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Divorce-Proof Your Marriage

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WHEN OUR DREAM MARRIAGE BEGAN TO FADE

Seven years into our marriage, my life was a blur. I was working hard at being a good provider for my wife, Barb, and our two young daughters, Sarah and Missy. I had a full-time job as the director of a correctional facility. At the same time, I was working toward a doctoral degree in counseling, spending many evenings each week studying at the university library.

Most of the time I felt stretched beyond my limits. As I juggled family, work, studies, and church activities, I prayed daily for strength and wisdom, longing for the day I could focus full-time on counseling families. Even more important, I wanted to free up more time to be with Barb, Sarah, and Missy—my family, the love of my life. The job and doctoral dissertation filled my schedule completely. I tried to eke out a little time here and there to help Barb, but I was at best only a part-time husband and father.

I honestly thought I was doing rather well in my role at that time. Then one day I was sitting in my favorite chair, studying for the final stages of my doctoral degree, when my five-year-old

Sarah announced herself in my presence with a question: “Daddy, do you want to see my family picture?”

I really felt stressed and pressed for time, with a week’s worth of work to squeeze into a weekend. “Sarah, Daddy’s busy. Come back in a little while, honey.” Sarah obediently left me to my work.

Ten minutes later she swept back into the living room, “Daddy, let me show you my picture.”

The heat went up around my collar. “Sarah, I said come back later. This is important.”

Three minutes later she stormed into the living room, got three inches from my nose, and barked with all the power a five-year-old can muster, “*Do you want to see it, or don’t you?*”

“No,” I told her emphatically, “*I do not!*”

With that she zoomed out of the room and left me alone. And somehow, being alone at that moment wasn’t as satisfying as I thought it would be. I felt like a jerk. So I got up and went to the front door. “Sarah,” I called, “could you come back inside a minute, please? I would like to see your picture.”

She obliged with no recriminations and hopped up onto my lap.

It was a great picture. She’d even given it a title. Across the top, in her best printing, she had inscribed: OUR FAMILY BEST.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“Here is Mommy [a stick figure with long yellow curly hair]. Here is me standing by Mommy [with a smiley face]. Here is Katie [our dog]. And here is Missy [her little sister was a stick figure lying in the street in front of the house, about three times bigger than anyone else].” It was a pretty good insight into how she saw our family.

“I love your picture, honey,” I told her. “I’ll hang it on the dining-room wall, and each night when I come home from work

and from class [which was usually around ten o'clock at night], I'm going to look at it."

She took me at my word, beamed from ear to ear, and went outside to play. I went back to my books. But for some reason I kept reading the same paragraph over and over. Something made me uneasy, something about Sarah's picture. Something was missing.

I went to the front door again. "Sarah," I called, "could you come back inside a minute, please? I want to look at your picture again."

Sarah crawled back onto my lap. I can close my eyes right now and see the way she looked. Cheeks rosy from playing outside. Pigtails. Strawberry Shortcake tennis shoes. A Cabbage Patch doll named Nellie tucked limply under her arm.

I asked my little girl a question, but I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer. "Honey, I see Mommy and Sarah and Missy. Katie the dog is in the picture, and the sun and the house and squirrels and birdies. But Sarah, where is Daddy?"

"You're at the library," she said.

With that simple statement my little princess stopped time for me. Lifting her gently off my lap, I sent her back to play in the spring sunshine. I slumped back in my chair, dazed. Even as I type these words, I can feel those sensations all over again. She had nailed me, right between the eyes. I wasn't in her family picture because I was at the library studying. I was too busy to be her daddy at home.

Although I didn't remember Barb's having expressed those thoughts, she had probably been trying to get through to me for months. All of the cautions I had received from sermons, books, and friends to keep a "balanced lifestyle"—God first, family second, work third—had not penetrated my career-bent brain. But Sarah's simple pronouncement got my attention big time.

A MARRIAGE FADING WITH TIME

Not long ago, I had an experience that helped me more fully understand what Sarah's picture really meant at that point in my life. I had pulled out some other pictures: my childhood family album. I flipped through old photos chronicling my life growing up. I stopped to examine a black-and-white photo of my mom and dad when they were newly married. I couldn't help smiling with pride at the images. Dad was one sharp-looking guy, reminding me of a movie idol from the 1940s. And Mom, I must say, was beautiful. I could see the sparkle in my parents' eyes, the look of love, their hope for a bright future.

Yet the photo itself wasn't as clear and sharp as it had been years ago. The crisp sheen that once caused this handsome couple to stand out on the page was now dull. Time had taken its toll on the old family album.

Decay is normal. In the natural process of aging, machinery wears out, buildings fall into disrepair, pictures fade, and our bodies lose their tone and strength. Scientists say, in fact, that everything in the universe is perpetually moving to greater and greater disorder—a state of entropy. You don't have to be a quantum physicist to know that even the most beautifully designed and well-built house will eventually crumble if left unattended. To keep anything fresh, alive, and in good order requires care, maintenance, and at times repair.

