

# making love last

divorce-proofing your young marriage



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For my husband, Gary.  
My partner in life and love.  
I'm so glad you said "I do."

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# Foreword

Falling in love is easy! Yet, as many of us well know, staying happily married over a lifetime is another story. As we struggle, resentments build, contempt creeps in, and once sturdy relational bridges are ultimately burned to the ground. If you once were madly in love but now find yourself drifting toward relational disappointment and disillusionment, take heart, because wonderful help begins just a few pages away in Laura Taggart's new book *Making Love Last*.

As we travel and speak around the world, one of our greatest pleasures is getting to meet many amazing people who share a common passion for helping families thrive. On one such trip to the San Francisco Bay Area we had the pleasure of being the guest of Laura Taggart, who was the director of Marriage and Family Ministries at Community Presbyterian Church of Danville. With a passion to help relationships grow and flourish, she founded a marriage mentoring ministry to help young couples navigate the ups and downs of early marriage by being mentored by a more seasoned couple.

Laura has a great heart for families, and as a licensed marriage and family therapist she has the education and experience to

offer wise, comprehensive, practical counsel. A teacher at heart, Laura has shared these insights from her therapy office of thirty years, as an adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, at the Evangelical Theological College in Ethiopia, and now in this new book.

Our working relationship became a personal friendship with Laura and her husband, Gary. As our relationship deepened we discovered Laura and Gary had grown tremendously through the difficulties in their own marriage and honored the covenant they made years ago. We love authors who have success in their own relationships before offering insight to others.

When we first received a copy of *Making Love Last*, we knew we would find wisdom, insight, vulnerability, and practical application. And as we read the manuscript for the first time, Laura surpassed all our expectations. She gives young couples a realistic picture of marriage and the skills to manage difficult seasons. In part 1 she helps couples explore important concepts of married life and challenges them to think about what has influenced their beliefs about marriage. Part 2 will help husbands and wives develop awareness and change the way they relate to one another. Part 3 will help couples create an entirely new vision for their relationship. Discussion questions and suggestions for application make this a practical and life transforming book.

Laura has a special interest in the millennial generation. Many in this age group are marrying in their late twenties, having taken the time to “find themselves” and develop their careers and talents before they commit to marriage. Conventional thought would lead one to believe that married life might be easier when a person marries later in life and has had more time to mature. Yet, as Laura points out, marriage is usually more challenging than we imagined because it *exposes weaknesses* we weren’t aware of as singles. She follows up by shedding light on the opportunities for growth and healing that marriage brings and helps couples travel the road of transformation as they help each other heal, change, and grow.

*Foreword*

We couldn't be more enthusiastic about Laura Taggart's book *Making Love Last*. So turn the page, begin reading, and discover hope and encouragement that will refresh your mind and soul.

Many blessings on your journey of love!

Milan and Kay Yerkovich,  
authors of *How We Love* and *How We Love Our Kids*



# Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to those who personally and professionally supported me through this project and, through their candid feedback, helped to shape this to be a sharper, more helpful book.

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I have had the incredible joy of working with several millennials in the shaping of this book. They have generously given of their time and heart to help this book be more engaging, relatable, and helpful. My dear friend and colleague Teagan Darnell has offered her deeply insightful perspective to shape the content and tenor of the book. My amazing niece, Lindsey Norman, gave me great feedback on content and helped edit the early chapters. Nikki Pritchett, a wise and wonderful young mom, carved out time between work and children to read and help me sharpen each chapter. I was so honored that these three incredible women believed in this book and devoted themselves so wholeheartedly to bringing it to life.

## *Acknowledgments*

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I am indebted to Richard Schwartz for his origination of the Internal Family Systems model of therapy, to Ken Sande for his thoughts on apologies, to Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson for their developmental model of treating couples, and to Tim Keller for his theological understanding of marriage.

I am profoundly grateful to the couples whom I have had the privilege of counseling over the years. They have taught me about the tenacity of the human spirit and have had the courage to expose their pain and allow me to walk alongside them. I also appreciate those who took the time to take the *Making Love Last* survey. This survey helped to shape chapters 4–9, offering practical help to young couples.

