



the **DNA** *of*
RELATIONSHIPS
for **COUPLES**



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Dr. Robert S. Paul



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The DNA of Relationships for Couples

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DEDICATION

Greg Smalley dedicates this book to his wife, Erin.

Thank you for the unconditional love you so abundantly provide. I could not have written this book without your sacrifice, encouragement, and support.

You are my last love and best friend. I love you.

Bob Paul dedicates this book to his wife, Jenni.

Thank you for all your years of patiently accompanying me on this incredible journey. The extent to which you have enriched my life can never be adequately expressed in words. Because of you we will enjoy eternity together.

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Many professional colleagues have left their unmistakable handprint

on the development of the ideas presented in this book. Our current team includes Chris Arnzen, Tricia Cunningham, Dr. Shawn Stoeber, Nathan Phillips, Jane Phillips, Dr. Robert K. Burbee, Dr. Brett Sparks, Cindy Irwin, Pat McLean, Tamara Hanna, and Gary Bruegman. Additionally, we have had the opportunity to work with a number of other incredibly bright, creative, and talented people over the years, including Dr. Scott Sticksell, Dr. Peter Larson, Dr. Kelly Vick-Morse, Sheryl Haile, Amy Smalley, and Dr. David Swift.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

The DNA of Relationships for Couples is based on the work and ministry of the National Institute of Marriage and therefore has many elements consistent with a four-day Couples Intensive seminar. However, characters are based on composites of personality types and are therefore fictitious. Any similarity to an individual case is purely coincidental. Any slights of people, places, or organizations are unintentional.

The purpose of this book is to educate. No individual should use the information in this book for self-diagnosis, treatment, or justification in accepting or declining professional advice and treatment.

The DNA of Relationships for Couples is set mostly in Branson, Missouri. Some of the landmarks, such as the Bradford House bed-and-breakfast, have been placed in their true settings but have been embellished for the purpose of readability. Other buildings, parks, and establishments are nothing more than figments of our imaginations. We hope those of you who visit will have fun distinguishing between the two.

INTRODUCTION

“What? Marriage Should Be Thrilling?”

Greg’s Story

“How am I doing as a wife?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that seemingly innocent question. But since Erin and I had been married only four months, I wondered how hard it could be.

“Fine,” I said.

Have you ever said something that you wished you could immediately delete, like words on a computer screen? Erin’s sudden lack of breathing made me wonder if “fine” wasn’t really what she wanted to hear.

“*Fine?*” she echoed.

“What?” I asked. If I had been a batter in a baseball game, you would have just heard a gigantic *whoosh* sound as, for the second time in four seconds, I hit nothing but air.

“You think I’m just FINE!” Erin snapped again.

There it was again. The way she echoed my “fine” was somehow very different than I had intended it.

And then Erin asked me to do something that still gives me chills. “On a scale of one to ten, rate how I’m doing as a wife.”

“Is ten the best?” My voice was shaky.

“You’re stalling.” *She’s good*, I thought. Then I came to the

sickening reality that I was actually going to have to answer her question.

“Well,” I started, feeling like I was walking not just on eggshells but on the heads of chickens, “I would rate you as a . . .” And then it hit me. I had the answer! A confident smile pursed my lips as I said, “You’re a 9.4.”

I know what you’re thinking: *Greg, you idiot, you blew it!* I know. But remember, you weren’t there to wave your arms frantically and scream “No!” like the guy on the deck of an aircraft carrier waving off a fighter jet about to crash into the side of the ship.

You see, in my mind, God is a perfect ten, and since Erin isn’t God and I thought she had a little room to improve, a 9.4 was pretty great.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. It was as if I’d rated her .0000439.

“What am I doing wrong?” was her immediate (and let me emphasize the word *immediate*) response.

“What?”

Stee-ri-ke three!

“Why don’t you think I’m doing a good job?” Erin asked, obviously hurt.

“Honey,” I begged, “a 9.4 is awesome. I meant that as a compliment.”

“But I want to be perfect for you.”

Erin and I lay in bed that night arguing about her score. We argued for a good forty-five minutes before we both rolled over and went to sleep unhappy.

My last thought before drifting off was, *And you wondered why I didn’t rate you a 9.9.*

Erin and I hadn’t done any premarital counseling or training; after all, we were “in love.” Besides, I was the son of Gary Smalley, the famous marriage expert. We had a surefire ticket to a great marriage. I remember actually saying to Erin, “We aren’t going to be like those *other* people who fight and argue all the time.”

Sadly, I was very wrong. Erin and I had no idea what it took to develop a great relationship. It got so bad that three years into our marriage, I thought we were just one argument away from Erin's leaving me and going home to Phoenix. I didn't think she'd divorce me, but I was convinced that she didn't want to live with me anymore.

Eventually, Erin and I got some help. We learned ways to deal with our conflicts and experienced some improvement in our marriage. Sadly, though, our early brush with marital difficulties made us lower our expectations. We went from wedding-day hopes of marital bliss to mere relief at finding *some* happiness and experiencing *some* success. Being married was a lot more challenging than I had originally imagined, and I unconsciously learned to be content with having a "good" marriage. That is, until I began to work with Bob Paul.

Bob's Story

Like Greg, I came from a family of marriage experts and authors. I entered marriage with Jenni convinced that I knew the way to the Promised Land of marriage; all she had to do was follow me. As you might guess, we struggled miserably—for the first thirteen years of our marriage. During that time our four beautiful children came along, and we were blessed in many ways. But relationally things got worse and worse between my wife and me.

