossing into inappropriate sharing. You might disagree with what I consider appropriate sharing. I certainly don't want to dishonor my parents, my husband, my kids, or my church by what I share. Please know that my intent is to reflect the range of emotions and reactions I have experienced. You might be experiencing some of the same emotions, and I hope to create an atmosphere of acceptance and safety for you as you read. I want you to know you're not alone. Most of all, I'm praying you'll find a few timeless nuggets of encouragement and hope that strengthen you as you serve Jesus and his church and that you will see yourself as a person who has been given a sacred privilege.



The Story of a Church Girl

I'm a church girl. I've always been a church girl.

I have the faded nursery enrollment certificate from my dad's church given to me when I was one week old to prove it. Most of my earliest memories are tied to the people and the small churches my dad pastored in San Diego, California. I've proudly marched into the sanctuary carrying the Christian flag to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers" during many a Vacation Bible School. I've fallen asleep on a hard, wooden pew while my father or a visiting evangelist preached his heart out every night at a two-week revival. I learned the books of the Bible when I was eight and could find Obadiah faster than any of my friends. I studied and memorized dozens of verses to become a "queen" in Girls Auxiliary (Southern Baptist's version of Girl Scouts). I became the church pianist at twelve. I've been to hundreds of potlucks and Wednesday night suppers where I've eaten mountains of cold

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fried chicken, inhaled bowl after bowl of homemade ice cream on hot summer nights at after-church fellowships, and drank more red Kool-Aid than is good for any human being.

I remember feeling the pressure to be the perfect pastor's kid who knew all the right answers to Bible trivia questions. I recall the heavy pressure to be a model for other people and especially the pressure not to embarrass or cause shame to my parents by exposing our family flaws. I also remember being confused by the people who told me I *had* to do something because I was the pastor's daughter and those who told me I *couldn't* do something because I was the pastor's daughter. It often seemed as if I couldn't win.

Many of my experiences are probably common to others who grew up in a pastor's home, but a few incidents weren't related to my dad's job per se, and they marked me in ways that have taken me years to overcome.

I can't remember a time when I didn't feel like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. From a very young age I was a serious, sensitive child who felt things deeper and differently than my peers. In my teen years, it seemed as if there was a "switch" inside of me, and my mood could flip from happy to sad in an instant, often over very trivial things. Even after I got married, there would be periods of time that we called my "existential angst"—days when nothing mattered, everything looked bleak, and my energy level was extremely low. It always passed, and within a short time, I was back to feeling like myself. Now I recognize the signs of low level depression, but that was not a word in my vocabulary at the time, and even if someone had suggested it, I would have dismissed it as nonsense. I was a Christian! Christians didn't get depressed.

I was molested by the son of the church janitor when I was four or five. I remember not telling my parents because it was “bad” and because as a young child I didn’t have the language to express what had happened. This became my first secret.

Another confusing family secret was my dad had been divorced before he met my mother and I had a half-sister. His previous marriage and the existence of another child were forbidden topics—off-limits for discussion in our family and certainly not shared with other church members. Because I knew that I needed to help protect my dad from people who wouldn’t understand his reasons for getting divorced, I carefully monitored my words and what I revealed about our family to others.

As a teenager, I felt very bold and adventurous one night at a neighbor’s house where I was babysitting. I noticed a bottle of wine in their refrigerator and convinced myself that one sip wasn’t going to hurt anybody—it wasn’t going to send me to hell. With shaking hands and a racing heart, I took a sip. Instantly, I was convinced I was the worst sinner on the planet. I spat it out as fast as I could, washing my mouth out over and over again, terrified that my parents would be able to smell it on me after my one tiny sip. For those of you raised with a more tolerant view of Christians and alcohol (drinking but not drunkenness), this must seem like utter stupidity and silliness, but for me and my very sheltered upbringing, this qualified as downright rebellion! The pastor’s daughter had another embarrassing secret.

