

A hand is shown holding a butterfly with shimmering gold and blue wings. The background features a gold mesh pattern and a soft shadow of the hand. The overall aesthetic is elegant and celebratory.

(in)

EMPOWERED

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Empowered: More of Him for All of You

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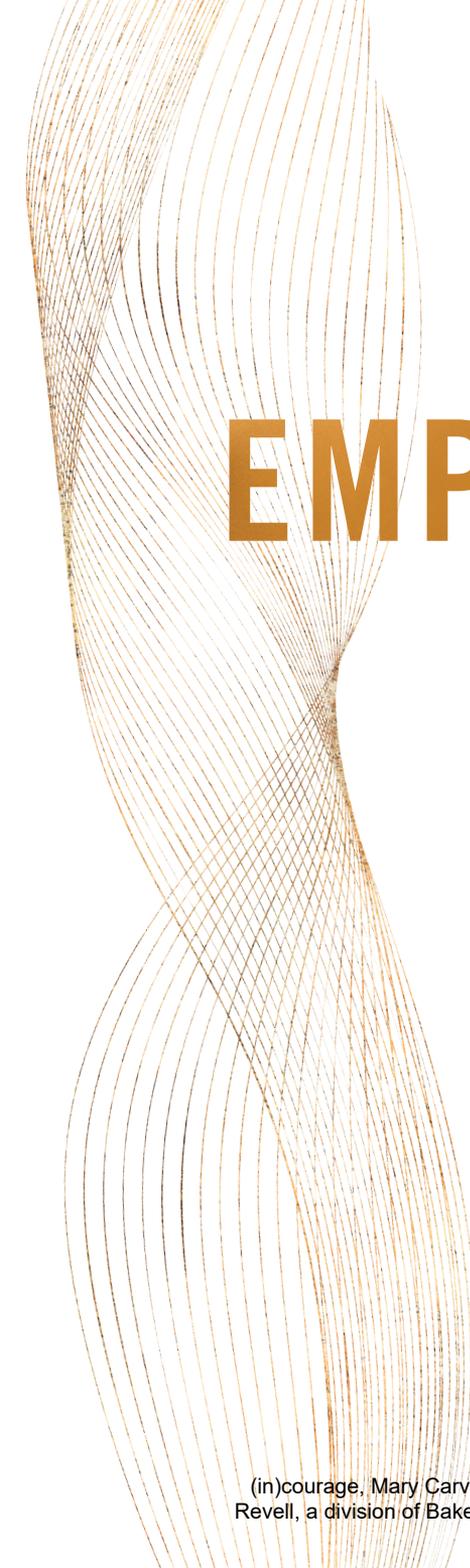
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*Courageous Joy:
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EMPOWERED

More of Him for All of You

**Mary Carver, Grace P. Cho,
and Anna E. Rendell**

 **Revell**

a division of Baker Publishing Group
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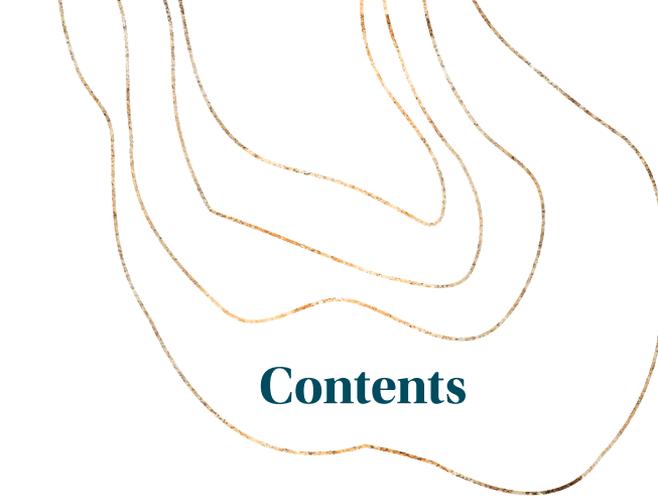
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Introduction

The word *empowerment* brings to mind motivational speakers and the self-help section of a bookstore. Messages from the stage and page tend to run along the lines of “If you believe in yourself, you can do anything!” It’s an inspiring slogan in the moment, but its energy fizzles out in the long run. It falls short of what we truly long for—to be empowered in the fullness of who we are.

