

# **Marriage is for Grown-ups**

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***For Les***

*Bone of my bones*

*Flesh of my flesh*

*Although I didn't always know it*

## Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	4
<b>I Cleaning the Lens: Examining Our Assumptions</b>	7
1. How do you see marriage? What do you expect?	
2. What is marriage?	
3. Romance is pure poetry; marriage is mostly prose	
4. We meet, marry and then truly get to know each other... and ourselves	
5. A wedding doesn't make a marriage	
6. You can only start with what you've got	
7. Nothing stays the same	
8. It always takes two	
<b>II Mapping the Territory</b>	21
9. Love as hormones; love as homemaking	
10. Men are from earth; women are from earth	
11. Marriage is a not entirely satisfactory solution to a not entirely soluble problem	
12. Marriage is sacred ground... which means that sometimes it gets wet, muddy and very slippery	
13. The three-legged stool and the three sides of marriage	
<b>III Moving Forward</b>	31
14. Sex and other mysteries	
15. Differences, difficulties and World War III	
16. There is nothing like marriage to teach you about loneliness and solitude	
17. Infidelities, affairs and one-night stands	
18. My journey, your journey, our journey	
19. Children and other happy distractions	
<b>IV Driving Change</b>	42
20. Creating a different marriage	
21. Daily acts of heroism	
22. Daily gifts of love	
23. Marriage is a mixed bag	
24. Mixed feelings are normal	
25. Marriage is for grown-ups	
<b>V Staying Grounded</b>	49
26. Marriage is for grown-ups and it's marriage that grows us up	

## Foreword

### Why read this book?

This book is not for the faint hearted. It is not for those who find marriage easy, smooth or trouble free. Nor is it for those who have given up on marriage. Rather it is for those who still hold a vision for marriage, despite disappointments and difficulties, and want to see their own marriage be the best it can be.

I can only speculate as to why you've picked up this book. Maybe you're aware that something is missing in your marriage. Maybe, like me, you've felt all too often *unhappily* married. Maybe you've entered into a marriage, or a long-term de-facto commitment, with the best of intentions but you can feel your goodwill fading. Maybe you feel like you've fallen out of love. Maybe you're feeling lonely, scared or just uncertain. Or maybe you're feeling desperate and you're hoping this book will be part of the solution.

Whatever your circumstances, welcome to the mystery that we call 'marriage'. For many of us, marriage is the best and worst of times, the deepest of intimacies but also the deepest loneliness, the most familiar of states yet also the strangest at times, the place where we come face to face with the stranger in ourselves and in the other.

This book is part map, part kitbag for the journey. It is divided into five parts.

Part I, Cleaning the Lens, invites you to examine your assumptions and expectations of marriage and your perspective when things get difficult. Sometimes we need to clean the lens before we can see clearly the territory we are in. Several foundational principles are offered about the journey of marriage that I have found useful.

Part II, Mapping the Territory, takes some of these principles further and tells you what to look out for along the way.

Part III, Moving Forward, tackles some of the nitty-gritty issues and offers a few tips about how to move forward with them. The most common issues, in my experience, that cause couples to come unstuck are sex, conflict, separateness, infidelity, children, in-laws and money. I offer some introductory comments about each of these.

Part IV, Driving Change, is an introduction to how to make a difference in your marriage: how to drive change, or respond to your partner driving change, and stay focused.

Part V, Staying Grounded, addresses the question of how to stay grounded in your marriage and let it keep on working on you. Many of us like to talk about 'working on the marriage.' There may be some truth in this notion and it may be a useful way to approach things sometimes, but in my experience the greater challenge is to let the marriage work on you.

The chapters of this book are intentionally short, sharp and introductory. They are designed to get you thinking. They should not be taken as advice or as 'everything you need to know about marriage' and they certainly should not be taken as an alternative to effective relationship counselling and relationship education programs.

With apologies to my gay friends, when I refer to marriage or long-term de-facto relationships I am thinking of heterosexual relationships and the dynamics inherent in a relationship between a man and a woman. This is not to deny or devalue gay marriages or de-facto relationships. It is simply a function of my own life experience. I can only speak about the things I know at depth, personally or professionally. Hopefully some of the principles in this book will apply to gay marriages or de-facto relationships – my gay friends tell me that their relationships have more similarities than differences with a hetero relationship – but I cannot presume this to be the case.

For many of us, the gold-standard is still the life-long committed journey between two people, whether gay or straight. Any life-long journey requires a life-long commitment to learning and growth. I hope to simply set you on a good path, or help you return to a good path, and I trust you to seek out the other resources you need along the way.

I hope that after reading this book you will be better equipped to celebrate the triumphs of your relationship and find your way through the difficult times that are part and parcel of a real relationship.

### **Why write this book?**

I'm tired of the pop psychology literature on relationships, the slick formulae and the five easy dot points that promise *The Key to a Happy Marriage* or *Lifelong Fulfilment in Your Relationship* or similar.

I'm tired of counselling couples who have read some of those books and then wonder why the reality of their marriage doesn't match the slick formula, or why they have trouble remembering the dot points when they're in difficulty.

It's not their fault. Marriage is the greatest challenge we set ourselves in life – two imperfect human beings living in close proximity to one another, trying to balance the needs of self, other and 'the relationship' - and it's only become harder over recent decades. Rapid social change and conflicting assumptions and expectations regarding relationships have led to increased uncertainty and confusion about marriage and a persistently high separation and divorce rate.

I don't blame any of us for this and I've outgrown the need to pass judgement on people who separate or divorce.

We live in a society that undermines marriage - subtly but unmistakably - by its preoccupation with romance, sex and the pursuit of individual happiness without *also* addressing the nature of long-term commitment, the many faces of love and the kind of happiness that can only be realised by mutual faithfulness to the journey.

I like the saying, 'Happiness is accepting what happens.' Maybe a happy marriage is one where both partners are committed to dealing with whatever happens, learning from it and committing to a path of growth and mutual accountability. Whether or not that makes you 'happy' in the conventional sense of the word remains to be seen. I would suggest that sometimes it will and sometimes it won't but beyond conventional 'happiness' lies something far richer, something that is hard won and to be highly prized.

The separation and divorce industry has been around for a long time. It is much bigger and more lucrative than the marriage support and enhancement industry. We have had elaborate family law systems, at least in western society, for several decades but it's only in recent times that relationship education and counselling over the lifespan of marriage and family life has started to become mainstream.

So, I want to add my voice to the discussion about relationships and marriage. I suspect that I bring a different perspective to the dominant voices in our society.

My perspective comes out of 30 years of marriage counselling and, more importantly, more than 30 years of marriage. Over that time I've listened to hundreds of couples and occasionally my own wife! Because of my line of work, and because I've been desperate for some wisdom for myself, I've read widely on the subject of marriage and I've listened to some wise trainers in this area. I want to share with you the key things that have made a profound difference to me and my marriage, and things that have made a lasting difference to the marriages of my clients.

In a nutshell, dear reader, you get to learn from me and my clients. You get to benefit from our successes and joys as well as our stumbles and mistakes. You've probably spent thousands of dollars on the wedding, and hundreds of thousands on the house; maybe it's time to invest some serious time reflecting on the marriage and your part in it.

I wish you well in your journey,

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## Part I Cleaning the Lens: Examining Our Assumptions

### 1. How do you see marriage? What do you expect from marriage?

For most of us, the single biggest influence on how we see marriage and what we expect from it is our parents' marriage. From our earliest years we are observing and absorbing the marriage that forms us. As we negotiate our way through childhood and adolescence, the most powerful messages about who we are and what life is about are coming at us daily, often without words, from our parents.

It may be a happy and harmonious example that we observe. It may be a hardworking partnership. It may be a dour and difficult struggle. It may be a subtly destructive relationship or an openly volatile one. Whichever kind of marriage we were raised in, the tracks were being laid down in our hearts and minds as to what marriage is.

Then there is the influence of the society and subculture in which we are raised, in particular our peer group. Most of us can't help but compare our own circumstances with those of others around us. From the early years we notice how other parents are different to our own and how their relationship looks different to our parents' relationship.

Then as adults we are constantly on the lookout for 'information of difference' – whose house is nicer than ours, whose car is sexier than ours, and whose marriage looks happier than ours. We set and revise our norms, consciously and unconsciously, according to what is going on around us.

For some of us, the norm is still 'til death do us part' – one partner for life. Many of us still believe there is nothing more important than a faithful lifelong marriage commitment and any deviation from that feels like a tragic failure. For those who hold to this view, the primary task in life is to enrich and preserve the marriage, to make *the relationship* as happy as it can be.

For others of us, the norm is two or three or more marriages over a lifetime. Individual happiness and personal fulfilment are seen as the most important thing in life and if the marriage proves to be difficult or unhappy, separation may be seen as not only necessary but inevitable. For those who hold to this view, the primary task in life is to find relationships that make *me* happy.

While life need not necessarily be a matter of either-or, of choosing relationship or personal happiness, there are times when one or other seems to come first either by conscious choice or by unconscious inclination. Sooner or later one of these emerges as the given, the other as the expendable variable.

It pays to know which of these views you naturally incline towards, which lens you are viewing your marriage through. For those who put the marriage first, the risk is that you will neglect your own wellbeing and 'hang in there' in stoic endurance. For those who put their

own happiness first, the risk is that when the going gets tough you will 'pull the pin' and miss the opportunity for learning and growth that goes with difficult times.

My own conviction is that an authentic marriage is one in which the wellbeing and flourishing of the marriage *and* both of the people in it are *both* important, but this takes work and the ability to see beyond the natural either-or view that most of us tend towards. Sometimes the most difficult and painful times in a marriage hold the key to a new level of health and wellbeing for the people in the marriage. It is the crucible of marriage that can form and refine us like nothing else.

So, this book is an invitation to reflect on your view of marriage, to clean the lens so that you can see yourself and your partner more clearly and see the possibilities as well as the inherent difficulties of marriage more clearly.

## 2. What is marriage?

Dictionaries typically define a marriage as ‘the legal union of a man and a woman.’ Some add, ‘... for life.’ Others focus on ‘the legal or religious ceremony that sanctions or formalises the decision of a man and woman to live as husband and wife.’

I think these definitions are missing a vital point. I think they are confusing the wedding with the marriage. A wedding does not make a marriage.