If the one sip of wine left me feeling like a horrible rebel, my view of myself was about to sink even lower. The deepest place of confusion and internal struggle for me as a teenager was finding pornography at the home of these same neighbors

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where I babysat. I saw it on the end table next to their couch (yeah, they left it out) and was both fascinated and repelled by this forbidden material. Remember the time period—no internet, no cell phones, no instant availability of pornography, no private ability to obtain and peruse it 24/7. It mostly existed in magazine form, and I had never seen it before, not even in a store magazine rack. It was clearly taboo for a Christian young woman who sincerely wanted to live a pure and holy life for Jesus, but somehow one night I picked it up and looked at it. Instant self-loathing, guilt, and remorse. “How can I look at pornography? I love Jesus! I want to be a missionary! I’ll never look at it again,” I told myself. And I didn’t. Until the next time I babysat. And the time after that. And the time after that. And before long, I was hooked. The good girl who loved Jesus with all her heart had a secret fascination with pornography, and the shame about killed me.

Again, given the time period, pornography wasn’t always staring me in the face. But I would occasionally stumble upon it, and when I did, the cycle of temptation, giving in, shame, and remorse would repeat itself. I couldn’t reconcile my temptations and my faith; I was torn apart on the inside. Worst of all, I couldn’t tell anyone about it—no one. How could I possibly confess my weakness and repeated sin to a fellow Christian? I never even considered telling my parents, and the thought of unburdening myself to a friend or an older adult was simply not an option. Off the table. And so I continued in this state of internal conflict and failure, all the while knowing I was in deep trouble. I wanted out but didn’t have a clue how to change.

Then I met Rick Warren when I was seventeen at a training to be part of a summer youth evangelism team that would travel

to Baptist churches in the cities and towns of California. I distinctly remember being unimpressed (sorry, honey). To be fair, he felt the same way about me. He was a loud, guitar-playing, over-the-top extrovert who sucked the oxygen out of every room he entered, and his humor and passionate preaching soon drew many to him. I, on the other hand, was shy and reserved and way too in touch with my female adolescent emotions to appeal to a larger-than-life person like Rick.

But then we reconnected a year later as freshmen at California Baptist College, a small liberal arts college in Riverside, California, and became casual friends. Everybody knew him on our campus of six hundred students, and he quickly became a respected Christian leader, while I kept a lower profile, loving Jesus, college, the singing group I was a part of, and close girlfriends. Later our freshman year I began dating a really nice guy, but the relationship ended within a few months. I thought my heart was irreparably broken. To make a long story short, Rick tells me that a month before this guy broke up with me, Rick had an impression from the Lord: “You’re going to marry Kay Lewis.” He says he immediately dismissed it because (1) I was dating someone else and (2) he wasn’t romantically interested in me. But when he walked around a corner at school one day, I nearly ran into him, and he says Cupid’s arrow pierced his heart in a flash and he fell madly in love with me. So cute, huh? I was clueless. I had absolutely no idea about his newfound interest in me, but suddenly this Rick Warren guy—the guy who once told a friend that he didn’t date because he didn’t see why he should waste money on a girl he wasn’t going to marry, and besides, God would point out the right girl and he would know—started sitting down next to me in the college cafeteria and engaging

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me in conversation. I immediately panicked because I had heard of his “not wasting money on a girl he wasn’t going to marry” approach to romance. So why was he acting interested in me? I wasn’t interested in him or any guy. I was still recovering from a painful breakup. I just hoped he would go away.

Within a few days of his sudden interest in me, he asked me out to Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlour in the fall of 1973, and I grudgingly went. He made me nervous. He was nice to me and very attentive, but I just wasn’t interested. A week later—eight days to be precise—he accompanied me to a revival meeting in a neighboring city where I was playing the piano. When we got back to campus, we prayed together to close out the evening. Sitting in the dark, I heard him say, “Will you marry me?” I was aghast. “What did you say?” Stammering now, he said, “I love you. Will you marry me?” Clearly the poor boy was delusional. Marry him? What in the world was the matter with him? But I recall instantly praying and asking the Lord what I should do. “I don’t love him! I don’t even really know him! I love someone else!” I heard God respond, “Say yes. I’ll bring the feelings.” And so with my nineteen-year-old understanding of life, romance, God, his will, faith, and my desire to be obedient to him, I said yes. Kay Lewis and Rick Warren got engaged.

