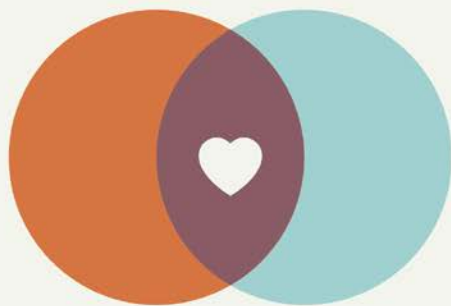


Turning Frustration and Disunity
into Closeness and Commitment

THE MERGE

for

MARRIAGE



KARI TRENT STAGEBERG

Does it feel like the honeymoon is over? Welcome to “the Merge,” that jarring moment when reality hits and starry-eyed newlyweds discover just how different they are! Thankfully, Kari has written *The Merge for Marriage*. With hope and humor, she coaches fledgling couples to address their disagreements, embrace their differences, and thrive as a team.

DR. GREG SMALLEY, vice president of marriage and family for Focus on the Family

If you are looking for a dry, heady book that will get lost on your shelf, move on. But if you are looking for a book that is transparent and vulnerable—rich with wisdom and full of heartfelt insight—then you are holding the right book. Kari Trent Stageberg is the real deal. She has embraced marriage, mothering, and life in the midst of all the ups and downs, and she understands how to help married couples shrink big, intimidating mountains through small moments of change.

DR. GARY AND BARB ROSBERG, marriage coaches and authors of *The 5 Love Needs of Men and Women*

Something counselors learn that can powerfully change lives is helping people put a name to the huge challenge they're facing. *The Merge for Marriage* is not just a way to name and bring incredible insight to the challenges of marriage—it's a whole book full of “we can do this!” tools to guide couples toward greater commitment and greater closeness. Get some couples around you who are facing the Merge and read and put into practice the principles in this book.

JOHN TRENT, PHD, president of StrongFamilies and coauthor of *The Blessing*

If you're newly married or have been married for a few years, you'll want to read *The Merge for Marriage*. This book shows you how to leverage the inevitable challenges you face in merging your two lives so that your differences actually bring you closer together. Kari has a fun, vulnerable, and practical approach. You'll love this book.

DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT, bestselling authors of *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*

Kari provides insights, tools, and strategies to help couples get on the same page and work through their challenges. This book is a must-have if you are looking for a new way of overcoming the gridlock and patterns that keep you hurt and divided. If you are looking to bring real joy back into your relationship, you will find the answers in the timeless and life-giving truths that Kari presents.

ROLFE AND LEA CARAWAN, founders of Transformed Living

The Merge for Marriage is outstandingly practical and outrageously entertaining. It's easy to trust someone's advice when they share the most vulnerable and redeeming pieces of their journey. You'll see yourself in the book, see your spouse differently, and have hope for a beautiful Merge.

JILL MONACO, founder and CEO of Jill Monaco Ministries

Many in-love and engaged couples have short-term wedding dreams and long-term relationship goals. However, the process of getting from one to the other can test even the healthiest of relationships. In *The Merge for Marriage*, you will find insight to understand your spouse and your goals. Kari's wisdom and practical tools, such as your own customizable Merge Map, will leave you more prepared, encouraged, and inspired to meet your long-term relationship goals.

HALEY SCULLY, senior director of strategic and international operations for Hope for the Heart

With a solid plan and an understanding that we are able to leverage our strengths instead of living with friction, *The Merge for Marriage* provides a step-by-step plan for couples to come together and have a successful Merge. A must-read for all couples merging together!

GJ REYNOLDS, author and coach

You know that couple you look at and think, *I wish I had something like that*? Kari and Joey Stageberg are such people for me. The book you hold will get you *there*—to a place that makes others wonder how *you* have such a great marriage. Kari’s fun style makes it easy to read a book that addresses complex challenges. And the ideas, exercises, and lessons make her principles easy to apply. Whether you are in your first few days of marriage or the first few decades, this book will launch you toward your dream of a marriage that fits you and your spouse.