I have always loved Jenni and wanted to have a great marriage; still, no matter how many ways I attempted to fix our problems and point out to her what we needed to do differently, we got more hurt and disillusioned. Over time, the thought of having a "great marriage" increasingly became a question of whether or not we would even *have* a marriage. Our troubles progressed until the telling moment when Jenni made a statement that has forever symbolized for me the utter desperation of our marriage at that time. In a heated moment filled with hurt, anger, and disgust, she

looked at me and declared, “The thought of ever making love to you again makes me feel like I’m going to vomit.”

I had no idea what to do or where to turn. For years I was convinced that if Jenni would just do as I suggested, things would be great. Not now. I was no longer able to believe in myself. Proverbs 14:12 kept ringing in my ears: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” I had tried my way for thirteen years, and now marital death was hovering frighteningly close. Fortunately for me, the complete hopelessness of the situation caused me to turn to God in a way I had never done before. I pleaded with God, “There must be something I need to learn through this pain and this mess of a marriage. I’m ready to learn whatever I need to in order to become a man you can be proud of. Teach me, Lord.”

I spent the next two painful years on a path of incredible personal challenge and growth. Many times I became discouraged about whether my marriage and family would ever be restored, but I determined that either way, I was going to learn what it meant to love as God loves and to be a man after his own heart.

In my years as a marriage therapist since those days, I have had the opportunity to witness countless marriage miracles—transformations that defy the imagination. But my favorite one of all was the one that occurred in my own marriage. Two full years after my wife had closed herself off from me, Jenni was challenged by God to reopen her heart. Suddenly, without warning, she did . . . and I was ready! I had been given another chance where I believed there might never be one, and I was determined not to blow it.

Today, almost twelve years later, Jenni and I are thrilled—*thrilled*—with our marriage. It’s not perfect, but I no longer expect perfection. We are imperfect people living in a crazy, mixed-up world.

So what’s different? What caused our marriage to move from the brink of disaster to a relationship better than either of us had ever thought possible? Many of the answers are found in this book.

Like Greg, you may think your marriage is fine . . . or like me, you may believe your marriage is over. Either way, few of us truly believe that we can ever be “thrilled” with our marriage. But we can be. We know this is not a word you hear often—especially in tandem with marriage. But we want to show you how this can be your reality. Does it sound like a long shot? impossible? That’s okay. Stay with us. We have yet to see a marriage fail when a husband and wife are dedicated to discovering all that God has intended for them.

Welcome to a New Experience!

We have walked this journey of hope with thousands of couples in a variety of ways—seminars, conferences, workshops, videos, and books—and we’ve had wonderful responses. But nothing else we have found comes close to our Couples Intensive program in helping couples understand God’s hope for their marriage.

Consistently, people ask us for real-life stories to help them understand how to apply the principles we teach. We recognize the extraordinary power of watching relationship principles in action, so we’ve taken these requests seriously. We are excited to present this book, which is written to give you exactly that—an entirely new approach to self-discovery and application through story.

This book is unlike any other marriage book you will find. Rather than attempting to follow the steps of just another self-help book, you are about to enter into a fictionalized, true-to-life journey with us through one of our four-day Couples Intensive programs. Though it has the look and feel of a novel, you’ll not find here a fantasy with neatly packaged, better-than-life romance. Instead, we invite you to step into our world, to engage with us in an unbelievably realistic journey based on authentic accounts of conflict, intrigue, and heartbreak—all the while receiving a guided tour through the awesome world of hope renewed and love redeemed.

How to Best Read and Enjoy This Book

You are about to be introduced to four couples who will arrive shortly for a four-day Couples Intensive in Branson, Missouri. They are normal people with normal problems, and all of them are struggling in their marital journeys. Their issues represent some of the most common types of problems we all encounter in relationships, the kinds of things most of us can relate to.

Imagine that we have asked you to fill our last guest reservation. One of the most powerful benefits of attending a Couples Intensive is discovering that marriage is challenging for everyone—and that the situations most of us encounter are startlingly similar. The details will vary, as will the severity, but the underlying challenges typically have more to do with our humanness and our attempts to conduct intimate relationships in a fallen world than they do with our specific differences. The four other couples in your group are a passionate, dynamic bunch who, like you, are looking for answers—who dare to imagine that their lives can be different. We invite you to enter into this intimate setting where you are privy to their Heart Talk involving their deepest concerns, hopes, and hurts . . . perhaps not so different from your own.

We realize that not everyone's marriage is in the same place as these seminar participants. You may not be on the brink of divorce or dealing with an affair, as Ryan and Becca are. You may not have a problem with unmet expectations like Rodney and Chelsea. You may not have a communication breakdown as Todd and Pam do, or a long-standing misunderstanding like Charles and Victoria. But you do need to learn to create a safe environment in your home so you, too, can express your heart to your family. We have found through our work with hundreds of couples that a relationship doesn't have to be in crisis to benefit from these powerful ideas and tools. Couples with *good* marriages discover ways to have *great* marriages.

We ask anyone who is considering attending one of our Cou-

ples Intensives to be open to God's working a miracle in their marriage. This is the one and only commitment we expect. We want to ask you, our reader, to make a similar commitment while you read this book. Refuse to be satisfied with mediocrity in your marriage or with having a "fine" marriage, as Greg was. Refuse to be satisfied with the status quo.

We realize that reaching the final destination—experiencing the ultimate marriage—requires two people committed to following the Lord's leading together, and you may not have a cooperative or interested spouse. The great news is that we've found a way for even one person to make a major difference by learning and using these principles.