A marriage is no different. Unless a marriage is kept fresh and nurtured, it will fade like an old photograph. Marriage is a dynamic love relationship between a man and a woman, and at every moment that relationship is either growing deeper and richer or stagnating and decaying. And all deteriorating marriages are at least pointing down a dark and lonely road that can end in divorce.

When Sarah showed me the family picture with her daddy

missing, I realized (or at least admitted to myself for the first time) that I wasn't tuned in to the warning signs that my marriage and family life were in a state of entropy.

I WANT TO COME HOME

I mounted Sarah's drawing on the dining-room wall, just as I promised. And through those long, intense weeks preceding the oral defense of my dissertation, I stared at that revealing portrait. It happened late every night as I consumed my warmed-over dinners while my family slept. I didn't have the guts to broach the issue with Barb. And she had the incredible insight to let it rest until I was ready to deal with it.

I finally finished my degree program. I was "Dr. Rosberg," and I guess it should have been a big deal for me. But frankly, there wasn't much joy. It felt a little hollow.

One night after graduation, Barb and I were lying in bed together, and I found myself working up the nerve to ask her a question. Actually there were three questions. It was late, it was dark, and as I murmured my first question, I was praying Barb had already fallen asleep. "Barb, are you sleeping?"

"No."

Rats! I thought to myself. *Now I'm committed.*

Question number two: "Barb, you've obviously seen Sarah's picture taped on the dining-room wall. Why haven't you said anything?"

"Because I know how much it has wounded you, Gary."

Words from a wise woman, wise beyond her twenty-something years.

Next I asked the toughest question I've ever asked anyone in my entire life. "Barb, I want to come home. May I come home?"

Twenty seconds of silence followed. It seemed as if I held my

breath for an hour. “Gary,” Barb said, “the girls and I love you very much. We want you home. But you haven’t been here. We don’t know you anymore.”

The words look cold in print, but she said them with restraint and tenderness. It was just the plain, unvarnished truth. My little girl had drawn the picture, and now her mom was speaking the words. I lay there in the dark, pretending to sleep. But I couldn’t. Events raced through my mind. I remembered when Missy was two and refused to sit on my lap for more than a few seconds. Why? Because she didn’t know her daddy. I recalled missed dinners with friends, evenings Barb waited for me to come home but I had to study just a little longer. I thought about the vacations we had canceled so I could finish a class. My life had been out of control, the people in my family were on automatic pilot, and I had a long road ahead of me if I wanted to win them back.

I didn’t know at that time how God would heal the pain in our hearts. I just knew that I was at the end of myself and needed him like never before.

Maybe you have looked into the eyes of your spouse or your kids and known you were not connecting. Maybe you realized that your failure to connect heart-to-heart was mainly your fault. That’s where I was that night. I was scared. It felt as if I were slipping down a mountainside, unable to grab onto something to stop the slide. I desperately hoped to regain my balance, but near terror was rising inside me. I was afraid I could never rebuild the family I loved.

After Barb’s chilling words, I slipped out of bed and went downstairs to our living room. I pled with God that night for wisdom, perseverance, and faith. I begged him to restore my family. I was at risk of losing the security, joy, and direction I had dreamed of and expected from our marriage. Publicly, I appeared fine to our friends, coworkers, and even extended family. But privately, I could not fool the three people closest

to me. I was a man “missing in action” in our family, and Barb, Sarah, and Missy knew it.

Deep down inside I knew that God is a God of second chances. He was capable of leading me through the restoration process with my family. But that night, as I poured out my heart to God in our living room, my hope for the future seemed buried under the avalanche of pain and discouragement in my heart.

And what about Barb? Would she offer me a second chance? I’ll let her tell her side of the story in her own words.

FULL-TIME MOM, FULL-TIME PAIN

Gary wasn’t the only one feeling terribly hurt over our marriage relationship and family life. I also was hurting. I was aware, though, that it takes two in every marriage to bear the fault. We were partners in the disconnected lifestyle we were living. We entered Gary’s doctoral program in full agreement. We had decided that he would be a full-time breadwinner and doctoral student, and I would be a full-time, stay-at-home mom for our two little girls. We charged into this phase of our life together as most couples do, with optimism and our eyes wide open.

At the outset I worked hard at being my husband’s greatest advocate and cheerleader. I was very proud of him and his desire to accomplish his goals and dreams. But over time, the stress, separation, and loneliness began to wear me down. Gary was constantly submerged in work and academic demands, distracting him from me and the girls. And I felt left out of his picture. In just a couple of years I went from being an optimistic wife to a woman who felt less and less understood. My resentment began to grow. I wanted to have family time together. At times I felt a bit like a single mom because Gary was absent so much.

I cried a lot. I felt isolated. I watched longingly at other young families who were doing so many fun things together, and I wanted that for us as a family as well.

Our marriage had been my dream come true. But during these stressful years it was hard to stay optimistic. Our marriage wasn't what I had expected it to be. Gary was my best friend, and I missed him. Most days he left home before seven o'clock in the morning, and many nights he didn't return until after ten o'clock. The girls hardly saw their daddy.