DR. MOLLIE BOND, author of *Hopelessly Hopeful*

Weddings are beautiful celebrations of love as two lives become one—so why do a shocking number of couples fail within months? Perhaps they don’t know how to map the merge of ideas, personalities, and core values into oneness. *The Merge for Marriage* provides a technique and a literal map that can save countless marriages from experiencing pain. I recommend that every marriage add the powerful communication techniques found in *The Merge for Marriage* to move from conflict to connection.

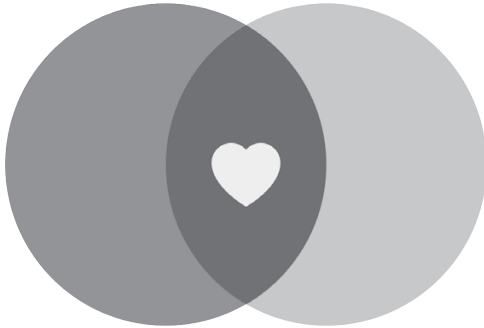
DWIGHT BAIN, founder of The LifeWorks Group

My wife and I have been married for forty years, yet I still discovered several useful tools in *The Merge for Marriage*. It would’ve been great to have this book thirty-five years ago, but better late than never! I encourage you to take hold of the jewels of information within this book and incorporate them into your current relationship, no matter how long you’ve been married.

MATTHEW WARD, singer, songwriter, producer, and founder of Matthew Ward Ministries

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into Closeness and Commitment

THE MERGE
for
MARRIAGE



KARI TRENT STAGEBERG

FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY®

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To Joey, the love of my life:

I would not be who I am, or where I am, without you, your unconditional love, and the way that you model health, strength, and Jesus in our home. I hope and pray we get fifty more years to love, merge, and enjoy life together.

To Lincoln:

You are our greatest blessing. May you always know that when it comes to your dad and me, “forever our name, eyes, and heart” will be there. I love you, my son.

Also, to my mom, dad, and sister:

You’ve all worked hard as encouragers and editors, and I could not have done this without you. Thank you for your advice, wisdom, and sleepless nights right alongside me.

And last, but not least, to Denny and Judy:

Without your support, watching JT, and raising such a great man (who is now my husband), none of this would exist. I can’t thank you enough.



PART ONE

Meet the Merge

That First Life-Altering Merge Moment



WHEN MOST PEOPLE PICTURE MARRIAGE, they think of a grand adventure with their best friend. Having a partner to do life with. Lots of laughter. Eventually a few kids will arrive, or a couple of dogs, or maybe both. And someday, if Dave Ramsey's financial wisdom liberates millennials from their avocado toast and crippling student-loan debt, they'll have a house of their own. Here they'll enjoy romantic dinners together, gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. Afterward, they'll sit snuggled together on the couch while watching their favorite show.

Yes, there will be some challenges here and there, but it won't be anything their love can't survive. Their love is going to last. *Forever.*

A lovely picture, to be sure. And it's all true. Really. For a few weeks, at least. Or, if you're fortunate, a few months.

But soon enough, *it* happens. The moment that changes everything.

The Merge.

When the Merge Hits Your Home

For me, that moment came quietly and unexpectedly during our third week of marriage.

It was a beautiful October day in the Pacific Northwest. The sun was out. Colorful leaves danced in sync with the wind. Happy couples drank pumpkin spice lattes while walking hand in hand along the waterfront. All was right with the world.

To make it even better, my husband, Joey, had just finished moving all his important stuff into the house that I had been renting prior to our wedding. We were now both officially home.

Thrilled that the moving process was finally over, I stopped by the grocery store to pick up some items for a celebratory dinner. I couldn't wait to get home and start cooking together and then jump into our nightly tradition of board games, laughter, and newlywed bliss.

However, nothing could have prepared me for the scene I was about to see upon arriving at our new home. Trying out my best Ricky Ricardo voice, I opened the door to our house and yelled, "Joey, I'm home!"

Almost immediately, a bright light popped around the corner, blinding my eyes. After a moment of stunned silence, I realized the light was attached to a head. My husband's head.