My definition of a marriage is *the imperfect union of two imperfect people who commit to loving and growing together, ‘whatever the weather,’ over a lifetime.*

We are drawn together by conscious and unconscious forces - drives, needs and desires - and the hope that this other person will meet those needs and fulfil those desires. Sooner or later, that other person turns out to be limited and imperfect, just like me. However, that does not mean that they have nothing to offer me, or I them.

Wendell Berry, in his wonderfully challenging essay ‘Poetry and Marriage,’ described marriage as ‘a not entirely satisfactory solution to a not entirely soluble problem.’ What is the problem he is referring to? Presumably the problem is *how to live together* - how to maintain self and other whilst living in close proximity over the course of a lifetime of changes and challenges.

Admittedly, some couples get lucky. They seem to meet at the right time in both their lives, get to know each other well, have much in common and end up having a long and happy marriage that gracefully negotiates the changes. I have known a handful of such couples.

The rest of us have a trickier time of it. Most of us meet, marry and then get to know each other – and ourselves – and, as Wendell Berry says, not everything we find makes us happy.

We can respond to this situation in two main ways: question our choice of partner or open ourselves to the lessons of marriage.

Some of us get stuck wishing we’d chosen a different partner. Ten, twenty or even thirty years into the marriage, we can still find ourselves ruminating about how much happier we’d be if only we’d chosen a different partner, and it may be true. However, few of us pause to consider how much happier *our partner* would be if only s/he’d chosen someone different.

I like to recall M. Scott Peck’s advice that there are only two valid reasons for marriage – for the children and for the friction. I notice he makes no reference to soul mates, great sex or eternal happiness. If you have any or all of these, you are extremely fortunate. For the rest of us, it’s a more mixed affair. That’s why it’s important to open yourself to the lessons of marriage.

David Schnarch, author of *The Passionate Marriage*, says, ‘Stop working on your marriage; your marriage is working on you.’ I don’t think he meant that relationship education and counselling are a waste of time, although they may be for those who refuse to examine themselves. Rather, I think he meant that it’s all about how you *approach* these things. Your marriage is trying to teach you something. Are you open to learning? Are you open to being humbled at times? Are you committed to the journey of lifelong learning and transformation?

There is something inherently challenging, confronting and *potentially* transformative about marriage. The commitment to journey through life in close proximity with someone of the opposite sex – and often a very different temperament and personality – is probably fifty percent courage and fifty percent folly. It's a big ask. The stakes are high.

That's why we love marriage and why we hate it. We love what marriage promises but we hate what it delivers sometimes. We love the promise of living happily ever after but we hate the reality of the 'not entirely satisfactory solution to the not entirely soluble problem.'

Here's your first choice – your first fork in the road - get used to it or keep chasing rainbows. Work with what you've got or keep wishing things were different. Mr Right (and Ms Right) may or may not exist, but what about *becoming* Mr Right (or Ms Right). I'm *not* talking about becoming the perfect partner, reinventing yourself according to your partner's dream specifications. However, I *am* talking about becoming the best partner *you* can be, maximising your potential to love, honour and cherish this person you have chosen to be with, for whatever imperfect motives.

### **3. Romance is pure poetry; marriage is mostly prose**

Falling in love is easy. I've done it many times. There are many beautiful people in the world and unless you go through life with blinkers on, you are bound to cross paths with some of them. And some of these beautiful people will take your breath away. Something in them will strike a chord with something in you. Call it pheromones, chemistry, infatuation, true love, destiny or madness – it happens. There is no point in denying it. However there is a danger in blindly following it every time.

How do we understand those times? What do we make of them? How do we manage them?

When you are smitten it's like being bitten – something courses through your bloodstream. You are transported and intoxicated. It's delicious. However, it's also inherently unstable, ill-informed and generally short lived. It's the illusion of 'The Perfect Stranger'. It's 'poetry in motion.' It should come as no surprise that some of the most delicious poems, songs and art are triggered by this kind of experience. It's mind altering.

Marriage, on the other hand - or any long-term committed relationship - is more like prose. It is more ordinary, even tedious at times. It's not a rush of blood but rather the day to day chiselling out of an existence, hopefully a loving and adaptive existence. The drug of romance has worn off. The poetry of romance is no longer flowing like it used to, although we can help it return from time to time if we know how to. The day to day tedium has set in. Familiarity is at risk of breeding contempt. But maybe this is normal. And maybe it all comes down to how we understand this transition and how we work with it.

#### 4. We meet, marry and then truly get to know each other... and ourselves

Even those couples who have a long courtship or engagement discover that there are some things that only come out in the wash once they're married. Sometimes 'the perfect gentleman' turns out to be controlling, demanding and even violent once the wedding is over and the day to day work of the marriage has begun. Or sometimes the sweet, charming fiancée turns into the nagging wife with a longstanding agenda to change her man and turn him into someone she can control.

It can take a few years for the natural patterns of a relationship to emerge, then a few more for the ruts to deepen and solidify, and then many more again before we're prepared to address the hard questions:

- Why are we together?
- What's good and healthy about our relationship, and what's not?
- Where are we heading?
- What are the best and worst aspects of each of us?
- What do we each need to learn here?

It's not only the other person that we're getting to know. We are learning things about *ourselves* that we don't necessarily like.

We discover that our partner triggers thoughts, feelings and behaviours within ourselves that are different to those triggered by others. We notice that we feel like a different person when we're in the company of others who are different from our partner. We start to wonder about this mysterious power s/he seems to have over us. Some of us even say, 'this is not the real me – I'm only like this with him/her.'

We like to think that our negative reactions to our partners are some sort of aberration from the true self and that therefore it's his or her responsibility for having triggered them. We are reluctant to admit that it may be a case of unacknowledged hurts or underlying tendencies within ourselves being unearthed.

Being in a real relationship means your partner can get to you. Sometimes the disappointments and hurts and feelings of betrayal get the better of us. Our partner, from whom we had hoped for so much, seems to be either incapable of loving us as we had hoped or is perhaps wilfully withholding the love we need, now that he/she knows me. Either way we feel the pain of rejection and we struggle to maintain goodwill. It never occurs to us in the heat of the moment that s/he is struggling just as much as we are.

There is nothing quite like marriage to bring out the best and worst in each of us. The day to day grind of life lived in close proximity to another imperfect human being can test us all. Familiarity can lead us to take one another for granted or be careless in our communication and end up hurting each other. Unacknowledged assumptions can lead to misunderstandings or serious clashes. Raw nerves can get knocked in an instant and the force of our anger can be frightening. Strong emotions need to be managed carefully, neither suppressed nor indulged but addressed and expressed in a way that honours self and other and the relationship.

It's been said that marriages are often entered into on the basis of similarities but are actually nourished by the true differences that lie beneath the surface, if we are willing to work with them. These days there's a lot of emphasis on making sure you and your partner are 'compatible' – that you share sufficient psychological, social, intellectual and spiritual common ground to make a good marriage. I'm sure these 'compatibilities' are preferable however maybe it's the *differences* that sharpen us, shake us out of our complacency and challenge our assumptions about how life should be. Even with the most compatible couple there are important differences in family background, personality, temperament and (the biggest of them all, with implications we are still discovering) gender.

Maybe it's these differences that grow us up, if only we're willing to be grown up. We need to learn how to work with these differences and use them for our mutual growth.

## 5. A wedding doesn't make a marriage

Weddings are getting bigger than Ben Hur. Like children's birthday parties, there seems to be a pressure to put on the biggest and best. A few decades ago, nobody had heard of professional wedding planners. For many couples these days, the wedding has become an event that needs an event manager. Substantial loans are taken out to ensure The Big Day is as big as it can be. Thousands of dollars and hundreds of our hours are expended on planning, preparing, rehearsing and executing the big event.

I guess the fairytale is still alive and well in our society. *Handsome prince sweeps delicate princess off her feet and they all live happily ever after.* As if the best insurance against becoming a separation statistic is to put on the biggest and best wedding money can buy.

Sadly, there is no correlation between the size and slickness of the wedding and the quality of the marriage. In fact, I suspect that modest weddings are a predictor of greater marital happiness because they suggest a couple who have their feet on the ground and understand that it's in the quiet, modest occasions of life that a marriage is built.

Unfortunately, those same couples who spend thousands on the wedding often don't spend a cent on marriage preparation or enrichment. Only a small minority of couples access professional help or education in the early stages of their relationship. It's clear that early input can help lay a solid foundation for the marriage for many years to come but most couples prefer to wait until things go from bad to worse before putting up their hand for help. By then it's often too late.

'*I do*' or '*I will*' are just the beginning. They are at best a statement of intent, a commitment to embarking on a particular path with this particular person. The will or intention needs to be put into action and practised, over and over again.

At best, a couple at the wedding altar are fully conscious of their choice of *this person* over all others and *this way of life* over all others and the wedding is their declaration of that lifelong commitment. At worst, they are completely distracted from those issues, caught up in the logistics of the ceremony, the reception and the honeymoon, leaving the marriage to take care of itself.

So how do we get from the wedding to the marriage? After the romance stage is over – maybe a year or two - what next?

The first thing is to realise that, to quote the old hit song, 'We've only just begun...' We've set out on this journey and although we have some plans about where we're going to live, what we're going to do, how we're going to make ends meet and when we might start a family, we really have no idea what lies ahead at the deeper level of the marriage. At best, we have only a few clues as to the general nature of marriage and some of the challenges that lie ahead in our own particular marriage. There is much that we can only discover when we get there.

For all of us, a challenging journey lies ahead.

For many men, the challenge seems to be in two main areas - I've heard two memorable expressions of what this journey entails for men:

- *from me-thinking to we-thinking* (retraining ourselves to think beyond *me/my/I*, to consider what's in *our* best interests as a couple or family, rather than just *what I want*); and
- *from being a single-man-married to being truly a married man* (one who 'forsakes all others' and considers his partner's needs to be just as important as his own – a profound shift in consciousness).

For many women, the challenges seem to typically be quite different:

- *the loss of the dream* (what's left when you realise that this relationship is not going to fulfil your hopes and dreams);
- the challenge to hang onto *a sufficient sense of self* while all around you are wanting a piece of you; and
- the challenge of balancing up all that *we-thinking* (looking after everybody else) with some *me-thinking* (taking adequate care of self).