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My husband, Gary, has been a huge support from the time of early conception to the present. Although birthing our two

## *Acknowledgments*

beautiful children together is far more miraculous and creative than any book could ever be, as with our children, I could not have given birth to this book without him. I am grateful for his constant belief in me, his love and encouragement, and his patience with the mess on the dining room table.

I am grateful for my adult children: Emily—for always pushing me to reach beyond my comfort zones and be a better mom and person. Tim—for your generous heart and wisdom beyond your years.

I want to extend my deep gratitude to my parents, Bud and June Naslund, and their courageous journey through their own marriage challenges. They inspired me to become a marriage and family therapist by the way they fought for their marriage and came to enjoy the sweet fruit produced by years of weeding and watering.

Finally, I want to thank those who have believed in me and in this book. Your confidence has been humbling and inspiring. I am so very grateful to my editor, Andrea Doering, for her guidance in shaping the direction of the book, her wisdom, and her willingness to say yes. I feel so fortunate to have Wendy Lawton as my agent. She has been a great encourager and helped me to see the bigger picture of being a writer.

# Introduction

This book is the fruit of three experiences of my life: my thirty years of being a marital therapist, my role as director of marriage and family ministry at a large church, and my own marriage of forty years.

When my husband and I were married, we were very young and in love. We were excited to begin creating our shared life and looked forward to enjoying adventures, experiencing milestones, and building our dream together. We expected that there might be some mild adjustments that would need to be made but believed our love was certainly strong enough to overcome any challenges we faced.

We had no idea what lay ahead.

Year seven was particularly painful. The glow of our shiny polished idealizations had faded, and we were deep in the trenches of disappointed expectations and self-protective patterns of relating. My husband wasn't the guy I'd expected him to be, and I wasn't the woman he had married. The reality of married life had hit, and we weren't too happy about it.

But things changed. And as I look back over the seasons of our married life, I realize we have had many marriages within our marriage—our idealized early years, our period of disillusionment

and disconnection, our later season of reconnection and mutual support, and our current time of enjoying the fruit of our hard work. It hasn't been easy. And we could never have envisioned that what we enjoy today could even be possible in the earlier, more difficult years.

When you said "I do," you likely didn't have any idea you had just embarked on the greatest crucible of your life. You may have come to marriage with idealized expectations of how life would be with your spouse. Like most of us who marry, you long for a lifelong marriage to your best friend but you may feel unprepared as to how to navigate the failed expectations and ensuing disillusionment.

Today, young marrieds have a 32 percent divorce/separation rate. Many feel ill-equipped to handle the conflict that comes with marriage and may assume that it must indicate they've married "the wrong one."

In my role as the director of marriage and family ministry at Community Presbyterian Church in Danville, California, I have met with dozens of young couples struggling to hold their marriages together. They sought marriage mentors—older, more seasoned couples who had strong, Christian marriages and were trained to come alongside young marrieds to help them set a firm foundation. Many of these young couples had no healthy model of what marriage could look like and had already begun to experience negative patterns and disillusionment. They desired to have a marriage that was all God intended it to be but didn't know the path to get there.

In preparation for writing this book, I conducted a survey of 256 young marrieds (those married less than ten years). Some of their comments reflect these unexpected challenges as they relayed what was most surprising to them:

"Feeling like you don't even know the person you're married to and knowing that if you were not fully committed, it would be way too easy to leave."

"Marriage has revealed to me how selfish I am and how deeply my actions, or lack thereof, can affect my husband."

“When we first got married I thought I was good at communicating, but no one prepared me for how different it was to communicate with a *wife*.”

“How the little stuff can become big stuff so quickly.”

“How quickly the ‘young love’ turns into the ‘old couple.’ I feel like we have to schedule sex just to make it happen, while we used to be so spontaneous and romantic.”

“That the person I chose to marry ended up being someone I would fight and argue with. I’ve never been one to argue or not get along with anyone, but my husband and I don’t see eye to eye on much.”

“How our pasts, our upbringings, and our families would have far-reaching influence on our marriage.”

“How quickly we can become disconnected because of our busyness and activities.”

“I didn’t imagine how compromising would be as hard as it can be sometimes.”

“How much I miss my alone time, and even when I get ‘me’ time, I feel guilty and neglectful.”