Joey's blond hair was sticking out haphazardly, and he waved at me with a big grin. His enthusiastic wave showcased big yellow rubber gloves that covered his arms all the way up to his elbows. The kind of gloves that reminded me of my grandma when she would pull out her cleaning kit on the last day of Thanksgiving weekend. With glove-covered hands and fierce determination in her eyes, my grandma would attack the bathroom, trying frantically to erase the damage that twelve people—sharing one toilet during the biggest food holiday of the year—had caused.

"What are you doing?" I asked with laughter.

"Cleaning!" he replied joyfully.

"Cleaning?" I repeated.

“Yep!” Joey replied.

“With a headlamp?” I pressed further. A confused look began to replace my smile.

“You know it!” he said confidently, as if cleaning with a headlamp were a completely normal activity that he did daily.

“Did the puppies get sick or something?” I asked, referring to our dogs and searching hard for a reason why either a headlamp or gloves would be needed.

“Nope, just cleaning the downstairs sink,” he replied casually.

Cleaning the downstairs sink? That’s when it hit me. I realized that I had absolutely no idea whom I had married. I know that may sound overly dramatic, but bear with me for a second.

Have you ever had a moment with your spouse when your differences seemed *so* pronounced that you questioned whether you even knew the person standing beside you at all? It’s a moment when you start to think that maybe he or she has been lying to you the whole time about who they really are. You might even briefly wonder whether body-snatching aliens are in fact real and reason that they’ve decided to use your spouse as a host. Because nothing else could possibly explain your spouse’s wacky, out-of-character behavior. Behavior that never made an appearance when you were dating.

This was that moment for me. *Who is this guy?* It certainly didn’t help that, with the headlamp and the yellow granny gloves, Joey did kind of look like an alien.

What Does It Mean?

As Joey cheerfully went back to cleaning, I began to process the implications of the scene before me. My initial shock turned into worry as I began to wonder: First, was our sink really headlamp-level messy? After all, I had just cleaned it the week before. Second, did Joey normally clean with such precision and intensity? And, perhaps most importantly, would he expect *me* to clean with that much precision and intensity?

I would soon learn Joey's answers to the first two questions. Both were a resounding yes.

However, the answer to the third question remained to be determined. I had no idea what Joey would expect of me. Which meant that I had no idea how his cleaning standards would impact our relationship.

So a subtle but very real fear began to creep into my mind. What *were* Joey's expectations when it came to keeping our house clean? That fear produced more questions. What if I failed to live up to those expectations? What would all this mean for our marriage?

Fear of the unknown led to anxiety, and I began to imagine outrageous scenarios about living with Joey. Each scenario ended with me having to wear a hazmat suit around the house or sit on a couch covered in my great-grandmother's plastic couch cover. Or even—gasp—having to wash and put away my laundry *on the same day!*

As I thought about it further, I began to chastise myself for not seeing the warning signs earlier. A memory popped into my mind: One day, early in our relationship, Joey had surprised me by coming over and detailing my car. What I thought should have taken him an hour max took him—and I'm not exaggerating here—*six* hours.

At the time, it seemed like an amazing blessing. (And, I'll admit, ten months later, my car *was* still clean.) However, as I watched him clean our bathroom, I felt myself viewing his attention to detail and cleanliness differently.

Joey being a clean freak was no longer something that I could admire during the day and then avoid when he went home at night. The condition was permanent. The clean freak was living in my house, touching everything around me.

There was no place for me to escape.

Joey wasn't my boyfriend anymore. He was my husband. His cleaning habits didn't impact just him. They impacted me. And they would continue to impact me *foooorrrreeevvveerrrr* (said in my best Squints-from-*The Sandlot* voice).

Do You Remember That Moment in Your Relationship?

Maybe your first Merge Moment was something completely different. The first time you had to make a financial decision. Or when you realized you had different holiday traditions. Or when you watched your spouse handle conflict with in-laws.

Or maybe you're more like Joey and there wasn't one big moment but a series of smaller moments that highlighted your differences over time, your frustrations gradually building as those early weeks ticked by.