The problem is that we’ve learned to compartmentalize ourselves—our physical bodies, our mental health, our emotional well-being, our relationships with one another, and our faith in God. We seek empowerment in each category by watching fitness gurus on YouTube or listening to Enneagram podcasts, reading books by celebrity pastors or trying the latest health food.

But what often happens is that we prioritize certain parts of our being over others because it feels more spiritual or urgent. We might nourish our souls but neglect to eat well and drink plenty of water. We might exercise our minds but lack meaningful friendships. When we do this, we become lopsided in our

being, forgetting that every aspect of our lives is important to cultivate because God is in it all.

God cares about our whole being because He, who is spirit, became flesh in order to dwell among us (John 1:14). Jesus, who is fully God, took on Himself the vulnerability and beauty of being human. He enjoyed eating meals and napped when He was tired. He wept when His friend died and raged in anger at injustice. And His work of redemption includes the restoration of our bodies, minds, and souls.

God is invested in our wholeness and the empowerment of our whole being. This involves more than “You go, girl!” statements that lead us to believe we can do everything in our own strength. God empowers us to be all that He’s made us to be by the truth of His Word and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This book is designed to incorporate the five major components of our being—physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual. The sixty Scripture passages and devotions invite you to see from different angles how God empowers us, and each day ends with prayer and reflection questions to deepen the learning. Each Scripture and devotion will be labeled according to which of the five major components it generally falls under.

As you read this book, may you be empowered in every part of your being to live fully as God created you to be.

Empowered to Be Seen

The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?”

“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” . . .

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.”

Genesis 16:7-10, 13

I recognize myself in her. She is busy, dodging people left and right as she sets the table. She’s been up on her feet all day preparing the meal—the feast, really—for the family gathering, but she’s only half-way done. She moves deftly between people, as if she’s dancing, stirring the pot while smiling and chatting effortlessly with the aunts and uncles, grabbing garnishes from the fridge and large glass platters from the pantry.

I offer my help, but she waves me off to go hang out with the young people. She’s got it covered, and she just wants me to relax and have fun; I only want the same for her.

When everyone else has served themselves and is happily gorging on her delicious food, she goes around and makes sure they all have

what they need: something to drink, napkins, second helpings. I catch her looking around, surveying the crowd, and finally satisfied, she gets a plate for herself and pulls up a chair at the edge of the table. She settles in, wincing from the pain in her knees. Her apron is still on, her duties not quite finished.

She sends each family home with enough leftovers for another meal the next day. Even though I don't witness the rest of her night, I know she'll spend the next hour or so cleaning the mess we left, wiping down counters, vacuuming crumbs left by little ones, and getting her house back to normal.

She's the invisible force that carries everyone else. It's what she'll do at every gathering because it's expected of her culturally, societally. She knows no other way, and though I'm of a different generation, I feel the same pressures. I've learned to be invisible, to serve and help until I wince in pain at the end.

It's the quiet suffering that's considered part of the job of being a woman. Though it isn't so in every culture or in every family, the idea that women can and should carry more is almost universally accepted as true. We are the ones who sacrifice our careers, our time, our space, and our bodies on the altar of our families, of marriage and motherhood. It's complicated and nuanced, but for many women, including myself, the expectation to bear it all quietly is how we often become invisible. We lose ourselves in the needs of others and are left feeling lonely, rejected, and perhaps even discarded.

Hagar understood. She had been used by her masters, Abraham and Sarah, to bear them a child. But when the pregnancy created enmity between the two women, Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar ran away to the wilderness, unable to take any more.