“How hard it would be to balance the exhaustion of raising children with being available to my husband.”

“How much the daily grind chips away at romance.”

“That we would be dealing with a sex addiction.”

“I thought we’d be more ‘in love’ and ‘on cloud nine’ for longer than we were. Marriage was more work sooner than I was expecting.”

“Dealing with in-laws!”

“That finances would be such a hot topic with heated discussions.”

Do any of these sound familiar? If you’re reading this book, you may have discovered that marriage is hard work. Perhaps you can relate to the dashed expectations and have lingering thoughts that

you and your mate may not be “compatible.” You may be wondering how you went from the bliss of the wedding to the degree of disconnection and conflict you are currently experiencing. If so, this book is for you.

For over thirty years, I have counseled countless young couples. It seems that now, more than ever, couples are calling it quits when they face the difficulties of married life. Many have had no real model of what a healthy, thriving marriage looks like, which feeds their level of disillusionment. The problem for these couples is not that they have lost the desire to have a deeply satisfying and loving marriage. The problem is they don’t trust that change is possible and they have lost the resiliency necessary to give change a chance.

Change is possible, and this book will help you dive in and enjoy its benefits. Think of the potential change ahead as a flowing river. You can watch it go by and never put a toe in, or you can grab an inner tube and jump in. Along the way you will notice some new scenery, and when you step out onto dry land from time to time, you’ll realize you’re in a new place. Marriage is dynamic and ever-changing. The potential for growth is part of the DNA of marriage itself.

Each of my experiences—my own marriage, my role in ministry, and my years as a therapist—have given me a deep affection for struggling young couples. They have also led me to a growing passion to help these couples through their difficult seasons.



*Making Love Last* will help young couples divorce-proof their marriage and enjoy a thriving lifelong relationship with their best friend. In part 1, “Reimagining Marriage,” I will explore how you think about marriage. Chapter 1 will examine idealized expectations of marriage and address why marriage is such hard work. Rather than seeing problems as evidence of failure, you will see the value of marital difficulties as not only normal but necessary to a strong marriage. Chapter 2 will explore current values that conflict with marital happiness and set a couple up for disillusionment.

It will offer new ways of thinking that will support both your uniqueness as an individual and the growing bond of your marriage. Chapter 3 offers a fresh perspective on the unique benefits of marriage and why your marriage is worthy of your investment.

Part 2, “Revitalizing Marriage,” will give you six action steps that will enable you to change the way you relate with your spouse. Chapter 4 will start with a deep and honest look at yourself. You will be given tools to explore your ways of being in relationship and ways of understanding the impact of your upbringing. Chapter 5 will help you to explore the differences between you and your mate. Rather than feeling threatened by the way in which your mate is different from you, you will become aware of the vitality those differences bring to your marriage and be encouraged to embrace them.

In the early stage of married life, you may have tried to suppress conflict. It does not fit the picture of what happy couples do. Many young couples tend to avoid bringing up touchy or difficult subjects, and many feel unskilled at working through conflict successfully. Chapter 6 will provide tools to proactively enter into conflict in a way that decreases hurt and increases understanding. Out of hurt, habit, or a need to feel secure, couples often hold on to habits that damage their relationship and keep them stuck. Chapter 7 will address the habits you may be clinging to and give you a way to release them and enjoy life with your best friend.

It is not big vacations or extravagant gifts that cement the connection of thriving marriages. It is the small increments of behavior that make the difference. Every moment you share with your spouse, you either lean in to the relationship or lean out. When you lean in, you nourish positive connection. Becoming aware of these opportunities to lean in is the focus of chapter 8.

Marriage is intended to provide the deepest human companionship of your life. This intimacy involves being vulnerable with your emotional, sexual, and spiritual selves. Chapter 9 will address some of the hindrances to closeness you may be experiencing and offer specific help to ignite your intimate connection.



When we say “I do,” we promise to love for a lifetime. Although we have no idea about what that “labor of love” will entail, we commit ourselves to the road ahead. Chapter 10 will explore the beauty of a covenant marriage and challenge the contingencies we often allow to influence our marriage commitment.