## 6. You can only start with what you've got

An Irish friend of mine says, 'It is the function of every parent to create dysfunction in their children.'

When I first heard him say this I didn't like it. It seemed too glib, even if the accent made it slightly humorous. It seemed to make light of our responsibilities as parents and gloss over the suffering of many children.

Now, many years later, I realise that he was simply stating a fact. It may not be our intention to create dysfunction, but it happens anyway to a greater or lesser degree. Despite our best intentions, parents inevitably create dysfunction in their children. It is part and parcel of parenting. Nobody is perfect. Marriage and family life is the arena in which everybody's imperfections get acted out and passed down through the generations.

When I give talks on the subject of marriage or de-facto relationships I often ask the audience, 'How many of you would say that your parents gave you adequate modelling or instruction in the area of relationships and marriage?' About 10% typically raise their hands.

Human beings are *mimetic* by nature – we mimic others. We observe those around us, absorb their words and actions and unconsciously copy them. From a young age we are absorbing the modelling of our parents – not just what they say but what they do, in particular how they do marriage and relationships.

When we embark on our own adult relationships, that absorption is reflected in how we do our own relationships. Men will be particularly influenced by how their father did marriage and family life, for better or worse. And women will be especially influenced by how their mothers did marriage and family life, for better or worse. Whether we like it or not, it is this early absorption that will most influence how we embark on our own relationships. We can only start with what we've got.

The question is, 'Once we've started, what next?' Are we content to just do marriage like our parents did it or are we prepared to stop, examine our behaviour and change the pattern of our relating for our children's sake and our children's children?

I'm not talking about striving for the perfect marriage or the flawless family. However, I am talking about examining the patterns of previous generations and doing what you can to improve on the start your parents gave you. You can only start with what you've got but to stop there is to sell yourself and your marriage short. It may be the inevitable function of every parent to create dysfunction in their children, but when those children grow up they have the opportunity to create different dysfunction in their own children!

Try listing the strengths and weaknesses of each of your parents and the way they raised you. Then try listing your own strengths and weaknesses as a person, and as a partner, and then (if it's relevant) as a parent. Be as honest and as objective as you can be about this. What do you notice? Are there repeated patterns or themes that need to be addressed?

This can be a useful exercise for couples to do together. Compare your lists and your reflections about what you absorbed, for better or worse, from each of your parents and what you would like to do differently.

Finally I recommend that each of you find yourself a good counsellor or therapist who will graciously and skilfully work with you to address these themes or patterns and help you make the desired changes. You might also consider short courses or books on relationships, not the ones with the slick formula that promises happiness ever after but rather the ones that seem grounded in the realities of what marriage is and what it takes over the course of the life-span.

## 7. Nothing stays the same

I'm on my fifth marriage... to the same woman. On at least four occasions over our thirty-plus years we've given the old marriage a good send-off. We had to in order to see whether a new one could emerge, otherwise we would have separated. On each of those occasions the way we were doing marriage had become no longer adequate to either or both of us. We have had to learn to dig deeper, several times over, in order to properly resource ourselves for the journey ahead of us.

Many years ago Paul Simon sang, 'After changes upon changes we are more or less the same.' It's true that gender, temperament and personality set the frame around the picture of who we are and the limits of how we are likely to unfold. In my 50s, I am *still* male, melancholic and choleric (for those familiar with temperament theory), an 'INFJ' (for those familiar with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator) and a NINE (for those familiar with the Enneagram).

I've probably been these things all my life. They reflect my natural way of doing life and they go back as far as I can remember. In fact, as my wife will attest, as I grow older I become *more* male, *more* melancholic, more INFJ and *more* NINE-ish.

On the other hand, it is equally true that I am very different than I was thirty-plus years ago. I am clearer about who I am, more assertive and more at home in myself. And, in important ways, my wife is very different to how she was thirty-plus years ago. Neither of us is completely the same as we were back then and neither is our marriage. We are living, breathing, evolving organisms and our marriage is also a living, breathing, evolving entity. Hence we need to learn how to roll with the changes that go with personal, marital and family life cycles.

Most of us know about the 'family life cycle' - how babies become teenagers, get attitude, leave home, return home, leave home again, form relationships, become parents (hopefully *not* return home at this point but go on to make their own home), hopefully raise their own children, maybe help to raise somebody else's (as a step-parent) and hopefully grow up through all those experiences.

But how much do we acknowledge the cycles and seasons of marriage itself? Any real relationship goes through stages and developmental phases and within those stages and phases there are often cycles and seasons, ups and downs. In *The Couple's Journey* Susan Campbell suggests that there are five stages common to couple relationships: Romance, Power Struggle, Stability, Commitment and Co-creation. Each stage has its own challenges and possibilities. I've found this a helpful framework as have many couples I've worked with.

However, just as the journey of life is not a simple linear progression, a straight line from birth to death, neither is the journey of marriage straightforward. Sometimes we need to go back to old issues or themes and address them again, perhaps in a new context. This can be disconcerting but it's not uncommon and it can be triggered by *his* changes, *her* changes or *their* changes. As we will see further on in this book, there's *my journey*, *your journey* and *our journey*.

## 8. It always takes two

One of the well worn clichés when people talk about relationships, their own or anybody else's, is 'It takes two to tango.'

However, most people who complain about their relationship want to begin by telling you about the shortcomings of their partner. It's only after they've burnt off a long list of complaints about him or her that they'll add as a footnote, 'Of course it takes two...'

Most of us acknowledge this principle but we don't know it deeply enough at a personal and practical level. We 'know' it, but we don't practice it in the way we think about or talk about our relationships.

This is not surprising. If you cast your eye over the past few decades of self-help literature on relationships, marriage or sex, you'll find that most of it speaks to the reader as if he or she is a separate individual. It will address 'you' in the singular not 'you' plural. Very few books take a systemic perspective – drawing on systems theory, seeing relationships as interactional systems and tackling the patterns that maintain the system.

Also, if you go to a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or counsellor and ask for relationship counselling many practitioners will prefer to see you and your partner separately, sometimes for many months, before considering joint sessions. Many practitioners don't want the two of you in the room at the same time because it's complicated and maybe their training did not include adequate grounding and skills in couples counselling. So they play it safe by seeing you one at a time for as long as they can.

The problem is, they never get to see the two of you interact and by seeing you separately they are perpetuating the belief that they (and you) can do relationship work with only one half of the relationship in the room. Some of my colleagues say that they can. I say it's a start but only the warm-up to the main event. There is no substitute for seeing both parties in the room at the same time and helping you both develop the skills of healthy relating. Marriage is complicated. Most of us need a practitioner who from time to time can get into that complication with us and show us a way out.

The self-help movement has served a useful but limited purpose – useful because it helped a lot of people examine their lives and consider the changes they needed to make, but limited because it tended to have a narrow focus: the self. The overriding message has been, 'Help yourself!' In other words, 'Help yourself to whatever you want... If you're not happy, leave your partner... If you think your partner is blocking your growth, move on... Maybe you've outgrown him or her.. Maybe he or she is not right for you (etc).'

Most of us are already pretty good at blaming someone else if we're not happy, or making our partner the scapegoat. This is not to deny that there are circumstances where our partners may be primarily responsible for an unhealthy or destructive situation, in particular those relationships where there is abuse or violence or manipulation. However, in most relationships the difficulties are more subtle and things are more complicated. To blame the other person entirely or use them as the scapegoat is the easy way out.

Who of us is immune from thinking, 'If only he was more... then I'd be happier,' or 'If only she was less... then we'd have a better relationship.'? Not many of us go on to think 'If only I was more... or less...'

Once upon a time everybody was convinced that the world was flat. It looked flat so it must be flat. When the idea of a round earth was first mooted, it was branded heresy. 'If we can't see it, it can't be true.' The idea was disturbing and confronting, not the least because it suggested that human vision and understanding was limited and that beyond our grasp of things there lay a greater truth.

These days, as you know, we learn from an early age that the world is round – it just looks flat – and we have the photos from space to prove it, so we accept it. We are taught to accept a reality beyond the limits of our natural perception.

We need to learn to see beyond the limits of our natural perception regarding relationships. We need to learn to think systemically about our relationships and address the patterns that maintain the relationship system. The separation and divorce rate (roughly 50%) should be sufficient proof that we've missed something and that there is an urgent need to see it differently and do it differently.

The social and psychological cost of relationship and family breakdown should be sufficient motivation to start teaching children and adults to think systemically about relationships. For example, 'It's not just about you; it's about the two of you... (or) Sure, s/he does that, but what do you do that contributes to the difficulty?' It's about the interactional patterns, the ruts we get into together, and the things we avoid together.

Yes, this is tricky. Yes, it can be taxing. Yes, you may need professional help to make the necessary changes.

It's easy to blame the other party and in most relationships there is generally an easy target, most often the man. However, if you know 'it takes two' then it's time to open yourself to what that means in your day to day interactions as a couple and the patterns that you form in your relationship.

What might the two of you need to do differently in order to create a different relationship? What might you do differently in order to create the possibility of a different reaction or response from your partner? And what would you like your partner to do differently that would make it easier for you to respond more constructively to him or her?

How we see it will determine how we do it. Our grasp of the territory will determine how we take the journey.

We've begun to clean the lens. We've opened up the question of our assumptions. It's now time to examine the territory in more detail.

## Part II Mapping the Territory

### 9. Love as hormones; love as homemaking

*Falling in love* is easy. All that's required is sufficient radar to notice the rise and fall of the pheromones, that mysterious and intoxicating thing called 'chemistry.'

*Loving*, on the other hand, is a very different thing entirely. It is to pledge oneself to another through thick and thin, through smooth chemistry and rough, through easy times and hard.

Falling in love is all about desire, obsession and possession. We talk about being 'smitten' or 'bitten by the bug'.

Loving, on the other hand, is about something broader and deeper. It is less subject to the vagaries of hormones and chemistry. It is a deep honouring of the sanctity and separateness of the other person which sets them free to be who they are in their own right, not simply 'my other half.'

Falling in love is often founded on an instant knowing which may or may not be illusory. When we fall for someone we are struck by a kind of familiarity, as if we've always known this person, a recognition of something in him or her that resonates with something in me. It is as if we are two pieces of a jigsaw that seem to fall into place very easily, or two different lines of harmony that have been looking for each other.