And this was where God met her, where He saw her—abused, alone, vulnerable. But even before that moment, He had already heard her cries and knew her pain.

And He sees us too. When we're overlooked, when others take advantage of us, when we pour out until we're empty, God meets us. He

strengthens us to challenge oppressive expectations, and He sustains us to keep going even when circumstances cannot change.

Our God is El Roi, the One who sees us and does not pass us by. He notices every sacrifice and every ounce of love poured out. His eye on us tells us we are worthy of being seen.

EL ROI, *thank You for seeing me even when I've become nearly invisible to others. Though the expectations that culture and society place on me as a woman are unfair, You help me. You empower me to break free from what is not right. Thank You for noticing me today and calling me valuable. Amen.*

REFLECT

What are some circumstances in your life that make you feel unseen?

How does Hagar's story empower you to value yourself as God values you?

Empowered to Be Beautiful

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Ecclesiastes 3:11

So God created human beings in his own image.

*In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:27 NLT

I have two daughters, one with dark eyes and brown curls and one with blue eyes and straight blonde hair. Both are spunky, sweet, a little sassy, and beyond beautiful. Their eyes sparkle, their smiles are huge, and their hearts are genuine and dear.

When I look at them, I see beauty. Sometimes I wonder what it would take for me to look in the mirror and see myself the same way.

Losing the baby weight? Clearing up that annoying adult acne? A fashionable haircut? A cute new outfit? A full night's sleep to brighten up the dark under-eye circles? Whitened teeth and full makeup? Sure, these things could all help me feel pretty, but even then, I still feel like beauty is unattainable these days.

You see, right now I have a baby and three older kids to keep track of. I'm likely unshowered, wearing last night's pajamas, and covered in baby spit-up. I don't have time or motivation to put on makeup or

blow-dry my hair, and my non-maternity clothes don't fit yet. I don't feel back to beautiful, that's for sure.

I think this is the part where I'm supposed to chirp, *But it doesn't matter, because my baby is worth every pound and every day of dark circles!* Of course he is. Without question. Duh. I also think I'm supposed to say very little about external beauty: *It's the heart that matters. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting and all that.*

However, I would argue that external beauty does matter and that there is indeed value in our feeling beautiful. After all, God created us in His own image, and Scripture says He makes all things beautiful. And since we are each created by God, those words apply to us—even on the days when it's hard to see our own beauty.

The beauty we see in nature stops us in our tracks and takes our breath away. The glory of a sunset. The reds and golds of changing autumn leaves. The joyous smiles on my children's sweet faces.

It is okay, friends, to look for and cultivate beauty and to feel beautiful.

One summer when I was working as a camp counselor, my roommate was applying a light amount of makeup, and I mentioned that I'd left my makeup at home. To be clear, I was incredibly proud of this fact—and not in a good way. I was proud in a haughty, my-priorities-are-clearer-than-yours way. She paused, then gently said, "It's okay to embrace your beauty and femininity." That was at least twenty years ago, and the moment is still with me.

When God said He made us beautiful, it's because we reflect Him. We are created in His image, so we are beautiful from the get-go. End of story. Nothing we can do will increase our inherent beauty. It's one of God's gifts to us, and we can embrace it.

So I say it's good to recognize the ways God has made each of us beautiful. Indeed, we *should* do this. Maybe it's the way your eyes disappear when you smile big or the tone of your skin. Maybe your lashes curl up on their own or you have perfectly aligned toes or long

graceful fingers. Maybe it's your laugh, silvery and peeling, or your hair, whether wavy and short or straight and long. Whatever our physical traits, God imagined, formed, and created us beautifully. And He wants us to recognize that, because in seeing and accepting our own beauty, we see God's too.

LORD, just as I see Your beauty reflected in the sunset, my kids, and other aspects of Your creation, may I see it also reflected in myself. I want to be able to look in the mirror and call every part of myself good as You do. Help me to recognize the beauty You have empowered me to live into. Amen.