When we focus on our mate’s deficiencies, our relationships suffer. When we begin to see the difficult, even painful parts of our marriages as an impetus for our own growth, change and healing begin to happen. Chapter 11 explores how God uses marriage as a catalyst for change in our own lives and how his love can release us to experience more freedom in our relationships.

Young couples need a vision of what it looks like to be married to our best friend for a lifetime. As a parent, I have often heard the anonymous quote, “There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings.” A thriving marriage is also about roots and wings. To keep the tree steady in tumultuous storms, we need a strong set of roots that sink deep into the soil to hold us firm. We also want to help each other become all we were meant to be, to help each other fly.

If chapters 10 and 11 are about the roots that keep you steady in the storms, chapter 12 will help you to take flight as a couple in such a way that you are inspired to become your best selves—and in the process, best friends. It will help you cast a vision for your future together that will help you move forward into the lasting, loving marriage you desire.

It is my sincere hope that in these pages you will be encouraged, understood, challenged, and inspired to experience the extraordinary richness of married life. If you are hoping to deepen the bond you have with your mate, this book is for you. You will find new perspectives and skills that will help you create the intimate marriage you long for. If you are discouraged and despairing, wondering if your marriage can recover, hold on and read. The road ahead will not be easy but it may surprise you.

PART 1



# Reimagining Marriage— Changing the Way You Think

Laura Taggart, MA, LMFT, Making Love Last  
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# 1

## Why Marriage Is Hard Work

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

Leo Tolstoy

It was late in the afternoon on a hot, muggy August day. James and Amy were my last appointment. They were new clients, a young married couple who were considering divorce. They sat on opposite sides of the couch in my office, barely looking at each other. Everything about James oozed hostility—legs extended, arms crossed against his chest. Amy curled into the couch corner as if to protect tender wounds.

I started the session by asking how they met, hoping to awaken their sense of earlier connection. Amy brightened and took the lead. “Oh, that’s a good story,” she said. “We both loved soccer and were playing for a co-ed league. We were on different teams but I noticed him. Later in the game I blocked his shot on goal and he gave me heck for it.”

“It was a great shot,” James said, leaning forward. “She was in the right place at the right time.”

This was the first stirring of interest I had noticed in James. “Tell me about your wedding,” I said, encouraged by the slight drop in tension.

“It was a beautiful day,” Amy said. “Everything went perfectly.”

“Except for your drunken uncle,” James said.

Amy shot a scowl at him. “The wedding *was* perfect.”

I jumped in. “So when did things start to go wrong?” I looked at James.

“I’d say a couple of years ago,” James said. “My work started to become more demanding. At first, Amy was pretty understanding, but after a while she became really critical about it.”

“It wasn’t just his work,” Amy said. “He was going out with the guys almost every weekend. I was alone a lot. When I’d complain, he’d tell me I was trying to control him.” She slumped back in her corner. “Over time, I just felt misunderstood and hopeless.”

As the story unfolded, it became clear that the initial dream they’d shared for their life together was shattering. Early in the relationship they had enjoyed shared interests, a strong romantic connection, and similar ambitions. Amy had been willing to subordinate her desire for time with James. Eventually, she had become very disappointed with his lack of attentiveness and his priorities of work and friends. In her hurt, she became critical and pulled away emotionally and physically.

James felt deprived; their sexual intimacy had taken a nosedive and he felt he could never do anything right. He, in turn, pulled away and spent longer hours at work to avoid the tension at home. They had dreamed of being married to their best friend for life. Four years later, they were considering divorce.

After James and Amy’s appointment, I felt sad. Over the previous five years, I had noticed a significant rise in the number of troubled young marrieds who came into my office seeking help. A nationwide study on first marriages of 22,682 individuals ages

15–44 in the United States confirmed my concern. As reported in the *National Health Statistics Reports* in March 2012, 20 percent of marriages end in the first five years and 32 percent end in the first 10 years.<sup>1</sup> Couples married five to ten years represent the greatest increase in divorce rate in any five-year period.

Perhaps this has caused you concern. You may be feeling pretty good about your marriage currently, but as you hear these statistics and look around and see other couples who appear to be happy as well, you wonder if you could end up being one of the 32 percent. Things are good now, but you want to make sure your relationship stays healthy, strong, and resilient. You want to be preemptive and keep your relationship on track. Or perhaps you have begun to have significant struggles.