Loving, on the other hand, is based on surrender to the unknown and the unknowable. In loving, we commit ourselves to an unknown path and to this person who, as the journey progresses, becomes more and more of a mystery and a distinct other. Sometimes we harmonise; sometimes we clash. Sometimes we are at home with each other; sometimes we are not.

In western cultures we have tended to assume that falling in love will lead to loving, and that romance should lead to marriage. I'm not so sure that this is helpful in every case, and it is certainly not inevitable. We seem to be dealing with two different kinds of love. Maybe these two types of love are not two different points on a continuum but two different continua entirely – not just two different frequencies on your radio dial but two different bandwidths entirely, like AM compared to FM.

Falling in love is wonderfully intoxicating and inherently self serving. It is all about me and my inner world, me and my emotional and physical needs being met. Like AM radio, it's catchy and it gets you hooked in. Before you know it you can't get that song, or person, out of your head.

Loving, however, is inherently self-giving. It is primarily about the good of the other and our common good. While you cannot afford to neglect the question of personal integrity and needs, these are seen in a broader context and a longer list of priorities. Like FM radio, you can hear more clearly the full range of what's going on – treble, middle and bass – and it

draws you in to its depths, troubling and inviting. It's not just a catchy three minute hit, it's a full symphony.

After 30 years of marriage I am increasingly convinced that these two kinds of love are very different and divergent paths. They lead to very different journeys and very different destinations. At various points in our lives we may need to revisit our choice and decide again which of these two distinct paths we will pursue.

Although I have pledged myself to the second kind of love, homemaking rather than hormones, this does not inoculate me against other attractions and occasional hormonal rushes. I'm still human and I'm still a red-blooded man. From time to time, I find myself strongly attracted to women other than my wife. Sometimes the feeling is so strong and so deep it feels like falling in love. At other times I know it's just a passing infatuation. Either way, it's part of life. The main story continues but these side-stories arise from time to time. I honour them but I do my best not to let myself be distracted from the main story. I acknowledge to myself the attraction but I keep it in context and, generally, I keep it to myself. Eventually it either matures or it passes.

Sometimes these attractions pose a threat to your marriage. These are the times when the attraction doesn't mature or doesn't pass, or you don't want it to. There is no virtue in denying it and there is not much point in feeling ashamed about it. In fact, it's a testament to the power of attraction that it can knock us off balance. And it's a testament to the beauty and depth of some people that they can touch us so deeply. What matters most is how we manage these times. Attraction is a very powerful drug, a many faced Janus that both delights like no other but can also delude and intoxicate like no other.

## 10. Men are from earth; women are from earth

Much has been made in recent years of the differences between men and women, particularly in the areas of communication, problem solving, decision making, intimacy and sexuality. We now have the brain scans to prove that men's and women's brains respond differently to identical situations and have different strengths and weaknesses. And we also know enough about the male and female nervous systems to confirm that men and women are wired very differently.

However, it seems to me that these discoveries have been a two-edged sword, a mixed blessing.

On the upside, there seems to be a growing acceptance of gender differences and the complementary perspectives of men and women. In recent years I have even heard some women say that they like men just the way they are!

For their part, many men are defining more clearly who they are. Despite several decades of feminism, the SNAG era and the androgyny movement, many of us are still convinced that men and women are meant to be different and that we need each other if we are to live as whole people in a healthy society. There are rich differences between men and women that we need to explore and incorporate into the relationship.

In addition to the increasing acknowledgement of gender differences, there seems to be increased awareness of personality and temperament types. Many of my friends and clients are well informed about themselves, their partners and the particular challenges they face as a result of the combination of their personalities and temperaments.

This is all progress in my view. We need to get away from 'cookie-cutter' expectations and templates about how things should go in a relationship or what a good marriage should look like. Variety really is the spice of life and we need to understand the variety of spices that make up humanity.

However, there may be a downside to our increasingly sophisticated awareness of gender differences, personality types and temperaments.

We may be in danger of forgetting our common humanity. We may *think* from time to time that our partner is 'from another planet' or (in the heat of the moment) 'off the planet,' but the thing that will keep us connected and faithful to the journey of marriage is an awareness of our common humanity. Men are from earth; women are from earth. We long for similar stuff. We share common needs. And we share some common faults.

From time to time we may have different ways of looking at life, and doing life, but the core of the life we seek – to love and be loved – is common to us all.

Unfortunately, something in me is reluctant to accept my partner's faults and imperfections and I notice I'm not unique in this regard. We want to remake the other in our own image. We like to believe, particularly in times of difficulty, that it's the other person who is the fly in the ointment. 'If only s/he were different...' We rarely have the presence of mind to say, 'If only I were different...'

There is something inherently humbling and maturing about accepting that we are *both* 'flies in the ointment' with shared flaws, shared aspirations and shared longings. To put it bluntly, we are *all* 'gods who shit'.

## 11. Marriage is a not entirely satisfactory solution to a not entirely soluble problem

I first heard this notion of Wendell Berry's about twenty years ago and it has never left me.

Many of us come to marriage hoping to fix, solve or change either ourselves or our partner - generally the latter. However, marriage is not a problem to be fixed but a mystery to be lived. And at the heart of that mystery is an unresolvable tension – how to do justice to the three entities in this marriage: *you, me* and *us*.

Some couples are strong on *us*. They do everything together and seem content to lose themselves in each other. They enjoy common interests and an easy fit of personalities and values. They feel little need to do things apart from one another.

Other couples are strong on *me*. They maintain quite separate lives and interests. They do more apart than together. Both are engaged in things that matter; they are just different things. Like the Oak and the Cypress trees in Kahlil Gibran's poem *On Marriage*, they stand well apart and are careful not to stand in each other's shadow.

Finally, a third type of couple typically revolves around one of the parties doing his or her own thing while the other party is the 'support crew' - taking care of things at home, perhaps lacking interests of his or her own, or perhaps feeling that 'there isn't time' after everything else is taken care of for him or her to have their own interests. In extreme circumstances this scenario can be very one-sided.

I'm suggesting that a healthy marriage is one where the ongoing tension of *you, me* and *us* is acknowledged, regularly reviewed and held in overall balance. Priorities, decisions and lifestyle choices are the result of honest negotiation and persistent collaboration. This of course demands much more of us than a relationship where one or other party makes the decisions singlehandedly or comes and goes as they please. That's why marriage is for grown-ups, as David Schnarch puts it, and the work of nurturing a genuine partnership grows us up.

Now we're getting to the heart of the mystery of a healthy contemporary marriage. We know that the old patriarchal templates (the man as the head of the house, his word as law) are inadequate. But we also know that simplistic post-modern prescriptions ('if you're not happy, just leave') are not the whole answer either.

We need a way forward that honours the mystery of marriage *and* the mystery of one another as man and woman.

Perhaps we could begin by acknowledging that marriage is, for many of us, the biggest challenge we set ourselves. This is particularly so if we strive for genuine partnership in the face of significant differences.

We all make mistakes and get into communication difficulties. We all say things that press our partner's buttons. Sometimes we don't hear our partner accurately. Sometimes we hear them accurately but we don't like the message. So we react rather than respond. We may be

quick to take offence, feel wounded and want to strike back or get defensive. We may be quick to criticise, slow to forgive and even slower to recover from difficult interactions.

We won't always get it right. Therefore, in addition to courage and honesty we also need to develop grace and humility.

Marriage is two imperfect people living in close proximity to one another doing their best to journey through life together with all of the changes and challenges that this will throw up. Instead of trying to 'fix' your marriage or 'do it right,' try surrendering to the mystery and the journey.

If we're honest, there will be many times in a marriage when we don't know what to do. There will be many times when we come to the end of our knowing, perhaps even 'the end of our rope.' There may be times, even after many years together, when we feel like we don't really know our partner after all. Such is the mystery of marriage and the mystery of the other. In fact, it may be the hallmark of a healthy marriage that this sense of mystery, and this sense of otherness, *increases* over the years rather than decreases.

Sometimes it's only when we come to the end of our knowing, when we feel like we can't take another step, that something new becomes possible. Sometimes it's only when our defences are down and we feel lost and bereft that we are forced to let go and let something new and different in.

As long as we cling to our usual ways of seeing things, and our habitual ways of reacting to difficult situations, there isn't much room for anything new to happen. Sometimes we have to hit the wall before we're willing to stop. Sometimes we have to empty out before we can take in anything new. This is not a comfortable place but it's quite possibly the only place from which something new, healthy and life giving can emerge. Sometimes we have to give the old marriage a good send-off before a new one can emerge.

## **12. Marriage is sacred ground... which means that sometimes it gets wet, muddy and very slippery**

Just as *not knowing* is a healthy response to mystery, *silence* is a healthy response to sacred ground.

Sometimes we find ourselves lost for words. Sometimes the depth or complexity of a situation is beyond our immediate understanding or our usual ability to find the words. Sometimes it's as if the capacity for reflection or speech has been temporarily taken from us, whether in distress or wonder. Painful as this may be, it's not necessarily a bad thing. It means you are in uncharted waters, or on sacred ground.

Marriage – the pledging of oneself to another who is both similar to and profoundly different from oneself – is surely a sacred journey, sacred ground.

The word *sacred* comes from the same root as the word *sacrifice*. The sacrifices of marriage are often sacred, for example the things we choose to give up so we can commit to another, or the decisions we make to stay together through thick and thin.

Sometimes these sacrifices just lead to more suffering. We may discover that what we've put on the line for the marriage isn't enough on its own. We might realise that there is more that must be relinquished (perhaps our pride at having made certain sacrifices or the ego that demands that my sacrifices be reciprocated).

Sometimes we sabotage our sacrifices. For example, we may tire of fidelity and undo years of faithfulness in a single act of infidelity that shatters our world. Or we may tire of honesty and integrity and begin to go down a path of keeping secrets, all the while justifying our deceit with a wounded self-righteousness.

There are many ways in which solid, sacred ground can become wet, muddy and very slippery. However, there are only a few ways in which it can be kept firm, solid and healthy. Honesty, integrity, courage and compassion are not easy paths but they are generally simple.

It seems to be in the nature of human beings that we stuff up, test the love and patience of our nearest and dearest, and even (to use a couple of blunt colloquialisms) 'poison our own well' or 'shit our own nest.'