Imagine

Do you sometimes feel as if you're living with a stranger? Has your passion ebbed like the tide? Perhaps you feel trapped in the same old arguments regarding finances or the kids. Life may seem to go on with its daily stresses, creating emotional distance between you and your lover. Possibly, boredom reigns in your bedroom.

You may feel alone.

Imagine if things could be different.

To engage in a story, one must imagine. And we invite you to do that. Place your preset expectations and judgments aside long enough to imagine your marriage being free of anxiety, void of misunderstandings, intimate, and filled with grace—as free-flowing as the movements of a beautiful ballet, or like a secret garden in springtime, fragrant and teeming with new hope and life.

Imagine what God hopes for you and your loved one.

Imagine if you were able to come to Branson, Missouri, in the early spring to spend four days with us as we coached you personally through the areas where you are stuck. . . . Imagine coming up the steps of a grand Victorian bed-and-breakfast tucked back off the main path, where you will be uninterrupted by daily chores, employers, children, or complications. Dare to imagine.

There are no guarantees of success, and we can never wrap up marriages with a neat bow. Each person will have to make a choice. What will it be? Come on in, kick off your shoes, and dialogue with us. These will be four days you'll never forget.



Rodney went to the kitchen window one more time. Stretching over the sink, he leaned closer and pulled back the curtain, as if he could will himself to see headlights bouncing toward him in the distance, indicating that Chelsea might be coming home. Everything was dark, save the little streetlamp at the end of the drive. She wasn't answering at the office or on her cell. Should he call the police? A mix of worry and rage—fear—crept into his throat. His wife might be in trouble.

He had played with the kids and fed them dinner, assuming she'd been held up at the office. Next he bathed the two toddlers, read books to them, and tucked them into bed. Still Chelsea was not home. He was getting nervous. The young dad watched several sitcoms and willed himself to wash the dishes—mainly so he could stay close to the window. Three more hours passed. Rodney didn't know what to do. It wasn't as if this was the first time his wife, a professional who refused to be controlled by anyone or anything, had arrived home long after she'd been expected. But not this late. She would be furious if he called the police.

Flopping onto the couch, Rodney paid little attention to the

living room floor strewn with books and toys. Instead, images of his wife played out in his mind. Wondering, worrying, he fought with his suspicions. *She's been really loaded with work . . . she's been so annoyed with me . . . I know she goes out after work sometimes . . . pushing deadlines, that's all . . . there are all those attractive men in suits!* Hauling his large body off the couch, he went to look out the window one more time and then to check on the children.

Jack's cheek was mashed against his pillow, and his lips were pursed in an open-lipped pout. His chubby palm fell open, making him as vulnerable and innocent as any little human being could be. Hannah slept on her tummy in her crib with her knees bunched under her so that her padded bottom stuck up. Rodney leaned down to brush away her curls and kissed her temple.

Standing there watching his children sleep, Rodney felt even more desperate for Chelsea's return. At bedtime, little Jack had asked about his mommy and refused to be consoled until Rodney promised she'd give him a kiss as soon as she got home. These kids needed their mom. Where was she?

By the time Chelsea's SUV pulled up to the curb, the clock on the microwave read 2:13 a.m. Rodney's emotions had covered the gamut. With a mix of relief and anger, he knew this was it. He had to confront his wife about what was going on. He would meet her at the door and insist on an explanation. Her key was in the lock. He had waited up all these hours, and he fully meant to stand up and ask her, point-blank, what was going on.

The door opened quietly. Rodney panicked and remained paralyzed in his prone position. He heard his wife sidestep the cat and tiptoe quietly past the couch, where he was pretending to be asleep.



“This is Julie. How may I help you?”

Rodney froze. Calling the Marriage Institute had seemed like

a good idea, but now he wasn't sure what to say. "Um . . .," he stammered, "a . . . a friend gave me your number a-a-and said I should call." He took a deep breath. "I don't know what to do. Several days ago, my wife moved out with the kids and said she is leaving me." The house was now barren. No laughter, no children squealing, no cartoons. He could hear his voice trembling, but he went on anyway. "I love my wife and kids, and I don't want to lose them. Can you help us?"

"I hope so," Julie said. "But first, tell me about what's going on in your marriage so I can help you decide if our programs are what you need and, if so, which one is right for you."

Rodney wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "My wife says I don't take any initiative in our relationship. It's not that I don't love her, because I do . . . with all my heart." He fought back tears. "I think it may be too late. I'm just not sure what to do."

"Are there other specific complaints or issues between the two of you?"

"Well . . . sort of . . ." Rodney explained that he didn't make enough money and that his wife claimed she wanted to be at home with their kids, but instead she wasn't coming home until late at night. Her resentment toward him continued to grow, no matter what he did. She hated the fact that he was still working at the Boys & Girls Clubs of America and pressed hard for him to go through management training or more schooling. "But I like my job. The work is steady, I have flexible hours, and I'm good with the kids. . . . I'm sorry for rambling."

"Not at all," Julie said. Her voice was pleasant, and she seemed patient. Rodney started to relax a little. "It's helpful to understand a little bit about what is happening in your relationship. It sounds like both of you are unhappy and feeling misunderstood. I can't help but wonder if maybe you haven't even gotten to the root of the problem."

That was exactly how he felt, but the idea of getting to the root

of the problem was unsettling. Terrifying, actually. What *would* be discovered at the root of their troubled marriage?