The problems and complaints I hear vary to some degree but have a common thread: the couples feel ill-equipped to handle the realities of married life. When problems hit and expectations are dashed, they have no capacity to navigate issues in a way that is not damaging to the relationship. It is as if they have been given a car but have only a limited amount of gas and no equipment to fix a flat tire. At a time when they could be enjoying the trip together and planning for their future, the car has stalled out.

Perhaps you can relate. In your early dating days, you enjoyed getting to know each other and discovering mutual interests. Over time you fell in love and couldn't picture your life without your future mate. When you married, you hoped to share a long life with your best friend. You deeply longed for meaningful relationship, intimacy, and companionship. You may have had a glimpse of some differences between you and your mate but overlooked them as you were moving toward the future.

And then, at some point, things began to take a turn. Qualities you used to find endearing in your spouse became annoying. The differences you used to overlook started to threaten the togetherness you hoped to enjoy. In an effort to change the course of dissatisfaction, one or both of you challenged the behavior or habits of the

other, stirring a negative reaction. This began a cycle of repeating the negative interaction over and over until a sense of hopelessness settled like a dark cloud over your marriage.

As I counsel young couples, the questions they ask are similar to those asked by James and Amy:

“If we love each other, why do we struggle so much?”

“Why didn’t someone tell us marriage would be this hard?”

“What if I didn’t have a good role model for how to work through problems?”

“How can we do conflict in a healthier way?”

These questions reveal a desire to discover a path *through* the difficulties so they can enjoy the gift that marriage is meant to be.

Marriage is hard work for many reasons. You may have come to marriage with idealized expectations of how life would be with your mate, only to become disillusioned when problems surfaced. Not knowing how to cope with the disillusionment, you may find yourself confused, angry, and wondering how to move forward.

Another reason marriage is hard work is that, most likely, you come from very different backgrounds. Even if you share similar values or come from the same geographic area, your families of origin are dissimilar, and you each bring different interpretations and meanings to marriage from your experiences. These differing vantage points are often surprising to discover, as people naturally tend to overlook or minimize differences when they’re dating.

By nature, we tend to be self-protective in the way we relate to others, and navigating conflict and tension can be difficult, especially when the conflict style of our mate is different from our own. It is important to explore each of these challenges to understand why marriage is such hard work.

But first, it is helpful to know you are not alone. Marriage is hard work for most couples.

## Idealizations and Their Impact

As a young couple, you come to marriage with a picture of how it will be. This picture is a composite of beliefs about what a happy marriage looks like—such as the belief that you should have little conflict and much agreement, and that your mate will have few flaws and sustain undivided devotion to you. Often this picture is embellished by media that manufacture fantastic notions of intense and passionate romance.

It can be helpful to know that nearly everyone is surprised by the realities of married life. Your early picture does not usually include navigating competing needs, coping with daily stresses, or dealing with heated conflict. You may have thought that the same ease of conversation and desire to please—so obvious in most dating relationships—will smooth over any difference of opinion or behavior you may experience in the future. In short, you come to marriage with a dream of how your marriage will be.

The dream may be something that has been developing since childhood or of more recent making, but usually it begins to surface as you seek out a partner. The quest for a mate, a life partner with whom to build a future, is universal. Choosing the *right* partner becomes of paramount importance.

Most of us had a picture of what we were looking for in a mate. What was your picture? What were the most important qualities you were seeking in your future spouse? Perhaps you were looking for someone who was ambitious enough to provide a stable financial future. Maybe you wanted a person who would share your love for adventure, your value of family, or your spirituality. You may have sought a person who was thoughtful and kind or gregarious and social. But the truth is, no matter how well suited you might seem, you and your mate are not completely compatible.

There is no such thing as two truly compatible people. That might be a jarring statement for you. Yes, two people can enjoy shared interests and preferences, but all of us have our own histories,

experiences, biases, gender-based differences, and physiologies. All individuals are uniquely different. When we seek out a life partner, we may seek someone who is not very different from us but, in truth, they *will* be very different from us. There will be incompatibilities.

These incompatibilities will require adjustment and change.