We didn’t tell anyone—least of all our families—because somewhere in the goofy brains of two nineteen-year-olds we knew it wasn’t going to go over well, even at our Christian college, where “being led by the Spirit” had high value. So our engagement became our secret for the next six months.

Unfortunately, for Rick, I was a mess inside—talk about conflicted emotions. I knew I had heard God’s voice when he told me to say yes to Rick’s proposal, but those promised feelings of

love and romance didn't show up. I continued to struggle with my feelings for the other guy and my lack of feelings for Rick. I felt so guilty—I knew I was hurting Rick by my on-again, off-again emotional response to him—but I felt trapped by what I understood God's will to be. Rick finally said he was going to end our engagement because I was breaking his heart. When I got myself straightened out and knew what I wanted, perhaps we could get back together.

After a month of separation, I realized that whether or not I had the romantic feelings I thought I should be feeling, Rick was the man I was supposed to marry. We got officially engaged this time around, complete with a simple diamond ring. No one knew that I remained baffled by the way God had led us to become engaged. To our friends and family, it seemed like a romantic story that was almost biblical—you know, like Isaac and Rebekah.

Rick immediately moved to Nagasaki, Japan, as a summer missionary to teach English, and I moved to Birmingham, Alabama, to work in the inner city for the summer. We faithfully wrote letters to each other that summer, but they always seemed to cross in the mail, so we were out of sync the entire time. Making a phone call was impossible—way too expensive to call internationally—and we had no cell phones, FaceTime, Skype, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or any other fantastic method of staying in touch. So we left each other at the beginning of the summer as mostly strangers, returned home as mostly strangers, and compounded the distance and unfamiliarity between us by living in different cities for the next year. When we did have a rare weekend together, we certainly didn't waste one precious minute on conflict or conflict resolution. Everything we should

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have talked about and learned to deal with was swept under the relationship carpet, where it waited, ready to pounce on us as soon as these two near-strangers said “I do” on June 21, 1975.

I stood in the foyer of First Baptist Church of Norwalk, California, where Rick was the youth pastor, anxiously clutching my daddy’s arm, frightened by the numbness and confusion inside me. But as I walked down the aisle and stared into the shining eyes of the earnest, kind young man who had asked me to marry him, I knew I was loved. Passionately. Intensely. With a “till death do us part” kind of love. The way he looked at me on our wedding day became an anchor I would hold on to during the darker times when I wasn’t sure we were going to survive the mess our marriage had become.

Our brand-new marriage took an instant nosedive. We didn’t even make it to the end of our two-week honeymoon to British Columbia before we knew our relationship was in serious trouble. We had been warned about five areas of potential conflict all couples have to deal with, and we immediately jumped into all five of them: sex, communication, money, children, and in-laws. Nothing worked for us. Nothing. We were so young—barely twenty-one—and inexperienced, and when sex didn’t work and we argued about sex, and then argued about our arguments and began to layer resentment on top of resentment, it was a perfect setup for misery and disenchantment. I had told Rick about being molested as a little girl—he was the first person I ever told—but because I was so unemotional about it, he figured it wasn’t that significant an incident to me and basically forgot about it. I kept my occasional ventures into pornography a complete secret. How could I share that shame with a man I barely knew? So between the effects of the unaddressed

molestation, the resulting brokenness in my sexuality, and the off-and-on pornography fascination, it shouldn't have been a surprise that sex didn't work.

What made it worse was that everyone considered us the perfect couple. We were both on fire for Jesus, had this romantic "God told me to marry you" story, were committed to God and the church, wanted to be missionaries or at least in full-time ministry—I mean, we marched down the aisle to the old hymn "To God Be the Glory." What else did we need for a happy, successful marriage?

Clearly, we needed more than what we started with. And when we returned from the honeymoon, already miserable and shocked at the depth of our unhappiness, we felt like we had nowhere to go with our wretched pain and marital failures. Our senior pastor and his wife were very kind to us, but there was no way we were going to confess to them that we were a mess right out of the gate. We thought everyone would be so disappointed in us and judge us as terrible Christians, unfit to lead. Maybe in some ways we were unfit to lead, but even that thought was terrifying.