Julie explained that the counselors she worked with, Dr. Greg Smalley and Dr. Bob Paul, were marriage specialists who helped people get to the root of these kinds of issues every day. They made sure both spouses felt safe before diving too deeply into their issues. She then described the Intensive programs available and encouraged Rodney to go to their Web site for more details.



A TALK WITH THE DOCTORS

Don't Go It Alone

We'd like to step aside just briefly from Rodney and Chelsea's story and talk with you, the reader, for a moment. Throughout this book, as you get to know our fictional couples and eavesdrop on their counseling sessions, we'll interrupt from time to time with words of encouragement, challenge, or clarification. These little "author asides" will be called "A Talk with the Doctors" and will be set apart in sections such as this one.

The first thing we want to share with you is that people were never meant to figure out how to create great relationships without help and support from others. Whether your relationship is good and you want it to be great, your relationship has occasional disappointments or challenges you don't know how to handle, or your relationship is a mess, don't go it alone. Reach out to others when you're grappling with relationship issues. There are many different ways to reach out to others. You can talk to a trusted friend or pastor, meet privately with someone in your Bible study or accountability group, visit a professional counselor, or attend a Couples Intensive like the one described in this book. It's often difficult for people to take the first step, just

as it was difficult for Rodney to make that phone call. But your marriage is worth it—and so are you!

Maybe you're reading this book not because you have marriage challenges yourself but because someone you care about is struggling. If this is the case, we commend you for your compassion. We are confident that what you'll learn in these pages will better equip you to be that listening ear, should your friend choose to turn to you for help.

Whatever your personal situation might be, we invite you once again to come along with us as the fifth couple for this week's Couples Intensive in Branson. It is our hope and prayer that as you listen in on these fictional couples' lives, you will learn something about your own marriage relationship, and maybe even something new and exciting about yourself.

“An Intensive sounds like exactly what we need,” Rodney told Julie, still nervous about the idea of discovering the root of their problem. “But I'm not sure Chelsea will even consider coming. Would you be willing to talk with her?”

Julie explained that just as medical doctors can't manipulate their patients to come in for checkups, their practice, for ethical reasons, wouldn't allow the staff to pursue clients either. They would simply have to wait until Chelsea was ready to contact them. “I'll be happy to discuss her questions, concerns, or hesitancy if and when she's ready. Does that make sense?”

“Rodney . . . ?”

As if his thoughts had conjured her up, Rodney suddenly heard Chelsea's voice. She had come in the back door, and he hadn't noticed.

“I just stopped by to pick up some extra clothes for the kids. I won't be long. Sorry to interrupt you.”

“No, Chelsea . . . no problem. Um, I . . . was just talking with someone who might be able to help us. They . . . she wants to talk to you.” He held out the phone, hoping against hope that she

would take it. Looking a little skeptical, she did. Rodney slunk out to the porch and sat on the front steps to wait.



“Hello? This is Chelsea.”

Chelsea listened while Julie explained who she was and why Rodney had called. Impatient, the young mother worked around the kitchen while giving the woman on the phone a chance to describe a four-day Couples Intensive program and inquire as to whether this was something the couple would be interested in.

“You know . . .,” Chelsea started hesitantly, while reaching into the cupboard for the sippy cups, “to be honest, I don’t know if I even want this marriage to work. I’ve tried hard for too long; I’m tired of hoping my husband will change. I don’t know that I’m willing to put forth the effort to make it work.”

Julie asked Chelsea if she was afraid to give her marriage another chance.

“Yes. I am disappointed with my marriage, and I just don’t want to try anymore.” She slumped down on an old stool in the kitchen. With a foot up on a high rung, she leaned her head against the wall. The cupboard doors needed to be scrubbed, food and crumbs had gathered under the table, and muddy scuff prints marked up the door. “More than anything, I just want to be happy, I want my children to be happy, and . . . I can’t see how we can ever be all that with Rod in the picture.”

Julie acknowledged that each individual has to sort through this kind of stuff on their own and that it was not her place to tell Chelsea what she needed to do, or not do, with her life or marriage. “That is strictly between you and God. And we’re confident that you and he can sort it out.” Julie went on to clarify how the goal of the counseling center was to come alongside couples in a way that would be useful to each person. “In fact, we really have

only one question that we ask couples in order to determine whether or not we can work with them.”

“Only one question?” With the phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear, Chelsea grabbed the broom and started sweeping up the mess on the floor.

“In order for us to feel confident that you are ready to enter our program, you need to answer yes to only one question: If God were to work a miracle in your marriage—even if the miracle is similar in magnitude to the parting of the Red Sea—would you be willing to receive that miracle? In other words, if God were to part the sea before you, would you be willing to walk through?”

Julie paused and then continued, “It’s not necessary to believe the miracle *could* happen, or even to hope for it. The only question is, Would you accept it if it arrived? If your answer is yes, we are anxious to come alongside you both to see what happens. If the answer is no, we would encourage you to save your money and time.”

There was a long pause. Chelsea glanced over at Rodney, who stood leaning against the door frame, looking a little anxious.

“Mhmm,” was all she could summon. “I don’t know what to think of all that. I guess if God wants to do a miracle, I’d be willing to receive it.”



Becca Stuart wasn’t sure how she and her husband had arrived in one piece. They had originally planned to travel separately, but she soon thought better of it and decided it would be a good idea to spend a few hours together en route so they could get their stories straight. She and her husband, Ryan, had been separated for one month, and any kind of communication was impossible because of innumerable interruptions—and it proved no better while traveling across the nation.