In a study done by the National Marriage Project, young adults were asked what they meant by the word *compatible*. The number one factor for men was someone who was willing “to take them as they are and not try to change them.”<sup>2</sup> This would suggest that a compatible marriage should require no change, no accommodation

*There is no such thing as two truly compatible people.*

to the other, and no growth, since you are so perfectly suited. Although the desire to feel accepted and adequate is, at one level, understandable, the reality is that any intimate relationship is going to compel change in both parties.

When you vow to take your mate “for better or for worse” you are accepting not only your mate’s flaws but also the changes and adaptations that lie ahead. Change is inevitable in any truly intimate relationship.

A concept that is widespread in our culture is that of the “soul mate.” When considering a life partner, you tend to look for that one person in the world that is uniquely designed for you, one who can perfectly mirror your thoughts, feelings, and needs. You assume that there is someone out there who is just right for you and if you look hard enough and long enough you are bound to find them. Once you find them, they will be a perfect “fit” for your life—someone who will meet your needs, support your goals, and be “low maintenance.” This pursuit of a soul mate has deluded many into endless searches and marital dissatisfaction.

Consider Amy and James, my clients. Amy believed she had married her soul mate. She had assumed that a truly loving relationship meant that James would be attuned to her need for time with him. When work became more demanding for James, she



hoped he would notice her patience and make a special effort to initiate a date night. When he failed to acknowledge her sacrifice or plan time together, she would express her dissatisfaction with a critical jab or moody withdrawal. Her soul mate was not reading her thoughts, which she interpreted as a sign of waning love. Her search for the perfectly compatible mate led to disillusionment when she discovered that she had married a flawed human being who *would* disappoint her.

Idealized expectations can begin as early as the wedding planning itself and can also set a couple up for disillusionment. Now more than ever, the \$55 billion wedding industry preys on a bride's happily-ever-after fantasies, and the more money spent, the better. A study by popular wedding planning website The Knot found that the average US wedding cost in 2014 was \$31,213.<sup>3</sup> Brides are being sold on the idea that they must stage an extravagant wedding that reflects their personal sense of style, such as commissioning artists to paint a custom backdrop for the ceremony or hiring social media consultants to make sure photos are posted and tagged accurately. The meaning of the day can get lost in the preoccupation of planning the day.

The wedding is an important day, but it is only one day. As brides (and grooms, though to a lesser degree) find themselves caught up in the creation of their perfect day, they focus less on preparing for the relational, emotional, and spiritual aspects of their marriage. Premarital counseling may have helped you anticipate some of these crucial aspects; after all, every wedding is followed by a marriage. The idealization around the wedding often causes couples to overlook important relational issues, which will inevitably surface as real life returns. Although your wedding day has likely passed, the planning season could have initiated some early patterns of expectation and disillusionment that may need addressing.

Idealistic expectations involve more than unrealistic thinking about finding the perfect mate and planning the perfect day. The

“soul mate” concept also suggests that once you find this person you will be so connected, so able to mirror each other, that there will be little to no conflict. Most people, when they marry, have an understanding that they will have some disagreements but cannot imagine having relationship-threatening levels of conflict. They trust that, because they are so well suited, they will bypass the really serious conflicts experienced by their parents or others they’ve known. And if they do have problems, they will be resolved quickly.

After all, in an age where technology sends the message that the solution is at your fingertips, the belief is that things should get better fast, including problems in marriage. Getting an instantaneous fix is much preferred to waiting and doing the hard work of resolution. When difficulties don’t remedy quickly, young couples often assume their marriage is in trouble. The idealization that a happy marriage is a conflict-free zone causes them to believe their marriage is failing when arguing persists.

When James and Amy entered my office, their idealizations about marriage had taken their toll. Their picture of finding a soul mate had begun to unravel. Their levels of conflict had surpassed their expectations and capacities to cope. They felt unprepared for the difficulties of working out real life with a real person. The misconception that marriage is easier than it is led them to early disillusionment and thoughts of exiting their marriage. Contributing to their difficulties was the common challenge of navigating the differences inherent in two different upbringings.

### **The Blending of Two Family Histories**

When you marry, you are focused on the shared life you intend to build together. Similarities and the joining of two dreams into one occupy your thoughts. There is a tendency to suppress differences for the sake of keeping the dream alive. Over time, tensions begin to mount as misunderstandings occur. This is inevitable for two

people whose perspectives have been shaped by different families of origin.