REFLECT

On days when it's a stretch to see, how can you focus on the beauty of God within your own self?

Is it easier for you to see the reflection of God within others? Why?

The Power of Beauty

Esther 2:2–11, 17–18; 5:1–5

Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked

back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. . . .

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality. . . .

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

"Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks."

So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared.

GOD, thank You that every part of my being is of value to You. You see worth in my beauty. Help me to believe it too. Amen.

REFLECT

What can you learn about God's perspective of beauty from this Scripture passage?

What is God saying to you about being empowered to be beautiful?

Empowered to Be Hopeful

Rest in God alone, my soul,
for my hope comes from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my stronghold; I will not be shaken.

Psalm 62:5–6 CSB

Until recently, I had never struggled with hope. Though the years had taught me to be more of a realist than a pure optimist, and though I'd walked through many truly painful seasons and circumstances, my trust in God never wavered. And because I trusted God, I remained hopeful for the future.

But two years ago, my good friend's daughter was hurt. She was hurt in a way that no child should ever experience, no mother should ever imagine. She was hurt in a way that's not my story to tell. But what became part of my own story was the way my faith was shaken as I walked through this darkness with my friend.

To my friend, I stayed strong in faith that God was with her and her little girl, certain that justice would prevail, and hopeful that her daughter would survive without scars. In my heart, though, I became a crumbling, raging, hopeless mess. I sobbed and screamed, asking God how He could allow such a thing to happen, begging Him to explain where He was and why He didn't intervene. I trembled and whispered only to myself that maybe some things don't work out in the end, that maybe God isn't completely in control.

As much as that incident and my subsequent deep sadness messed with my heart and mind, what really threw me for a loop was the fear that my faith had been unfounded all these years. What shook me most was the fact that I was shaken. After all, while I might struggle with a whole lot of things, hope had never been one of them! Even when I had to work overtime to choose joy or be patient, I'd always had my general hopefulness to fall back on. Now, though, I wasn't sure how to hope.

I'd like to tell you that I dove into Scripture and prayer the moment I realized the depth of my doubt and despair, that I went straight to the Lord with my hurt and my missing hope. But I didn't. Instead, I sank deeper into confusion and chaos as everything I'd previously pinned my hope and trust on seemed to slip away each time I thought about my friend's grief. I turned my questioning eyes on myself, wondering how strong my faith had been in the first place if it could be so shaken by someone else's pain.

I finally broke down and told another friend about my struggle. Understanding how hopeless I was feeling, she placed her hands on my shoulders and prayed that God would protect and heal my friend and her daughter—and that He would comfort and heal me as well. I didn't have to tell her I was broken; she knew. And when I was unable to ask God for help, she asked for me.

My friend's simple prayer became my breakthrough. Her hope helped me find my own hope again. It gave me the gentle push I needed to ask God to remind me of the truths that never change—that He is good, that He loves us, that He is with us and will never leave us. I asked God to rebuild my foundation and to help me remember that my faith is *in Him*, not in my faith or myself. I asked God to show me how strong and steadfast He is so that I could in turn share that vision with anyone else who needed it.

And of course, God did. Little by little, the ground underneath me felt less shaky, and I could stand with confidence again, trusting the firm foundation only the Lord can give. The promises of other people,

a false sense of safety or security based on humanity's goodness, and even my own faith are shifting sands that won't hold up to the storms of this world. But Jesus, our Rock and our unshakable foundation? He will always be there—through the storms and when the winds finally subside.

When you feel yourself begin to slip and slide, when you doubt and then wonder how you could possibly doubt, don't despair! God hasn't changed. He hasn't left you behind—and He won't. No matter how shaky you feel, God's still here and He's still holding steady. Ask Him to help you believe. Ask God to give you hope—in Him, in His promises and plans, in the story He is writing for you and for your loved ones. And even when the storm rages, God will give you hope to hold on to and to share.