“Right there on the sign, Ryan. We need Highway 65—you’d

better turn around here.” No sooner had they found the right highway to Branson than Ryan’s cell phone rang.

“That better not be the hospital,” Becca said. The young physician and his wife had not been out of the Springfield rental car lot longer than five minutes before the hospital was calling *again*. “Can’t they leave you alone?”

Ryan ignored his wife and continued the call. “Yeah, Monty. Tell me what her symptoms are again. I couldn’t hear you.” He shot Becca a dirty look.

Becca could hear Monty’s voice through the phone’s earpiece as he described the patient’s symptoms: headache, nausea, stomach tenderness, bleeding, swelling, high blood pressure, and protein in the urine. She knew the symptoms for HELLP syndrome were serious. This situation called for immediate response from an ob-gyn. Becca could see her husband’s frustration and knew he felt guilty for leaving the hospital when he was needed. Frowning, he replied, “I agree with your diagnosis, Monty. You’d better—”

“Ryan, you promised!” Becca was not happy. “Get off the phone.” Though it was serious, she had no doubt Dr. Monty Burleson could handle this situation on his own.

Ryan shook his head in disgust and gave his wife a look that had become all too familiar—the look that said, “Stop nagging and leave me alone.”

“You committed to this Couples Intensive, and now you’re telling me you can’t let the other doctors make the decisions for a few days?” She felt a familiar wave of desperation. “I can’t believe I actually hoped this might work.” On impulse, she yanked the phone cord out of the dashboard, where the phone had been recharging after a busy day of use.

They had been traveling all day, with several layovers between Southern California and Springfield, Missouri. Getting their two little girls settled with Ryan’s parents before leaving for several days had been exhausting for Becca, and frankly she didn’t care who was on the other end of that line. She had waited for Ryan’s

attention long enough. She needed him all to herself, just this once. This decision, as well as this trip, was long overdue—in fact, it may have been too late.

Ryan hardly broke stride in his conversation. Unfortunately for Becca, the phone had enough battery power for him to continue his conversation.

“Monty, I’m sorry about the interruption. Hold on one sec, please.” He covered the phone and grabbed Becca’s wrist. She knew by his expression that her behavior baffled him. “Stop being so dramatic, Becca. This will only take a minute. A woman’s baby and her life are at stake.” He pushed her hand back onto her lap, glanced at her, and rubbed his forehead. “It’s not always just about you, you know.” Ryan picked up where he had left off in the phone conversation.

In a fit of rage, Becca swung her body away from Ryan, stared out the passenger window, and began to read aloud the large billboard ads that littered the highway as they drove south.

“Silver Dollar City . . . ,” Becca announced with sarcasm. “Maybe we should go there instead of to the Couples Intensive, since our lives seem to revolve around money.” Leaning toward the phone, she shouted, “Hey, Monty, did you know there was a *famed* Highway 76? Cool . . . look . . . Andy Williams sings at the Moon River Theater. Ryan, wouldn’t your parents just love it?”

Ryan was livid. He held the phone away from his face with his thumb over the speaker and whispered fiercely, “Are you finished yet?”

She wasn’t. With every ounce of her energy, she would make it known to Ryan and anyone else within earshot how miserable he had made her life, and she didn’t feel the least bit guilty for making his life a little uncomfortable in return. “Yakov Smirnoff has a show. Remember him from TV? Oh, my goodness,” she mocked in a high nasal tone, “Shoji Tabuchi is in Branson too!”

“Monty,” Ryan almost yelled into the phone, “I’ll call you back in a few minutes. . . . Thanks.” He gripped the steering wheel

as if he needed to hold on to it to keep from hitting her. “Becca, what *is* your problem?”

“Oh . . . look who finally cares.”

“Look, Becca, you know I have patients I’ve been seeing for close to nine months. I’ve told you—I don’t know how many times—that I feel sick about leaving just when they are about to deliver. I can’t just ignore the hospital.” He glanced at her. “How would you have liked it if Dr. Jacobson had left town right before we gave birth to Michaela or Sydney?”

“Don’t give me that. I’m not worried about Dr. Jacobson’s marriage. I’m worried about ours. I can’t imagine him working night and day, and—and then going straight to the gym or sailing or . . . or to the nearest break room for a little tryst.”

Silence.

“Actually, your ‘hero,’ Dr. Jacobson, is divorced.”

“Well, I’m not surprised.” The delicate reality of their own wrecked marriage once again appeared insurmountable. “And that’s exactly where we’re headed.”

“Whatever,” Ryan muttered as he turned his attention to the radio dial.

“Wow, honey, you lasted a whole minute in the conversation this time before shutting down. I think that’s a personal best for you.” Becca knew she was pushing her husband over the line, but she didn’t care.

“I never should have agreed to come to this marriage counseling,” he said. “Are they going to help you accept the reality that you’re married to a doctor? This argument is always the same. You want all the goods, Becca, but you don’t want any of the inconveniences. . . .” He swore. “I’m so sick of this conversation. It’s like we’re caught in an endless cycle. There’s a price we have to pay to have the things we want. Why do you think I work so much?”

“Because you’re a pushover.”

“Oh, that’s mature.”

Becca turned back to read road signs. A long silence ensued before Ryan spoke again.

“The real question is, will you ever trust me again?”

She had no response for that.

“You keep making the issue about my job, but I think your unwillingness to let up on some of your petty demands is causing huge problems.”