At such times stopping may be the best action and silence may be the only honest comment.

Until we let ourselves be pulled up short, and silenced by our shortcomings, there is unlikely to be sufficient space for regret, remorse, embarrassment or shame - normal reactions to regrettable actions. And unless we are willing to let ourselves feel such emotions, we are unlikely to turn ourselves around in deep and lasting ways. To use the old language, sometimes we need to weep for our sins before the healing power of tears can kick in.

I am not advocating beating up on oneself or 'giving yourself a good whipping'. In fact, self-flagellation or self-loathing can be a way of avoiding genuine grief and facing up to the necessary changes. When we genuinely face our shortcomings and our darkness and make

the necessary changes, we don't need to beat up on ourselves. The outcome of a genuine and healthy process of this kind is an awareness of grace.

I am also not advocating someone else 'giving you a good flogging,' literally or metaphorically. There is a big difference between someone directly expressing their sadness, hurt and anger (even on more than one occasion) and them paying out on you over and over again in self indulgent and destructive ways (eg. name calling, haranguing or abuse). The first is a personal declaration and owned as a personal reaction; the second is an attack on you.

We need to get more skilled at expressing our emotions with integrity and clarity, and managing the challenges that are part and parcel of a real marriage. We need to build our competence in dealing with the many aspects of marriage.

### 13. The three-legged stool and the three sides of marriage

When I was a child I remember visiting a dairy farm and being given a crash course in how to milk a cow. I didn't master the art in one sitting but I do remember the pride I felt at being invited to sit on the milking stool. It was a battered but precious family heirloom, passed down through the generations. It was old and well worn but still very solid. It was made of hardwood, sat very low to the ground and had three legs which were well spread and cross-braced for strength. When you pulled up the stool and sat on it, cheek by jowl with the side of the cow, you knew you were sitting in a great tradition and doing something that countless generations before you had done.

By the way, I recently heard that these stools had three legs - not four - because that's the ideal number for sitting solid and stable on uneven ground.

As in milking, so it is in marriage. There is a three legged stool you need to get to know and regularly use. The three legged stool of marriage has also been around for ages, passed down through the generations. Wise parents and grand-parents have told their children and their grand-children about it in the hope of preparing them for the reality of marriage.

All three legs are needed for a balanced, solid stool. If you take away one of the legs of the stool, or shorten it because you don't like it as much as the other two, you'll fall over or *at the very least* have an unbalanced marriage. The three legs go by various names but I prefer *confluence*, *contact* and *withdrawal*.

*Confluence* is another word for merging or coming together in a way that dissolves the boundary between two previously distinct entities, like two rivers coming together or two substances merging. In the case of two people, it's those moments of fusion that we experience when deep in intimate conversation or making love. Most people like this side of marriage but some are scared of it.

At its best, confluence is a genuine intimacy based on a deep knowledge of one another and a deep surrender to one another in the act of lovemaking. At its worst, confluence can be superficial; a kind of pseudo-intimacy, an instant merging based more on fantasy or appearance than reality.

*Contact* is those times when the boundaries between one person and another are crisp and sharp. The differences are clear, whether in closeness or distance. At its best, contact leads to a deepened sense of the mystery of the other, a deepened love for the other and a deep stillness between both parties. At its most difficult, there may be friction, conflict or even full-blown anger as a result of feeling the differences. Often we feel anxious in the face of differences and sometimes this anxiety can escalate to 'fight or flight' reactions. We need to learn how to manage and express strong emotions safely.

*Withdrawal* or distancing is also a necessary and potentially healthy aspect of a marriage. We withdraw, whether briefly or for longer periods, in order to attend to our own needs, soothe our own wounds or re-ground ourselves. We might withdraw in order to recharge our batteries and re-emerge later more fully available.

We withdraw because as adults we know that no one else is *ultimately* responsible for our own happiness or wellbeing. So we take time, whether regularly or occasionally, to hibernate, replenish and rejuvenate ourselves. You can see this phenomenon across the animal and plant kingdoms but for some reason some of us humans have been reluctant to embrace withdrawal as a valid part of life and a valid part of marriage. Some of us are downright scared by our need to withdraw or by our partner's withdrawal. Sometimes the withdrawal is not well negotiated or concluded, or sometimes we don't know how to take care of ourselves in our withdrawal, but there is nothing wrong with withdrawal in itself. In fact it's part of life.

Some cultures value one of these three legs over the other two, one of these three sides to relating and marriage over the other two. Western culture seems perpetually besotted with confluence but uncomfortable with contact and withdrawal. If you look at popular culture (movies, songs and other media) you will see plenty about falling in love and having great sex but not so much about managing differences or withdrawing with integrity.

As in milking, so it is in marriage. We need all three legs to have a solid, well grounded stool.

We need to learn how to be happily confluent and build genuine intimacy – also known as '*into-me-see*'. This is not about swamping someone else with your needs or letting yourself be swamped by someone else but rather it's about meeting as equals and developing a deepening capacity for knowing one another and being known at a deep level, 'naked and unafraid' as the saying goes.

We also need to develop an appreciation of the contact boundary in our various relationships – the dividing line between my deeply held convictions or perspectives and yours, the space between me and thee. Any real relationship will entail differing thoughts, feelings and behaviours in each party and it's a sign of maturity that we learn to honour both sides, both viewpoints, and stay engaged. Sometimes our anxiety will rise in the face of differences and sometimes we will have difficulty managing that, but the answer is not to try and eradicate those differences. We need to learn how to support ourselves and stay engaged with the other in ways that don't diminish either of us but rather enlarge our perspectives and grow us up.

Finally, we also need to practise the art of good withdrawal. Sometimes that will need to happen spontaneously 'in the moment' to get our bearings. Sometimes we might need to withdraw for a while each day for some quiet. Some of us need regular weekly and monthly time out, retreat time so that we can replenish our depleted souls. If we have such a need, it is important to honour it. And if we have a partner with whom we are sharing life, it is important to negotiate times of withdrawal in a mutually acceptable way.

The three legged stool is your friend. It's a handy portable aid to building a healthy balanced marriage. It's essential to sitting solidly amidst the changing fortunes of marriage and family life, the uneven ground that is part of life.

## Part III Moving Forward

### 14. Sex and other mysteries

There are many myths in our society about sex. If you believe the sex surveys, everybody is doing it more than you are and having bigger and better orgasms than you are. If you believe the pornography industry, everybody is banging their way through each and every day with any and every stranger who comes along.

At the other end of the spectrum, if you're a marriage counsellor you can be forgiven for thinking that it's a miracle that married couples are having *any* sex at all, let alone mutually satisfying sex, given the delicacies and difficulties that often set in during marriage.

For many in Western society, the words *sex* and *marriage* have become an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. We associate *sex* with singleness, fun and freedom, whereas we associate *marriage* with a faithful but boring captivity and a slow relentless decline in sexual activity. It's time to dispense with this myth.

Sex has admittedly had a chequered career and its reputation is still mixed. In some relationships, sex is a sacred and intimate act between two people who gaze deeply into each other's souls and find no greater pleasure than taking time to pleasure the other. In other relationships, sex is a mechanical, soulless act in which there is little or no intimacy. In my experience, *both* scenarios are common amongst singles and married couples. In other words, what kind of sex you're having has more to do with the people *in* the relationship and their approaches *to* the relationship than whether you are single, de-facto or married.

Relationships take work and some relationships take more work than others. People are imperfect and some combinations of people struggle more than others and therefore need more attention and assistance than others. What matters is whether or not you and your partner are willing to do the work when it's required and get the help you need.

There are many ways in which a sexual relationship can go awry – very few relationships experience smooth sailing sexually.

One of the most common difficulties, particularly in long-term committed marriages, is a disparity in sexual desire. Many couples find that one party has a higher libido than the other. The high desire person, generally the man, often feels like he faces a painful dilemma. Either he imposes himself on his partner or he lives with a level of ongoing frustration at his desire not being reciprocated. The low desire person, most often the woman, is likely to feel the complementary dilemma. Either she goes along with what feels like an imposition or she sets the status quo (the frequency of sex) in a way that reflects her preference.

The challenge for both parties is, as David Schnarch says, 'to step up to the line and hold onto yourself.' In other words, to have the courage to engage, be open and honest in the moment, and support yourself in those difficult moments when the two of you don't want the same thing or aren't in the same mood or space. It's not that there is necessarily anything wrong with either of you. It's just that deeper relating and negotiating is necessary.

In the old days it was widely accepted that the man had to be 'serviced', that it was his wife's (or mistress's) duty to meet his sexual needs and that men had a right to expect their needs to be met. These days some men (and some women) still hold that view.

On the other hand, in many relationships these days the low desire person is calling the shots. Many women report that they have gone off sex because, as David Schnarch puts it, they don't like the sex they are getting. For many women, the last frontier of self respect and control over their own body is the right to say 'no' to sex. Meanwhile, many men report frequent knockbacks, plummeting self-esteem, rising sexual frustration and increased resorting to pornography, prostitutes, affairs or casual sex.

While these strategies may bring some sort of short term relief, they bring a lot of other consequences as well - over and above the moral objections - and they are no long term solution. In short, they perpetuate the split between love and sex and create an additional set of psychological and relationship problems. Pornography is bad for your sex life because it conditions your sexual responsiveness in unhealthy and unrealistic ways. Similarly, the use of prostitutes is unhelpful and unhealthy because it sets up a pattern of 'sex on demand' and 'paint by numbers' sex with no emotional investment. And affairs create a variety of problems. Some affairs develop to fill an emotional need while others are based purely on lust. Some meet a combination of emotional and physical needs. However, unless you are available to develop the relationship fully, you end up perpetuating a very painful split which must eventually be resolved one way or the other.

It takes courage and candour to interrupt a pattern of declining intimacy in a marriage, to ask the tough questions such as,

- 'What's happening to us?'
- 'What's happened to us?'
- 'What gets in the way of you wanting me and me approaching you?'
- 'What gets in the way of me opening myself to you sexually?'
- 'What do we need to do to rebuild a mutually satisfying intimacy between us?'