GOD, *I feel shaky sometimes, unsure of myself and of my hope in You. Please forgive me when the doubts are louder than Your love for me and for those I love. Renew my faith, rebuild my foundation, and give me hope to hold on to and to share with others. Amen.*

REFLECT

What have you built your foundation on?

Where in your life do you need more hope?

Empowered to Cheer Each Other On

If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad.

1 Corinthians 12:26 NLT

My phone dings, and I see her text: “Could you read something I wrote? I don’t know if it’s any good, but I wanted to see if you could just take a look and tell me what you think.”

I could hear the hesitancy in her words and how much courage it took for her to ask. We had met each other at a conference, and from our brief interactions, I knew she had stories to tell, pain to express, and wisdom to lead with. We noticed each other in a breakout session for writers interested in getting published, and afterward we talked in hushed tones about our hopes for where our writing would go. The writing world and its nuances were new for us, and we parted ways holding those hopes for each other.

Eventually, I became an editor, and I watched from afar as her leadership took her places. I witnessed her voice become louder and stronger as she processed the current social climate through her newsletters. I could see that she was becoming freer, more herself, and less afraid of what people would think of her.

And so was I.

Her text was an unexpected but pleasant surprise. She shared how she had been keeping up with me as well and thought she’d

take a step of faith by reaching out. I was honored to be entrusted with a first read of her writing, and I agreed to take a look and get back to her soon.

I wasn't prepared for her gift with words. She wrote with precision and power, beauty and hope. She didn't shy away from naming her pain, and her pastoral and prophetic leadership shined through her stories. I was blown away by her natural talent, and I texted her immediately to tell her so.

She responded, "Really? You think so?" Her lack of confidence boggled my mind, and I sent back ten yeses in all caps with way too many exclamation marks. I assured her I wasn't just saying it because she was a friend. I genuinely believed she should be writing and getting published.

We went back and forth about her essay a couple of times, but it wasn't until years later that I received another text: "The essay we worked on got published in a book!"

I squealed in delight at this news. Her success wasn't only about her but also about the many other women—particularly women of color—who would see her name in a book and know what was possible for them too. Her joy was my joy.

First Corinthians 12:26 says, "If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad." And Romans 12:15 simply says, "Be happy with those who are happy" (NLT). In Christ, we are intricately intertwined and interdependent on one another. Because we are made for community and placed in community, we cannot separate our grief or our joy from that of others.

In a world and time when social media and celebrity culture hype certain people over others, it's easy to feel envious of someone else's success. Those feelings are understandable and shouldn't be shoved down in order to celebrate others. Instead, we can bring our honest selves before God, confessing our hurt, disappointment, and anger, acknowledging our own desire for success, and letting God be a balm for us. He can realign our hearts to His, remind us that together we

make up the body of Christ, and teach us to be glad when another is honored.

We can be countercultural by cheering each other on, and in doing so we participate in the joy that God has for us all.

I relished in my friend's news. I was so proud of her work, her persistence, and her increasing belief in herself. I had the privilege of watching her growth like a time lapse of a seed becoming a plant, and my delight was just a glimpse of God's rejoicing over her. And from my vantage point, I could see that this was just the beginning.

GOD, thank You that there isn't a limited amount of joy to go around and that one person's success doesn't cancel out another's. You are not a God of scarcity but of abundance. I confess that there are times when I have a hard time cheering someone else on when I'm not in the same place or position as they are. But I want to learn to participate in their joy as You are inviting me to do. Thank You for creating us to be the body of Christ so that gladness can be multiplied instead of hoarded. Amen.

REFLECT

How has someone gone above and beyond in cheering for you?

How is God inviting you to cheer on someone in your life?

The Power of Celebrating in Community

Luke 1:26–56

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she

exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost
thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

GOD, thank You that I am not meant to walk alone in this life. Thank you for the community You've placed me in right now to journey alongside in times of both hardship and celebration. Amen.

REFLECT

What can you learn about God's desire for us to be community from this Scripture passage?

What is God saying to you about the power of celebrating together?