“Have you completely lost your mind? The ‘huge’ problem in our marriage, Ryan, is the fact that you can’t seem to keep your pants up. I’m not the one who keeps saying, ‘I don’t know what I want. . . . I’ve tried to stop seeing her. . . . She’s the one who calls me. . . . I’m so confused.’ Give me a break. And how about honoring God by honoring your commitment to our marriage—how about we start there?”

“Okay, that’s enough. I’m done,” Ryan countered. “I mean it, Becca. This is never going to work. We might as well go home.”

Just then his cell phone rang again.

“Hey, Dr. Waterman,” Ryan answered. “No, you’re not interrupting anything important.”



Todd and Pam Davis were the third couple to arrive for the Couples Intensive. Pam was elated at the sight of their final destination. The Bradford House, a Victorian-style bed-and-breakfast built with elegant turn-of-the-century charm and furnished in characteristic 1920s style, was tucked off of Blue Meadows Road. Surrounded by giant trees, flowering bushes, and lovely spring flowers, its broad wraparound porch and double-door entry were unpretentious. When Todd pulled into the drive canopied by oaks and maples, it seemed to Pam as though they were out in the country, even though the inn was close to all that Branson had to offer. Quietly statuesque, the estate looked to her like a piece of paradise.

Her husband scowled.

The Bradford House, though expansive, was cozy and inviting, perhaps even romantic for those whose marriages weren't on the brink of disaster. What a contrast it was to their simple parsonage in Phoenix. *It all looks a bit fancy, but wonderful for hurting couples*, thought Pam. Its shaded velvety lawn was framed with flower beds of tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, peonies, roses, and irises with large, plump blossoms ready to explode.

Pam knew Todd wasn't impressed. Such frivolity seemed wasteful to Pastor Todd Davis. The inn looked excessive, and he was a practical man. With her arms wrapped tightly around her thick waist, Pam hoped she could hold back the rising waves of nausea. "Todd, I feel sick. I better wait here in the car for a moment." Feeling ill had more to do with the person at the wheel of the rental car than the winding roads that dipped and climbed like a roller coaster. Pam had been trying to hide her excitement. These four days were for her benefit, but they came at an excruciatingly high cost. Todd would expect her to show improvement equal to the sacrifice he'd made. She hated feeling indebted.

Her husband was still in a huff about the money he'd paid to register for their four-day getaway. This arrangement was not his choice. And though he never said it directly, his sharp tone clearly communicated that he hardly found her worth the amount he was paying to fix her up.

If I were a vehicle, he'd have traded me in a long time ago.

She watched as her husband slammed the car door and practically lunged toward the welcoming entrance of their beautiful accommodations. He had made known his belief that this was a waste of good time and God's money. The sooner they got this first part over with, the better.

Wanting to hope, Pam felt fear clawing at the back of her throat. She cracked the passenger window of the rental car for a bit of fresh air. Maybe her blood sugar was low; she did a quick blood-level check. It looked fine. Her anxiety had to do with much

more than the physical symptoms of her diabetes. Her mind and heart were in trauma. How could she receive help without being exposed when Todd was with her the entire time? What if the therapists only gave enough information to enable her husband to reload his guns to use against her once they arrived back home?

It wasn't long before Robert and Cristy, the Bradford House host couple, appeared on the front porch with Todd. Eager to personally greet each guest, they were friendly and helped with luggage while escorting Todd and Pam inside. Pam could hardly pay attention to the dialogue, however. Once inside, her fears were stowed away at the sight of the Victorian decor. These four days would be a treat for her regardless of what happened in counseling. How she wanted to explore! The inn had a delicious apple-cinnamon aroma, which made her want to find the kitchen. Her eyes followed the winding staircase, circling up past the arched entrance to the great room. For now, she obediently followed Rob and Cristy toward a massive mahogany desk. Pam would take a tour later.

Keeping the conversation light, Rob asked how the new guests had met. Without a thought, Todd answered with offhanded sarcasm, "I was witnessing outside a strip club." He laughed at his own joke and insinuated further that he'd been waiting for his wife's shift to end.

Pam was mortified, but Todd was oblivious to the awkward pause that followed.

With raised eyebrows, their hosts tried to cover her husband's ill attempt at humor by busily providing room keys and details about their stay.



Pam was hurt by Todd's inappropriate response to Rob's question, but she didn't want to start a fuss as soon as they walked in the door of their room. Instead, she asked, "What do you think Cristy meant?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She was referring to what Cristy had said while they finished the check-in process. Cristy had mentioned that they should be sure to read what had been written on the inside of their closet. *And why did Cristy look directly at me and say that it would give me hope? If she only knew how far I am from hope!*

Todd left the room without saying when he’d be back. Pam sat still, with her eyes squeezed shut, making bargains with God. How was she going to survive this man?

Alone at last, Pam opened her eyes to admire their room in peace. She marveled at its lovely Old English furnishings. She lived a simple life, but she loved beautiful things. Feeling like a queen, she set about arranging her belongings and settling in. Cristy’s words played over and over in Pam’s mind. What did her host mean?

The room was furnished with a stately armoire that matched the cherrywood of the king-size bed, but she was drawn to the closet off to the side. In fact, her heart skipped a beat. Cristy had said that reading what was written inside her closet would bring her hope. *I could use a little hope.*

She opened the closet and adjusted her eyes to its dark interior. It seemed fairly ordinary—cool, cramped, a bit musty. At first glance, it didn’t look like anything special. As beautiful as the rest of the historical bed-and-breakfast was, the closet had seemingly missed the last couple of face-lifts given to the rest of the inn. In fact, upon closer scrutiny, the inside of the closet looked shabby and scarred from hard use. Little attention had been paid to its upkeep. Not much hope there. Maybe she had missed a detail in what Cristy had said.