Pattern interruption – asking the difficult questions – is the first step. But it has to be done in an inviting, genuinely curious way because the feedback you get may not be pleasant. Not everything you hear will make you happy. Hence, for some couples it is vital that they have these conversations with the help of a skilled and qualified relationship counsellor.

Then, having begun the process of pattern interruption, the next step is to deepen the communication so that a new connection is made around the old issues. It takes mutual courage and perseverance to drive change and to maintain the new patterns. Just as it takes two to get into unhelpful patterns, it takes two to make the necessary changes and sustain the new patterns.

## 15. Differences, difficulties and World War III

Every couple must eventually face their differences. While the early stages of a relationship are often based on perceived similarities or shared interests, time will reveal what lies beneath the surface and the future of a relationship will largely depend on how each party deals with their differences.

Some say that differences are the spice of life. We may not always like the spices offered to us, they may be unfamiliar or unsettling, but they give the marriage its unique flavour. They can also be the catalyst for personal growth.

Differences are part and parcel of married life. No two people are the same. However, if those differences are not addressed and integrated into the marriage, they can lead to tension or friction. This is no judgement on you or your partner. It's very common. To quote Scott Peck again, 'there are only two valid reasons for marriage: for the children and for the friction!'

If tensions or frictions are acknowledged and aired openly and respectfully, they can be dealt with constructively. A way forward can be found that honours both parties, even if there are necessary compromises or trade-offs. If the negotiation is conducted well and the resolution is genuine, couples can generally return to a state of homeostasis (balance or rest) until the next tension or friction arises.

If the negotiation is not well conducted, or the resolution is not genuine, conflict often follows or one party capitulates – 'anything for a peaceful life' – but this is not really peace. If conflict arises, it's generally because the differences have not been properly addressed and integrated into the relationship. It's time to pay attention to the 'contact' leg of that three legged stool outlined earlier.

How do you know if you've got a real relationship? Your partner can get to you! At times like this, our task is two-fold: we need to support ourselves *and* we need to listen carefully to the other person. By 'listen carefully' I mean listen beyond the raised volume, beyond the emotive language, to what he or she is saying about him or herself. In other words, your partner's anger is first and foremost *information about him or her*. There may be some feedback for you in what he or she is saying, but it is firstly *information* about his or her hurts, sensitivities, limits, struggles and vulnerabilities.

The most important component to supporting yourself whilst listening to difficult communication is to keep breathing. It's the most basic but the most overlooked way that we can support ourselves. Unless we maintain adequate oxygen intake, not much else can happen. Shallow breathing pushes your heart rate up and brings on the 'fight or flight' reaction. Deep, regulated diaphragmatic breathing slows your heart rate and calms your nerves.

Keeping your pulse rate under control is vital to good communication. Once your pulse rate gets over about 90 beats per minute a whole set of automatic reactions are activated which are not helpful to conflict management and problem solving in a marriage. To put it briefly,

you basically stop listening and you stop seeing the other person as a human being. You're ready to go to war. Breathing evenly and slowly can help prevent this or turn it around.

The other component that helps with self support is your posture. I see a lot of men slump in the chair when their wife is giving them challenging feedback, or some women hang their head when they're feeling overwhelmed by life. Reorganising your posture can help you start to reorganise your internal world. Lifting your head, or sitting up straight and breathing deeply, or standing up straight and looking someone in the eye, can all help to shift how you feel on the inside and therefore shift the conversation.

Most couples experience times of conflict. What matters is not whether you have conflict but how you manage it and how you clean up afterwards.

If the conflict is well contained and eventually well resolved, it need go no further and the relationship can return to homeostasis again. However, if the conflict is not well handled, fighting or abuse or violence can follow. Many women can sting with their tongue; many men can bruise with their physical strength. Neither is acceptable. Both types of weapon demean the other as well as oneself. If things have got to this point, the professional help that may have been 'a good idea' earlier on is now urgently needed.

Every genuine relationship has its inherent difficulties because every genuine relationship has its inherent differences, however great or small. The couple who has 'never had a cross word in 50 years' has probably, I suspect, maintained an uneasy peace at the expense of one or both parties. Differences have probably been swept under the carpet and individual aspirations or perspectives have most likely been sacrificed in the interests of maintaining 'a happy marriage.'

For most of us, the problem is the reverse. We tenaciously cling to our perspectives, preferences and convictions. We rise to battle too quickly and man the ramparts at the first sign of 'enemy fire.' 'Be damned if I'm going to let her/him push me around!'

Somewhere between these two extremes – fight or flight – lies the art of economical effort and genuine openness. We need to know when to 'live and let live' and when to open ourselves to new learning. We need to go beyond our reflexive defensiveness and our win-lose thinking to the place where we can develop sufficient solidness within ourselves such that we have nothing to prove and nothing to defend.

This does not mean that we will be fair game for abuse – we still need to be able to challenge unfairness and injustice. It simply means that our first reaction in conflict will not be driven by insecurity and reactivity but rather by that combination I mentioned earlier – self support plus genuine engagement with the other.

You can check on your level of self support by noticing your breathing, your pulse rate and your posture. Breathe from your diaphragm. Slow your pulse rate by slowing and deepening your breathing. Support yourself by sitting or standing up straight and holding your head up.

You can check on whether you are genuinely engaged with your partner by noticing what your eyes and ears are doing. Are you still seeing the other person, as they are? Or do they look like they have horns? Are you still hearing them, truly listening to what they are saying, or have your ears switched off?

To stay engaged with your partner while also remaining centred within yourself takes courage and practice.

## 16. There is nothing like marriage to teach you about loneliness and solitude

Most of us get married convinced that 'This is the one!' This is the one who will love me, take care of me, and treat me as I deserve! If we didn't start out with such promise, we probably wouldn't start out at all.

However, the greater the promise is, the greater the fall. The grander the delusion is, the greater the pain of reality. Sure, it's reasonable to expect our partners to love and care for us but this wish *to be taken care of* in some ultimate and perfect way is an illusion.

Life is bi-polar - joy and sadness, love and anger, closeness and separateness – and so is marriage.

Just as night follows day and winter follows summer, loneliness follows togetherness and solitude follows intimacy. These things are bi-polar. You cannot have one without the other.

If we open ourselves to the bi-polar nature of marriage, we can learn to make our peace with it. It takes us less by surprise. We learn that the dry and difficult times are part of life and part of an authentic relationship. We learn that we don't need to do battle with these times but rather we can support ourselves - and each other - through them and see what we can learn from them. We don't need to 'pathologise' or 'medicalise' such times or try to 'fix' them. As Richard Rohr says, 'Everything belongs.'

Some of us are unfamiliar with the withdrawal leg of the three-legged stool outlined earlier. Some of us fear that side of life. We try to avoid solitude and loneliness by never withdrawing. We keep busy and stay stimulated like those who have the radio or TV on every waking moment or those who make sure they go out every night of the week.

What are these people running from – silence? What is it they fear? So many people don't know how to spend an evening or a day with themselves. They feel the need to have some sort of media on constantly, even if in the background, 'for company'. It's as if they don't like their own company, not that they've ever really tried it or let themselves get comfortable with it.

The good news is that solitude and loneliness are not the same things. Henri Nouwen, in his classic book *Reaching Out*, mapped the movement from loneliness (not wanting to be on your own) to solitude (finding joy in being on your own). He highlighted the 'suffocating loneliness' many of us feel and try to run from. Ironically, he said, it is only when we accept our essential loneliness that we can begin to move from 'fearful loneliness' to 'receptive solitude' and from there to living creatively and joyfully.

## 17. Infidelities, affairs and one-night stands

Monogamy is, as they say, 'a Big Ask.' To contain everything that goes down in a relationship – love and anger, joy and sadness, intimacy and solitude, togetherness and loneliness, births and deaths – within a faithful lifelong marriage takes courage, humility and perseverance.

They are many ways in which this journey of marriage can go awry but really only one way in which it can be fulfilled. There are a hundred ways to fail at a marriage, and even those of us who are still in our first marriage can fail regularly, but there is only one way to return to the path when you realise you have wandered off it – completely and unconditionally. As the Zen saying goes, 'Doubt if you must, then persist.'

We all have only so much specialness to share around. We need to be clear about the specialness that belongs only with our partner compared to the things we share with family, friends or colleagues.

Why do we wander from the marriage? Perhaps we fall in love. Perhaps we fall into lust. Perhaps we meet someone who genuinely seems like a better match – the phenomenon of 'the perfect stranger.' At the time, our reasons are likely to seem compelling, even irrefutable, and we feel justified in following our compulsion.

Behind the pull of the new attraction, there is generally something missing at home - a loneliness or difficulty or distance between us that has left us hungry and vulnerable to the attentions of someone else. The difficulties may not necessarily be visible. The distance between us may be a subtle thing. Whether these things are overt or covert, something is missing. The marriage feels like it's 'not enough' and this new person on the scene touches us in a new and refreshing way. We feel different and alive with this new person while at home we feel stale, bored and in a rut.

In many ways this set of circumstances is natural, even inevitable. Marriages *do* become very familiar, sometimes stale and boring. And new relationships generally *are* fresh and exciting.

The question is how to refresh the marriage and how to manage the new attraction.

To refresh your marriage you first need to clean your lens, re-examine your map of the territory and commit to addressing the nitty-gritty. This will require courage, perseverance, goodwill and initiative. And like many special tasks in life, you may need to seek specialist help.

To manage an attraction that is distracting you from your marriage you will need vigilance, self-awareness and discipline. Perhaps that's why many of us choose the easier path – self-gratification and self-justification.

I am yet to meet anyone who does not wish for a lifelong, loving, faithful relationship. The problem is, most of us want our partners to make it happen. We need to get ourselves into the driver's seat. And we need to commit ourselves to learning what needs to be learnt. How is it done?

## 18. My journey, your journey, our journey.

It is a great pity that the notion of 'the journey' has become an overused cliché for I believe it is still the best metaphor for understanding life and, in particular, marriage. The important thing about journeys is that what matters most is not the destination but how you take the journey.

In every marriage there are three main journeys going on – his, hers and theirs. When children come along that adds a few more journeys, and surrounding most marriages are extended families whose members are also on journeys of their own, whether they like it or not.

The key to a life-long, loving, faithful marriage lies in our commitment to honouring these three journeys – his, hers and theirs - and our growing capacity to resource them.