I loved my husband and was devoted to our marriage. The Lord comforted me, but it was still difficult. I was determined to keep my marriage vows to this man and to God, but I lived day in, day out needing more connection with Gary. I didn't understand at the time that God had created me with legitimate needs he intended to meet through my husband. And since Gary was so absorbed outside the home, many of these needs went unmet.

I came to the point where I quit talking to Gary about my thoughts and feelings of isolation. It seemed useless. And in some ways I stopped trying. I stopped expecting Gary to fight this enemy of workaholism that was undermining our marriage. I had made suggestions, tried new approaches, even pleaded. But nothing ever changed. I didn't know how to stop it.

One day a switch flipped on the inside, and I made the decision to give up. I never told Gary or anyone else, but I remember the moment I stood in the middle of our living room on the green shag carpet and made the decision to quit trying. I was protecting my heart from feeling the hurt, so I thought. But by building a wall of protection around myself, I was not only locking up my heart but unfortunately also locking Gary out. On the outside I continued to be respectful, even pleasant—but on the inside I knew the difference. There was less transparency and sharing between us and more formality and distance. We were commit-

ted to each other, and I never would have consciously thought about walking away from him. But I had emotionally disconnected from my husband.

I know now that we were in a very vulnerable position at that point. I know now that if our disconnection had lasted for six months or more, I could have become a statistic, a “walk-away” wife.

But God in his mercy intervened before that could happen. He began to answer my prayers once I got out of the way. Then he began to work in my husband’s life.

God used our daughter’s crayon drawing to break through to Gary. A child’s simple picture was the tool. It became a non-threatening voice to help a distracted man get refocused. When Gary asked that night if he could “come home,” I had no doubts that he loved me. And my love was so deep and nonnegotiable that all I wanted was for him to come home. But would he? Could he really change? His doctorate was something we both wanted and worked for, but our marriage was suffering because of it. We didn’t know how to nurture and tend to our marriage. I had become brittle and demanding. The distance had taken its toll, and we both knew it.

I sensed an emotional distance between Gary and me. When we were together, I didn’t feel the same closeness and connection we once had. I desperately wanted Gary to come home, but in order for that to happen, something would have to change. Gary is going to share with you what that change would mean to him.

THE MISTRESS IN THE LIBRARY

In the weeks and months after I asked Barb if I could “come home,” God showed me how I had been neglecting my family emotionally. At first I didn’t want to admit that my affections

had wandered from home. I had no intention of being lured away from my family, and I certainly had never contemplated divorcing my wife. Barb and our two girls were my treasures.

At the same time, I prided myself in pursuing a career in marriage-and-family counseling. And I was doing so for the sake of God's kingdom. Yet while my goal of becoming a counselor was legitimate, I allowed books and study to lure me away as a temptress. My scholastic endeavors captured my heart and became my treasure. The love of my life—my family—was slowly and insidiously being replaced with coursework and learning: a mistress in the university library dressed in pages of black and white.

I never dreamed it could happen. I never intended for it to happen. And I was unable to see or admit that it had happened until God used my innocent five-year-old daughter as a wake-up call. God showed me through my child's drawing that I had emotionally left my wife and family for the mistress in the library.

THE JOURNEY BACK HOME

Knowing how to remedy a deteriorating marriage is vital for keeping any marriage alive and well. Barb and I didn't know how to turn our relationship around, but as I finished my doctoral work, we agreed that something had to change. We committed ourselves to finding a solution to the emotional distance between us. Little did we know that our search would initiate a journey that has become the foundation for our ministry to married couples and families today. In the pages that follow we will share that journey with you.

Can you identify with the distance and deterioration Barb and I felt? How close are you to your wife or husband today? Have the stresses, demands, and disappointments of life created

an emotional distance between you and your spouse? Do you know what to do to close the gap? If you are not growing closer together, you are drifting farther apart. Although you may never consider divorce, the road of a decaying marriage is always heading in that direction.

Is your marriage divorce-proof?

In our prayerful search to rebuild our marriage, Barb and I have discovered a marital road map that has led us back home together. We have shared this map with countless other couples—many with good marriages—and have seen their relationships revitalized and restored. The marriage map will enable you to identify where you are in your relationship, the first step in reversing relational distance and halting the slide into marital entropy. Understanding the map will help you fight negative tendencies, keep your love fresh and vibrant, and keep your relationship intimately connected and perpetually enriched.

We are not offering you a magic formula or a three-easy-steps program to marital bliss. Rather, we will describe a road traveled by thousands of couples we have encountered in the counseling office, in our conferences, or through our radio broadcasts. It is a road that leads toward home, not toward divorce. And it is a road Barb and I have traveled personally, though we have not always navigated it perfectly. It is a road rich with purpose, God's purpose. It is a biblical design that is guaranteed to deepen and enrich your relationship beyond your fondest dreams.

We cannot guarantee that walking on this road will be easy. But we can guarantee that following God's design will divorce-proof your marriage.