My client James said he came from a family that tolerated clutter. As long as his dad could find the remote control for the television, very little attention was paid to order in the home. There were minimal expectations that the children would do chores or even pick up after themselves. By necessity James learned to wash his own clothes by the time he was ten. He never knew which parent would drive him to school or when he would be picked up.

In contrast, Amy's mom was very particular about the cleanliness of the home. Amy and her sister were given clear guidelines about what was expected when they performed their chores of cleaning bathrooms, washing dishes, doing laundry, and scrubbing floors. She expected the girls to keep their bedrooms clean at all times. A list of consequences for the occasional undone chore or messy bedroom was posted on the refrigerator door.

When James and Amy married, they rented an apartment and enjoyed fixing it up with new finds from IKEA. James worked as a programmer in high tech, and Amy taught at the local elementary school. Amy typically got home earlier than James and enjoyed cleaning and organizing the home. Initially James had enjoyed Amy's organization and her efforts in keeping the apartment picked up, but eventually, when the demands of work meant he felt exhausted when he arrived home, he wanted to enjoy a more relaxed atmosphere, which included throwing his personal items wherever they landed. Amy grew irritated with his carelessness. When her attempts at correcting his behavior were not received well, she resorted to labeling him as selfish and slovenly. Their two family histories set them up for a collision of needs that became a source of ongoing daily tension.

Every couple has adjustments to make in marriage due to differences in family backgrounds. These differences include the way things are done, the priority given to certain protocols, and varying interpretations and meanings assigned to specific words and behaviors.

Sean and Michelle, another young couple who were clients of mine, were struggling to work through their unique upbringings. Sean had grown up in a very competitive family with two athletic brothers. When his dad would take them to the tennis court, they would do drills before game time and compete to beat the next older sibling.

Michelle had grown up as an only child with little experience of team play and lots of affirmation for her piano-playing skills. She enjoyed an occasional game of tennis but played mostly for the social connection and for fun.

When Sean would suggest to Michelle, “Let’s play tennis,” it meant something very different to each of them. He hoped for an aggressively played match and ultimate victory while she sought connection. She felt intimidated by Sean’s competitive spirit. This difference in meaning led them to not only abandon tennis but all other sports and games that might have enhanced their mutual enjoyment. In short, every couple has challenges to negotiate in order to maximize mutual enjoyment of one another and of life. This does, however, make marriage a challenging adjustment.

### **Self-Protection and the Impact of Childhood Wounds**

Perhaps the most difficult hurdle for young marrieds to overcome, the one that creates the most hardship, is the self-protective ways they relate to one another. These are so difficult because they are not easily recognized in yourself but are very apparent in your spouse. Whereas idealizations create disillusionment and differences in family backgrounds create misunderstanding and frustration, self-protective ways of relating create hurt and distance from your partner.

Remember James? He grew up in a family where emotions were viewed as weak. He remembers crying when he was five because his brother stole his tricycle. His father responded by telling him, “You

keep that up, and I'll give you something to cry about." His mother, likewise, was not emotive; she didn't invite James to express his feelings or wants. He learned early on to suppress his emotions, and over time he even learned to disregard them altogether. He applied himself in school, which garnered him some limited affirmation from his parents. Although he was more athletic than his brother, his talent drew little notice from his parents. They chose not to attend any of his high school soccer games. They were busy "making a living," or so he was told.

Amy grew up with a mom whose expectations were difficult to meet. Her dad was very consumed with his work and often unavailable. Although Amy was a good student, she remembered the look of disappointment on her mother's face if she failed to bring home all A's. Amy's mother was very present in her childhood, she recalled, but also very stressed, not the kind of parent a child could easily confide in. Amy found herself longing for her dad to show more interest in spending time with her and remembers with vivid clarity the few special times they shared.

Both James and Amy had wounds from childhood that were hidden from their conscious awareness. Amy's desire to have meaningful conversations, to spend regular time with James where she had his undivided attention, was initially well received by him. He enjoyed being desired and also enjoyed Amy's warm responsiveness when he focused on her.