The first responsibility of any living organism is its own survival, wellbeing and growth – '*my journey*.' If I don't know how to take care of myself, I'm not going to get very far and I'm not going to be much use to anybody else. If I don't know how to be a good steward of the gifts, talents and sensibilities that make me who I am, I won't have much to offer anybody else – partners, friends or children. I am the custodian of this evolving self.

The golden rule, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' implies a healthy foundation of self-love. You can't give someone else something you're not first capable of giving yourself. I'm not talking about narcissistic self-indulgence or self-preoccupation. These kinds of 'self-love' are a distortion of true and healthy self-love and do not lead to a deepened love of neighbour. I'm talking about an attitude of care and appropriate attention towards yourself – what some people call 'mindfulness.' I'm talking about having sufficient regard for yourself that you know how to support yourself through difficult times and you don't engage in activities that darken body or soul.

As Golda Meir said, 'If I am not for me, then who will be? And if not now, then when...? But if for me only, then what...?' We need a healthy self-love and self regard in order to live and love in a healthy way.

David Schnarch speculated many years ago that most people who leave their marriage do so not because they don't like the other person but because they don't like who they *themselves* have become. They have shrivelled up in the marriage. They have become a shadow of their true self and it feels like a matter of personal integrity, if not survival, that they leave.

If we neglect the self in the name of the marriage or the family, or because we believe that our partner could not cope with who we really are, we start down the slope of unhealthy self-denial and unhealthy self-less-ness.

The second journey to be honoured in every marriage is the other person's – '*your journey*.'

Your gifts, talents and sensibilities are going to be different to mine, even if in the early years we played down those differences. While you are ultimately responsible for your own

survival, well-being and growth, if I love you I will be committed to supporting you in that and honouring your journey even when it diverges from my own.

This divergence of journeys may well be about big things, not just little things: different beliefs, values, priorities and approaches to life. We all have different ways of doing life. We all carry within us different truths, long held cherished beliefs and perspectives that are the result of upbringing and the sense we have made of our life thus far.

If I truly love you, I will honour your ways of doing life and your beliefs (even if I don't share them) as much as I honour my own. I will gladly do this for you and, of course, I need you to do the same for me.

This means that when we cannot come to an agreement about something we will look for ways of honouring one another's integrity and well-being. We will look for ways of giving you enough room to grow and thrive, and give me the same, even if our ways are different. We will carve 'our journey' out of the sum total of your journey and mine. We will hold in tension those differences that define us and do our best to hold them with reverence.

This brings us to the third journey in the marriage – '*our journey*.'

Conventional wisdom says that 'our journey' is the bit where your journey and mine overlap. Maybe that has logic to it but I think it's too narrow. Everything I do in a marriage impacts on you, directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly. We are not simply separate atoms bouncing around in space, occasionally bumping into one another and even more occasionally coming together. Rather we are spiritual and sentient beings whose very heartbeats and moods mysteriously influence one another. If you are anxious, I will know in an instant. If you are down, I am likely to feel a pull into your mood. These things happen automatically, as soon as we exchange a glance. Before anything has been said we are picking up on each other.

Thus, 'our journey' is the sum total of *you plus me plus us* - all of the above and sometimes more. It is greater than the sum of the parts. It is being woven every minute of every day just by our simple gestures and neglects. Conscious and unconscious forces are constantly at play.

This is why it is not possible to have an affair or a one-night stand and not have it impact on the marriage. Despite our best efforts at concealment, if we betray our partner we will become different around them. We will feel different inside and chances are that they will pick it up, sooner or later. Even if we deny it, there will be something different between us. For we all have only so much specialness to share around.

Wendell Berry described marriage as, 'a not entirely satisfactory solution to a not entirely soluble problem.' There is so much going on that none of us could ever fully attend to it all. Between *my journey*, *your journey* and *our journey*, there are bound to be some things which fall through the cracks, some things which get neglected from time to time and need to be brought back on to the agenda.

The key, as I see it, is whether both parties are committed to maintaining some overall balance and harmony between these three journeys. If I'm just doing my own thing and not paying sufficient attention to you and your needs, or just letting you do your own thing and

neglecting my own needs, or if we are so focused on our shared journey to the neglect of individual needs, these are all variations on an unhealthy imbalance.

Just as the three legged stool outlined earlier needs all three legs to be healthy, we need all three journeys to be in balance in order to have some overall balance in the relationship.

I need to pay sufficient attention to the things that matter to me, and I also need to be paying sufficient attention to the things that matter to you. And maybe part of your growth is to get to know those parts of me that are different to you as well as making sure that you honour your own journey through life. And finally, it's not just about me and you, it's about us. It's about that mysterious thing called 'the relationship' and how we journey through life together.

## 19. Children and other happy distractions

There is nothing quite like children to test a marriage. If as would-be parents we knew just how testing the first few years of parenthood can be – physically, emotionally and relationally – I am confident that most of us would reconsider.

A newborn baby may be a wonderful thrill and a precious gift but an unsettled infant who won't sleep properly for a year or two can wear you down to your bones, and there is nothing like sleep deprivation to test a marriage. And as for sex... 'Who said anything about sex?!

Somehow, by some minor miracle, our children survive the early years and start to put their stamp on the household. If things were complicated before when there was just the two of us and a total of three journeys, now there are three or four or more of us - I've forgotten how many relationship combinations and permutations that creates.

And then, if an ageing grandparent needs our close attention or needy friend or relative moves in, it will take even more care to ensure that neither the marriage nor the family unit nor any one member of it gets neglected in the hurly burly of life.

The good news (and perhaps the bad news) of child rearing is that they are all different. From one and the same gene pool can come a shy, insecure, highly sensitive soul and an overly confident, highly sociable, perhaps feisty, more resilient sibling – just to keep us on our toes.

At times like this, giving sufficient care and attention to balance is more important than ever. Everything and everyone belongs. Nobody's needs, aspirations, ways of doing life or cherished truths should be trampled in the name of 'moving forward as a family.' But the corollary is also true - no single member of the family should be allowed to hold the rest of us to ransom with bullying, intimidation or rampant selfishness. Just as in the marriage it's *you* *me* and *us*, similarly in the family it's *you* and *you* and *you* and *me* and all of the possible combinations and permutations of *us* – they all matter and we all matter.

## Part IV Driving Change

### 20. Creating a different marriage

Sometimes you've got to give the old marriage a proper send-off before the new one can emerge. And sometimes you have to do that several times over in a lifetime.

Sometimes a marriage becomes like an old coat that no longer fits, or an old way of doing things that no longer works. It would be a shame to throw out the old coat if it's still serviceable – better to let it out, get it enlarged or reconfigured. And that old way of doing things may not be completely invalid – it's just too limiting or constricting, it needs updating.

Marriages often go through cycles of dying and rising. I often say to clients, 'You can't have the rising unless you're prepared to have the dying.' With each 'dying' there may be things that need to be jettisoned – old ways of being, old ways of seeing situations and old ways of reacting. However there may be some things that survive and regenerate as happens after a bushfire, for example the desire for true intimacy, a deepened commitment, and a renewed admiration for the other person. This process of a relationship dying and rising is always delicate and often unpleasant – sometimes it's excruciating and calls on every ounce of courage you can muster – but it's all necessary. It's part of life and part of the cycle of regrowth.

Another way of thinking about the journey of a marriage is like chapters in a story – each instalment can only emerge after the one that's gone before. Each chapter lays the preparation for the one that is to follow. Some chapters are pleasant; some are unpleasant. Some are easy and smooth; others are hard and rough. Some are safe and comforting; others are difficult even perilous. They all belong and they all have something to teach us. Are we willing to learn?

Sometimes you need to build up your personal reserves before embarking on a difficult chapter, like an animal hibernating in winter – conserving energy, slowing everything down and quietening yourself.

Sometimes this process will feel like climbing a mountain. Mountaineers are careful to develop their strategy and build their campaign over time. They set up base camp and then systematically take forward supplies and equipment to the advance camp. The advance camp becomes the launching pad for what may be several attempts on the summit. The weather is examined. The risks are calculated. The necessary supplies and equipment are itemised. The support crew is briefed. The climbers are rested. Then, when the time has come – generally in the dead of night – the leap of faith is taken.

Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith before anything can change. The summit cannot be known by just sitting and waiting and observing conditions at the advance camp. Somebody has to muster the courage to say, 'It's time to go for the top.' Or in the journey of a marriage, 'It's time to see what we're truly capable of.'

If you want to see the summit you have to be prepared to leave the comfort of your sleeping bag and your tent and step out into the dark night of the soul. Nobody else can speak your truth for you. Nobody else can summon the courage that you need in order to step up to the line and hold on to yourself. You may need help to muster that courage and you might need help as a couple to say the difficult things in a constructive rather than destructive way, but only you can decide when you are ready to step up and step out into the unknown.

We can never know in advance what the outcome of our courage will be and we have to be able to live with the variety of possible outcomes. It is only in embarking on the next stage of the journey that we can discover what is there. Therefore, we need to step up with openness to whatever follows.

Sometimes you will drive deep change and at other times it will be important to let things unfold at a slower pace. Some people in these situations report a sense of being carried, held or supported by a higher power. Like the Serenity Prayer, they have learned to accept the things they cannot change but they have found the courage to change the things they can, and the wisdom to know the difference. They are not manipulating, demanding or trying to control the process but rather have learnt to work with the process which includes times of silence, waiting, watching and learning some trust.

By any or all of these means a different marriage may emerge. True transformation comes from that paradoxical combination of courageous purposefulness and surrendered letting go. When you've come through the process of true transformation, nothing is the same again. Everything is made new.

Many years ago my wife and I went through such a process over several months. When it came to its natural conclusion, I wrote the following song, *'Earth to My Sky.'*

'Strange how it all seems so easy these days  
Even the journeys that take me away  
You give me your blessing freely and fully, I know.  
Strange how I seem like a different man  
At home in my skin, at home in my hands,  
I open my mouth and let out a sound, again.  
Strange how you seem like a different woman  
Strange how I see you with different eyes  
We meet and complete our design  
You earth to my sky.'

## 21. Daily Acts of Heroism

It takes courage to commit to another for a lifetime, regardless. It is counter-intuitive – it goes against the voices inside us that say, ‘You have a right to be happy. If s/he is difficult to live with, move on. Maybe it was never meant to be. It just didn’t work out. You weren’t compatible. You’ll be happier with someone else...’