Poetically, Pam realized how closely this old closet resembled her life. A pastor’s wife, now forty-five, with two teenagers and an eleven-year-old; she felt hidden, in a bit of disrepair, and empty—especially empty. Over the years her life had been filled with children, evangelistic outreaches, and church activities. She had been satisfied. Never could she have anticipated how painful and con-

fusing raising teenagers would be . . . and the devastating loss when things turned bad.

Darkness threatened to sweep over her. No! She would fight it today. Battling against her thoughts, she busied herself with tasks around the room.

The big Jacuzzi tub looked awfully inviting, but Pam figured she should settle in first. Todd liked everything to be in order, and she wanted everything to go perfectly during these next four days. She was worth the investment, wasn't she?

First, she laid out Todd's study materials and Bible on the antique desk. Next, she carefully arranged their toiletries on the marble-topped vanity, just the way he wanted them at home. For a moment she leaned her elbows against the cool stone and looked deep into the blue starbursts of light in her eyes, allowing herself to imagine being here with a lover. A man who had gone to fetch her flowers, or . . . It wasn't like she had anyone other than Todd in mind; just the thought of such a man was dreamy.

Out of the battered suitcase she lifted the neat stack of clothes for the dresser and unzipped the vinyl hanging bag of clothes she had carefully ironed at home. She loved the smell of clean, freshly starched laundry. After noting which ones would need to be touched up again, she turned the closet light on and started to hang Todd's pressed pants and crisp dress shirts. That's when it caught her eye.

There on the back corner wall, the closet was covered with graffiti. It looked like the pages of an old yearbook, complete with dates, names of couples, and short messages.

Pushing aside their clothing, she moved to the back corner of the closet. Sure enough, several people had written special messages on the wall. When Pam read the first one, she was stunned.

"Given a chance for new life."

DAVE & NICOLE, APRIL 2006

She read the next one.

*“God does touch the deepest part of your heart.
Our miracle happened, yours can too!”*

JAMIE & DEBBIE, DECEMBER 2005

Personal messages left for her from people in previous Couples Intensives. They must have stayed in this same room. Pam’s heart began to beat faster as she read on.

*“Emotionally, spiritually, mentally, physically . . .
you can know the fullness of each other’s heart.”*

JOAN AND RANDY, AUGUST, 2005

What appeared at first to be defacement of public property was instead warm oil soothing a deep crevice of pain. Pam’s vision blurred with tears as she read each message. She had no idea who these couples were, but she glimpsed a tangible connection—a lifeline—in her crushing loneliness. She had been given literal love letters scribbled in a closet. She read how God had restored hope and healing in these marriages. “A chance for new life.” That’s what she needed most. *They couldn’t possibly have been in the same poor shape we’re in*, she thought. *Could they?*



Victoria Templeton felt as if she had been sucking her breath through a tiny straw when at last she and her husband, Charles, drove through the gate to the historic bed-and-breakfast. Their travel had gone smoothly but had been marked by long periods of silence. Victoria was certain that they truly loved each other, but they no longer knew how to communicate it. Like the monogrammed towels left hanging in the master bathroom of their sprawling home in Dallas, each nursed “his” and “her” own private

pain. Without some kind of intervention, they would be driven further apart. Victoria didn't know how much further they could go before there would be no return.

Both husband and wife had agreed to come, but locked now in her own private thoughts, Victoria speculated about how well Charles would handle being confined over a four-day period with three other unhappy couples. The quiet bed-and-breakfast atmosphere, not to mention four days of intensive therapy, could prove daunting!

Once she could breathe again, Victoria felt at ease in the fashionable surroundings. While climbing the grand, winding staircase, she paused on the balcony and gazed through dramatic twenty-five-foot windows on all sides, which displayed a gorgeous view of the Ozark Mountains, lazy and blue in the late afternoon light. It was glorious. She would come back later for a better look at the view beyond the windows and the grand fireplace stretching from floor to ceiling. In spite of the pain in her heart, Victoria would enjoy the lovely change of scenery.

Husband and wife each went to their own rooms, reserved separately. Though it felt rather awkward, it was better this way. She knew her issues would get stirred during these next several days, and she wanted to ensure that she had her own space to work through them. She could think and pray more clearly when she was alone. Of course, Charles strongly disagreed.

It felt good to stretch after traveling for several hours. She stood in front of the lace-framed window to do some Pilates. Just then she saw an eagle soar over the trees against the backdrop of the picturesque hillside. She was sure that's what she saw. She craned her neck, hoping for another glimpse. How she would have loved to share this moment with her husband or even tell him about it later, but she knew her enthusiasm would be snuffed out when he tried to debate whether or not the area had such a bird.

She breathed deeply now, bending, stretching, twisting, angled

in positions that brought her body relaxation and strength. This was her life: *solo, forte, moderato*.

Victoria had started reading the book *The DNA of Relationships* several weeks earlier and was captured by the simple yet profound metaphor of the Fear Dance. It so perfectly described her troubled relationship with Charles: how, against the backdrop of life's melody, they had fallen out of sync and little by little allowed themselves to push the other away. Being a dancer by nature, she longed to be free to dip and twirl, to move to her God-given rhythm—and she did, when she was alone. But when she invited her husband to join her, rather than together becoming a beautiful reflection of God's love in motion, they were a distorted image, crippled and twisted with pain and rejection.