But it wasn't long before James started to feel smothered by Amy's desire for togetherness and began to view her as "needy." He was unaware of his own disconnection from his feelings and

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protected himself by disregarding Amy’s feelings. Having grown up in an emotionally disengaged family, he experienced a great deal of discomfort with Amy’s longing for intimate connection. His self-protective style of relating, well-honed from his youth, led him to push her away and seek out less “demanding” relationships with male friends. Feeling ill-equipped to meet Amy’s needs, he invested himself in the one environment where he felt most capable, his work.

Amy was also unaware of the wound that was impacting her responses to her husband. During courtship and early marriage, Amy believed she had found that special someone who would give her the attention and affirmation she longed for. James enjoyed surprising her with special adventures—a picnic dinner in the park overlooking the bay, front-row seats to the professional soccer game. With the juggle of two jobs and limited funds, these outings became infrequent. At first, Amy would hint to remind James to plan time together. In the past year, those nudges had escalated to reactive outbursts. Amy’s responses, triggered by her father’s sporadic attention and her mother’s disapproval, revealed her deep wounds.

Neither James nor Amy were aware that their responses toward their mate had their roots in their childhood experiences. Both blamed the other. James blamed Amy’s “neediness” for his avoidance; Amy blamed James’s negligence for her reactivity. They both felt completely justified in their entrenched positions—but they were stuck. Without an awareness of the underlying pain fueling their responses, they were unable to develop compassion for themselves or for each other—an awareness they would need to extricate themselves from their impasse.

## **The Strength That Comes by Fire**

Marriage is likely to be the most challenging thing any two people will ever undertake. It is also the most rewarding. Because it is the

most intimate relationship of your life, it has the power to evoke the deepest emotions and expose tender vulnerabilities.

If you have the courage to examine the imprint of your upbringing and the way it impacts your responses to your mate, you will be choosing a path that not only deepens your self-awareness but also brings compassion and understanding to your marriage. If you are able to approach the differences in your family backgrounds as normal, even interesting, you will be able to use them to enhance your relationship instead of hinder it. If you can identify the idealizations you have that are creating dissatisfaction and release them so you can embrace the real mate you married—with all their imperfections—your marital happiness will increase.

Much like fire is needed to burn off the impurities of a precious nugget of gold, a beautiful marriage requires the heat of challenges to mature into a more compassionate, loving, and fulfilling relationship. As the dross of idealized expectations, impugning of differences, and self-protective styles of relating are exposed to the heat, what emerges is something quite unexpected—a shiny, solid treasure in which you can see yourself, your mate, and your marriage itself in a new way.

Yes, marriage is hard. Taking two individuals with their own habits, histories, beliefs, preferences, experiences, and wounds and adding the pressures and stresses of life is difficult at best. To believe differently is to set yourself up for failure. The good news—no, the *great* news—is there's a much bigger picture. Marriage has higher

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purposes than you can even imagine! And your imagination—the way you think about and picture marriage—is vitally important to how you navigate the road ahead. In the next chapter, I’ll explore some new ways of thinking about marriage that will help you move toward that awesome, epic marriage you and your spouse long for.

## Discussion Questions: Chapter 1

### *Group and Couple Questions*

1. How can being “compatible” benefit a marriage? How can concepts of compatibility be detrimental to a marriage?
2. Have you ever thought that you have one “soul mate” out of the seven-billion-plus people on the planet? What is tempting about this concept? What is dangerous about “soul mate” thinking?
3. Share three ways in which your different family histories create challenges for you and your spouse.
4. Did you have idealized expectations when you first got married? What were they? What was your first disillusionment? Did you have the idea that marriage would be easy? How do Luke 9:23 and John 16:33 challenge that notion?
5. Why do you think marriage requires hard work? What do 2 Corinthians 4:17, Romans 5:3, and James 1:2–4 say about the purpose of our struggles?

### *For Personal Reflection*

1. When you got married, what was your picture of what a happy marriage looked like?
2. Can you identify any expectations you’ve had that cause difficulty in your marriage? Have you had any notions about



compatibility or wanting a “soul mate” that have caused disappointment or dissatisfaction in your relationship?

3. Are you aware of any ways in which your family history has contributed to your ways of thinking or behaving that have been a challenge in your marriage relationship?