Rick and I managed to limp our way through our first year of marriage, all the while he was a youth pastor to a vibrant group of kids who filled our small apartment at all hours of the day and night. We were young enough and naïve enough—and thoroughly conditioned by our strict upbringing—to not recognize the damage we were causing to ourselves by hiding and pretending everything was okay. We didn't get that we were

Maybe in some ways we were unfit to *lead*, but even that thought was *terrifying*.

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living a lie. Well, maybe we understood it at some level, but we were too scared to bring it all out into the open. About a year and a half into our marriage, with tremendous shame and embarrassment, we sought counseling from a Christian psychologist, and his gracious words to us got us talking, although nothing was fixed.

On our second wedding anniversary, we moved to Fort Worth, Texas, for Rick to pursue a master's degree in theology so that he could become a senior pastor. We still had massive problems with sex, communication, and money, and we were in marital hell. The common understanding of the day was if you love Jesus enough, your marriage will be happy. What was so confusing was that we loved Jesus with all our hearts and were committed to the local church. How could things be so bad? The irony that Rick wanted to be a pastor but had a cruddy marriage wasn't wasted on us. The fact that we were miserable weighed on both of us like a giant boulder, but we didn't see any way out. I think we hoped that one morning we would just wake up and find it was all a bad dream and that somehow all our problems would simply vanish. I think they call that magical thinking. We wanted to honor the sacred wedding vows we had made before God and our loved ones, so divorce wasn't on our radar. But neither could we visualize living in such pain for the rest of our lives. We just didn't know what to do or how to create a healthy marriage out of the shattered pieces of conflict, disappointment, dysfunction, and resentment.

As part of his degree program, Rick was required to attend weekly group counseling sessions for a period of time. He didn't feel he could expose our brokenness to these fellow theology students, so he would fake it during the group sessions and come

home so sick to his stomach he wanted to throw up. He grew increasingly angry about our secretly failing relationship, and with that suppressed anger came intense depression and anxiety.

While Rick was a full-time student, he spent many weekends traveling around the South speaking at churches and small conferences. I was working full-time and was the main breadwinner. I was the assistant to one of the VPs of the company, and my desk faced the elevator where everyone entered and exited throughout the day. It didn't take long for me to discover that a really good-looking guy worked on the same floor, and before I knew what was happening, I had spun a complete fantasy life in my head around this guy. I found "reasons" to take my lunch at the same time he did in the corporate lunchroom. There were "reasons" to walk by his office several times a day and smile and give a friendly wave. I sat at my desk and daydreamed about what it would be like to be in a relationship with him. I got nervous and my hands perspired when he talked to me. It was bad. Really, really bad. I detached my emotions from my husband and attached them to this guy who hardly even knew I existed. One day the emotional bubble burst when I walked by his office and heard him berating his wife on the phone. He was so rude and mean and ugly to her that I was completely shocked. It turned out my fantasy guy was a jerk. My ridiculous obsession with him ended in that moment because I caught a glimpse of the real man behind the good looks and didn't like what I saw.

But what if my emotional and physical attraction to him had been met with a corresponding attraction to me? What if he had entertained a similar fantasy? What if he had been receptive to my flirtatious behavior? What if he had been willing to

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jeopardize his family life for a silly, naïve young woman who was unhappy in her marriage? What if my actions had ended up putting me in the position of choosing between my marriage and an affair? The story could have had a very different ending. I could have lost my marriage. Yes, it was a bad marriage, but my fantasies didn't negate the fact that I had taken vows. Vows of faithfulness. Vows of love. Vows of lifelong commitment. Those vows didn't become null and void just because we didn't know how to love each other well. If I had abandoned my vows, my history would be different. I would have missed out on the rich, satisfying marriage that was still ahead of me, born out of the long and painful journey. I would have short-circuited the lessons learned along the way about self-centeredness, fear of vulnerability, broken self-identity, messed-up conflict management, and poor communication skills. I would have missed the joy of being a mother to Amy, Joshua, and Matthew. I would have missed being Grammy to Kaylie, Cassidy, Caleb, Cole, and Claire. I would have missed being a part of cofounding Saddleback Church, the most wonderful church on the planet. I would have missed out on becoming a global advocate for people living with HIV and for orphans and vulnerable children. I would have missed the chance to speak up for people living with mental illness, for suicide awareness and prevention. I would have forfeited the right to call the church to action on behalf of anyone living on the edges, the margins, outside the warmth of the fellowship of Jesus. I nearly lost everything I was dreaming of and longing for when I put my marriage at risk.