She and Charles had come to the Couples Intensive with the hope that they could not only learn what was crippling their relationship, but also with the anticipation that they could learn new steps to freedom. She pulled out her book again.



Victoria woke up cold and aching. The oversize pillow-top mattress of her bed seemed excessive for a woman all alone. Once she had located her glasses and perched them on her nose, the ominous glow on the clock focused to 11:38 p.m. She was hungry from missing dinner, but she had some dried fruit and nuts to snack on. Had Charles worried? Victoria sniffed. She was capable of allowing herself a good cry, but she fought it now. She had cried herself to sleep, and her bracelet had left a perfect imprint on her cheek.

The disturbing nightmare of crippled dancers that had plagued her brief rest continued to haunt her even now that she was awake. Her anxiety was aroused not only in anticipation of starting a four-day therapy session but also because she felt safe inside the walls

of protection she'd built and she didn't want them to be torn down. She had learned to dance well by herself. *Lord Jesus, I need your peace.*

Finding her shower cap, Victoria took a long, hot bath in her Jacuzzi tub. After a few minutes in the warm bubbles and some time to pray, she began to feel sane again. She wasn't ready to ward off more nightmares, however. Wrapped in her wine-colored velvet bathrobe, Victoria decided to journal a bit until she felt relaxed and ready to sleep.

She pondered how humanity's original DNA had been woven together by the hand of God, the Master Creator, that we might dance in intimacy and freedom with him and the ones we love. She pulled out her journal and wrote thoughtfully:

The DNA of relationships = our CODE for living = we are made for intimacy with self, God, and others. Our DNA determines the fabric of our being and the ways we are created to relate. Our DNA defines our movements through life, our life dance. In spite of the disappointments and pain we now experience as a result of being born into a broken world, we are undeniably woven together to live intimately in our Father's image.

When we lose sight of our DNA of relationships, we can no longer recognize the beautiful image of God reflected in us, and we become crippled in our dance. We are designed to know and experience his perfect love in our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with him. But because of sin, we've learned to survive by acting out of distrust and fear, causing our dance to become a pained limp.

APPENDIX A

Identifying Your Fear Dance

1. Describe a recent conflict or negative situation with your spouse—something that really “pushed your buttons.” For the purpose of this exercise, be sure that you and your spouse write down the same conflict.

2. What were the buttons that got pushed during the conflict? Another way to look at it is, How did what happened during the conflict make you feel about *yourself*? What did the conflict say about *you*? What was the message it sent to *you*? Look through the following options and use them to fill in the blanks in this statement: “As a result of this conflict, I felt _____ or feared feeling _____, or I thought _____ would happen.” Check all that apply—but put an asterisk beside the most important feelings.

Putting Heart Talk into Action

Heart Talk, or emotional communication, is focused on connecting and caring for one's relationships. It stands in sharp contrast to Work Talk, in which we are communicating simply for productivity or in order to reach a predetermined outcome. Heart Talk involves listening and speaking with open hearts. You must ask, what is this person feeling? We recommend using five simple steps.

1. Make safety the first priority.

You can have the best tools, the latest insights, the greatest determination, and the most powerful strategies and still fail if the environment is wrong. In a safe environment, no one has to worry about being shamed, rejected, punished, or attacked for stating personal beliefs and feelings. A safe environment makes Heart Talk easier, which in turn creates more safety.

2. Listen to the words the speaker is saying.

You don't have to agree with what your spouse is saying or fear that you will have to change your behavior because of it. You are simply listening to gain a greater understanding of who this person is and what feelings are being expressed.

Steps to a No-Losers Policy

A win-win solution makes both parties feel good, gives positive movement to the marriage, and leaves it in a different (and better) place than it was before. How do you create a win-win solution? We have found seven steps that help both partners in the marriage feel great about the solution.

Step 1: Establish a no-losers policy.

First, remember you're on the same team. This is huge! Just keeping this in mind can change the way you treat one another as you communicate and negotiate. A no-losers policy says that it is not acceptable for one of you to walk away feeling as if you've lost. You could say, "I need you to know that I will not feel okay with any solution that you do not also feel good about." If either one of you says, "I don't feel good about this decision" or "I feel as if I'm losing here," that's it. You back up and start over. It is simply unacceptable for either of you to feel as if you're losing.

This first step instantly creates a positive tone that tends to radically improve how you treat one another. As a matter of fact, if you did nothing more than this, you would see an enormous improvement in your relationship. The worry simply dissipates and is replaced by a feeling of safety.

Overcoming Roadblocks to Forgiveness

“Why can’t I forgive?” people often ask. “I know that God wants me to, but I just can’t find the strength to go through with it.” We each have a choice to make when our spouse offends us in some way. We can refuse to forgive because of past mistakes. We can let the offense tear apart our most prized relationship. Or we can decide to forgive and allow the work of Christ to heal both our spouse and ourselves.

Let’s be honest. No one finds forgiveness an easy task. Yet we find five main roadblocks that cause most of our hesitancy to forgive.

The Five Main Roadblocks to Forgiveness

1. We fear that forgiveness somehow lets the guilty partner off the hook.

Some people confuse forgiveness with acceptance of the wrong. We believe that to forgive is to excuse. We feel as if we’re being asked to condone what should never be condoned. We think, *If I forgive my spouse, then I’m excusing what he [or she] did!* The fear is that if we pardon the offender’s behavior and let them off the hook, then they won’t learn their lesson and will most likely hurt us again.