When things are difficult, not many of us stop and ask ourselves, ‘What do I need to learn here?’ But that is exactly the question that we need to ask. What is my marriage trying to teach me here?

The courage required to ask such a question again and again is not unlike the courage of the mountaineer. Doubt if you must, then persist.

As the old saying goes, ‘The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.’ Daily life – daily marriage – is a lot of little steps, a lot of little opportunities for fidelity and sacrifice, a lot of seemingly insignificant moments where we get to choose.

Our choices often boil down to two pathways: love or fear - generosity or mean spiritedness, goodwill or resentment, faithfulness or division, and thinking systemically or blaming. It’s a lot easier to feed disappointment, resentment and grievance than it is to swallow your pride, acknowledge your hurt and be the one who initiates a constructive conversation (or series of conversations) that make space for both parties to speak and be heard.

## 22. Daily gifts of love

Thankfully marriage is not all hard work. Sometimes it's easy work. And sometimes it's play.

Sometimes we find ourselves doing it effortlessly, although we probably kick-started the healthy patterns by paying close attention to what needed addressing.

Thankfully our work, whether easy or hard, is generally rewarded. Our courage generally bears fruit, albeit not always on our schedule.

Sometimes the fruit falls into our lap seemingly out of the blue, unearned. We may be surprised by joy, by a chance conversation that brings us closer or an occasion of lovemaking that brings a deeper connection than usual.

Sometimes we may be plunged into sadness or grief, but then have it melted away by a surprising tenderness from the other. It's all part of the picture. It's the truth that sets us free. Everything belongs.

Marriages often go in cycles, seasons. If we can meet everything that happens with faith, hope and love – however difficult this may be – we are enabled to continue the journey.

As Scott Peck used to say, happiness is accepting what happens.

### **23. Marriage is a mixed bag**

Most of us embark upon marriage with stars in our eyes. The first flush of romance is generally still lingering and very evident at the wedding. The attention to detail on the day suggest that nothing is too much trouble and the happy couple get to be the centre of attention before being waved off on their honeymoon.

My dictionary defines a honeymoon as 'a holiday spent by a newly married couple before settling down to normal domesticity' or 'the first weeks immediately after marriage' or 'any period of happy or harmonious relationship.'

Whichever definition you prefer, they all imply a limited period of time which is removed from and different to ongoing reality, the 'normal domesticity' referred to above.

The third definition, 'any period...', goes even further and implies that happiness and harmony should not be expected on an ongoing basis.

Marriage is a mixed bag because we are a mixed bag. We don't come to marriage full of happiness and harmony within ourselves so why should we expect that the conjunction of the two of us should lead to happiness and harmony. Some couples have an easier time of it than others. A small minority of marriages seem to be smooth sailing. However, for most of us the periods of happiness and harmony are punctuated by times of tension and difficulty and we need to make our peace with the changing weather of the relationship.

Much like the seasons of the year, relationships are fluid and dynamic and constantly subject to change.

We all have our preferred seasons - some would love to spend every day of the year lying on the beach working on their tan in the blazing sun while others cherish being rugged up by the fire in the dead of winter - but the other (non preferred) seasons of the relationship are part of the picture too and have their place in the overall scheme of things.

Just as nature needs all the seasons and all the cycles of blossoming, dying off, sprouting and growing, so relationships need to go through all of those cycles if they are to be whole expressions of the whole of life.

## 24. Mixed feelings are normal

The mixed bag of marriage, which is the result of the union of two mixed bags, inevitably leads to a mixed bag of thoughts and feelings about that marriage and about marriage in general.

Some of us are more suited to marriage than others. Most women seem more suited than most men. Women tend to be better at we-thinking (observing the patterns and needs of relationships) while men tend to be better at me-thinking (looking after Number One). Some of this is the result of socialisation but some of it is in the wiring and seems to go back many thousands of years.

Some temperaments find marriage easier than others. Loyal Phlegmatics seem to take the ups and downs of life in their stride most of the time while Melancholics can struggle to keep an even keel. Confident Choleric can bring their planning and leadership skills to marriage and family life while live-for-today Sanguines can want to take one day at a time and not look too far ahead. Each type has its own strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to the question of *gender* and *temperament*, each *personality type* will experience its own challenges when it comes to marriage. There are several models of personality types but the most widely accepted is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and there are many books and articles on personality types in relationships. Given that we tend to choose partners who complement ourselves, rather than another version of ourselves, there are bound to be tensions or difficulties along the way as each of us faces the challenges that marriage raises for us.

Finally – in addition to gender, temperament and personality differences - there are *contextual factors* that impact on a marriage such as race, religion, geography, upbringing and family history, personal history and the circumstances under which a couple first meets.

Each marriage is a unique mystery - you might even say a unique *miracle*. Each marriage is the combination of two unique individuals, each with their own troubles and joys. Each couple embarks on a unique path and each couple forms patterns of relating in the early years which set the tone and direction of the relationship. Thus each marriage faces unique challenges and unique opportunities.

Marriage is a journey into the unknown. Therefore we may feel lost from time to time. It's not possible to live in close proximity to another human being on a day to day basis without having your own interior world shaken up from time to time. That's why marriage is for grown-ups.

## 25. Marriage is for grown-ups

Marriage is for grown-ups because only grown-ups can cope with the mixed bag of marriage, and only grown-ups are willing to be grown up by the mixed bag that is marriage.

In childhood and adolescence we are in many ways the centre of our own world. As we grow into adulthood, we are challenged to let go of that self-centredness and join the rest of the human race, or at least one member of the human race who is markedly different from our selves.

In marriage there is a sense in which we 'lay down our lives' at times (or at least our personal preferences) for the greater good. This is not to be taken literally. There is no justification for violence or abuse that leads us to feeling like nothing. I am not talking about those situations. I am simply talking about developing or allowing a broader view of life than just *me and my wants*.

No wonder we have mixed feelings about marriage. No wonder we experience marriage as a mixed bag. It challenges our sense of entitlement and strikes at the heart of our inherent narrowness of vision and selfishness.

Difficulty is inevitable; pain is likely. Suffering is probable; wasted suffering is tragic. So how can we manage and learn from our suffering?

We need to develop the skills of self support in order to manage the challenges of marriage. In particular we need to monitor and adjust our breathing, our pulse rate and our posture. If we can get ourselves better organised *physically* when we find ourselves in difficult situations, we will be better able to manage the *psychological* challenges we encounter.

It is inevitable that in sharing your life with another human being over the course of the lifespan that your needs, anxieties and fears will be triggered. The 'fight or flight' instinct is normal. It's in the wiring, presumably the result of many thousands of years of fending off invaders or dealing with the threat of violence. Our vigilance and our quick reactions are part of our physical survival instincts.

On the psychological or emotional level of life, we have similar instincts. We are drawn to some people, repulsed by others. Some people 'turn us on,' others 'piss us off.' However, to grow is to grow beyond our initial reactions, our simple black and white judgements. And there is no better place to practice that growth than in a marriage.

To grow is to notice the full spectrum of responses within ourselves to others and develop the capacity to support ourselves through emotional rain, hail and sunshine.

When you're up close and personal with someone over the course of the life span, you're going to need the skills of self support, the ability to comfort and quieten and reassure yourself at times, and console yourself in the face of painful difficulties or loss. The good news is that marriage gives us lots of opportunities to practise those skills and develop them over time.

## Part V Staying Grounded

### 26. Marriage is for grown-ups and it's marriage that grows us up

We have seen that marriage is light and dark, joy and sorrow, harmony and tension, and sometimes conflict. We like to think we are in control but marriage is a thing that is both within and beyond our fashioning, within and beyond our control.

We have, hopefully, come to terms with the fact that we meet, then marry, then get to know each other and ourselves. And we have hopefully accepted that what we find will not always make us happy (in the conventional sense of the word).

We need more than good intentions if we want to fulfil the potential of our marriage. We are on a journey of discovery and we do not get to choose who or what we will find. This is why marriage is not for young people. We may 'get married' at a young age but we only truly *become* married as we make our peace with the nature of the journey and all that we are finding along the way.

Perhaps this is the best definition of 'marital bliss' – acceptance – in much the same way that Scott Peck defined happiness as 'accepting what happens.'

Acceptance is not the same thing as passivity, resignation or defeat. Rather it is the kind of acceptance that goes out to meet whatever challenges life brings.

We won't always do this journey with grace and elegance, but what matters is that we persist. Marriage will do the rest. Marriage will grow us up. As David Schnarch says, stop working on your marriage; your marriage is working on you.

How does marriage work on me? It keeps me honest and accountable. You might even say it keeps me humble although that's a word that is much misunderstood. To be humble comes from the root word *humus* meaning earth. Marriage reminds me that I am of the earth. As we say, it keeps my feet on the ground.

Marriage reminds me that my needs and perspectives are not the only ones in the room. It works away at my ego and my defences much like a good masseuse works on stiff or knotted muscles. In a word, it is *transformative* (if I will let it be).

Something in me would much prefer a *transactional* approach to marriage, one that's based on a 'quid-pro-quo' deal: 'You meet my needs and I'll meet yours. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.' In a transactional approach to marriage, if you don't measure up I can discard you and if I don't measure up you can discard me.

Every now and then I have to admit that maybe you were not put on this planet to meet my needs (nor I yours). In other words, that's not the main reason we are each here. The fact that we somehow manage to meet some of each other's needs in the course of relating is a wonderful thing but it's by no means guaranteed nor can we demand it.

A transformational approach to marriage sees wider, deeper possibilities. Life has brought us together and we have chosen to share life in this way. We will each teach the other significant things (without necessarily setting out to do so) and we will each learn from the other significant things (if we are open to learning). We will delight and disappoint one another. We will touch one another at times and then at other times miss the mark, not connect as we would wish.

As we grow in courage, candour and compassion, we will deepen and broaden our capacity for connection. Thus our needs will, at times, be met but not because we demand that they be met.

In this not entirely satisfactory solution to a not entirely soluble problem, the mystery is that most of us choose to stay married. Maybe something in us knows that marriage is a high and noble calling, however difficult it may be at times, and we feel drawn to hang in there even if only to find out how it all turns out.