Through my decades of ministry, I've talked to hundreds of women and couples who were in lonely, unfulfilling marriages—marriages in which their dreams had turned to dust. Where

the passion had long since been buried under the daily grind of careers, children, pressure, stress, and unfulfilled longings. Some of these marriages ended with a loud bang as anger and bitterness corroded any sense of decency and humanity and compassion for the other. Some ended with shock, soul-shattering pain, and disillusionment as betrayal made a mockery of the vows of faithfulness. Some ended with a thud; the unending battle for a healthy relationship free from addiction finally beat one partner to a pulp and he or she was just done and no longer willing to keep trying. Some ended with a quiet whisper—silence—as boredom, illness, financial struggles, or any other of myriad issues made even dry, brown grass on the other side of the fence look so much greener than the barren wasteland on their side of the fence.

I hear you. I really do. I don't approach this subject from the Hallmark-card-version of marriage but from the blood, sweat, and tears of the trenches where our marriage was forged and is sustained. I know what it's like to choose to build our relationship; to seek marriage counseling again and again; to allow our small group and our family into the struggle; to determine one more time to say, "Let's start over" and "Please forgive me, I was wrong" and "I forgive you"; to admit that my way isn't the only way to see the world and to try to imagine what it's like to be on the other side of me; to choose to focus on what is good and right and honorable in my husband instead of what drives me crazy; to turn attraction to another man into attraction to my husband; to have vastly opposing opinions on how

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to handle and cope with a mentally ill child; to have fear and anxiety and panic threaten to swallow up normal life; to become consumed with the needs of one member of the family; to be cracked open by catastrophic grief and to share it with your spouse when you're so different; to figure out how to grieve and mourn together when your mentally ill child takes his life in a violent way and your grief is public because you're in ministry and your glass-house, fishbowl existence is fodder for scrolling headlines on CNN. I don't know your exact circumstances, but I know mine, and to say marriage has been hard is as severe an understatement as I can muster up.

Yet, it's also been the very best thing that has ever happened to either of us. We wouldn't be who we are today without each other. I'm a better Christian, a better woman, a better mother, a better friend, and a better minister because of Rick. He says he's a better Christian, a better man, a better father, a better friend, and a better minister because of me. The shrieks of iron sharpening iron have often sounded like gears grinding on bare metal, but the result has been profound personal growth in both of us. He is my best friend. Forever. Our song used to be "Happy to Be Stuck with You" by Huey Lewis and the News because it spoke of the realities of our life together. It acknowledged the poor fit between us, the conflict, the struggle, the desire to be in an easier relationship but also the choice we had made to stay together because we had come to peace about our differences and learned how to really love each other. But we've chosen a new song—one that more accurately reflects the passion we feel for each other. Gladys Knight's rendition of "You're the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me" turns us sappy and weepy and googly-eyed like we never were at twenty-one. Why?

We've beaten the odds that divorce would be the outcome of our ill-advised union. We've weathered my breast cancer and melanoma. We've survived the mental illness and suicide of our son Matthew. And now we *know*. We know we are the best thing that has ever happened to each other. I am in love with the man God brought into my life so many years ago. Each of us is not who the other was looking for, but each of us is who the other desperately needed to become the person we each are today.

There's so much more, but I'll save it for later chapters. At the end of the day, the most important thing is for you to know we're all on the same journey, all holders of the same sacred privilege. You need to embrace your own story—all of it—for the glory of God and the growth of his kingdom.