Whatever caused that discovery for you, we've all had a version of it. The moment (or series of smaller moments) when you recognize the full reality of the differences between you and your spouse—differences that you've committed to dealing with for the rest of your lives.

Noted marriage and family counselor Dr. John Gottman has probably studied more couples than anyone on the planet for his research on the reasons couples argue. His findings are illuminating. Gottman's team observed that there are generally two categories of disagreements between couples: solvable and unsolvable. A healthy relationship built around honesty and open communication can help couples resolve the first type of argument, but Gottman found that only 31 percent of arguments fit into this category. A whopping 69 percent of arguments that couples face are perpetual problems based on fundamental differences between them.¹ Wow! That means these differences aren't simply going to go away with good communication and healthy conflict resolution. Couples very often just look at things differently, and if they don't accept and even value those differences, they're in for huge challenges ahead.

Sometimes discovering these differences brings moments of joy, drawing us closer together. Our differences may even remind us *why* God brought our spouses into our lives in the first place.

Other times, these differences come across as potential threats. Especially when we realize that the differences may change the

equilibrium in our relationship, or that they might require *us* to change.

It's possible to begin to see our differences in a way that can grow our relationship—making us, and our marriage, stronger. More on that later.

As for those differences in cleaning standards between Joey and me? Well, the issue certainly didn't go away overnight. As Dr. Gottman might observe, this one fell into the category of unsolvable disagreements. Joey and I began to notice many more of our differences in the weeks after the headlamp incident, especially when it came to cleaning. And we began to recognize how this one issue was fueled by other, larger differences in our personalities.

Here is how that looked for us.

The Joy of Cleaning

For me, having a clean house may be one of the greatest feelings in the world, but the actual *process* of getting the house clean is about as fun as a grade-impacting pop quiz on the first day of school.

I honestly dread cleaning. I wish I loved it, and it is on my prayer list of things that I'm asking God to change—along with helping me become a morning person and making green tea taste as good as coffee. *And please, God, allow popcorn to suddenly qualify as a fully nutritious meal.*

But for Joey, cleaning is truly a joyful experience—and often a musical one. As he works, he is belting out the lyrics to his personal playlist or singing boisterously to some soundtrack only he knows the words to.

The soundtrack of my cleaning experience consists mostly of me complaining, punctuated with an occasional grunt of frustration and, at times, some spiritually creative alternatives to cuss words. This soundtrack only grows in intensity when I notice how long the cleaning project is taking and how little progress I'm making.

Yes, this attitude is certainly on my prayer list as well.

The Precision of Cleaning

My primary goal with cleaning is to clean as fast as possible so I can get on to other, more important, things—things I actually want to be doing. However, whenever Joey asks me what those super important things are, I can't seem to find an answer good enough to help him see things my way. (If you've somehow cleared this hurdle with your clean-freak spouse, please stop reading and email me right now.)

Joey's goal with cleaning is to do it right. Not just *right*, but to a level of excellence that Mr. Monk would applaud—right before begging to move in.

Joey will walk by some household area that looks clean to me, shake his head, and then go grab the duster. And the vacuum. As Joey once explained, "You can't dust unless you vacuum. Because the dust spreads." Then, after a few minutes of intense and gleeful cleaning—after which the cleaned area looks exactly the same to me as it did before—he joyfully returns the duster and vacuum to their homes. (Homes that are clearly labeled, organized, and dust free.)

The Timing of Cleaning

I clean once a week. I try to bundle it all into one big push so I can rush through the tasks and then live in a peaceful and blissful state of ignorance for another week.

It honestly feels like Joey is cleaning *constantly*. He practically prances around the house with his cleaning supplies. Feeling a sense of satisfaction and apparent triumph each time he removes a speck of dust from a location so obscure that it would have made Queen Elizabeth's housekeeper nod in approval.

I've not even mentioned Joey's must-do-this-before-bedtime vacuum routine. Admittedly this leaves the floors gloriously clean for my bare feet every morning, but the habit still takes a good half hour before bed every night—a half hour that to me is valuable time to recharge and have fun after our son is asleep.

I suspected none of this until the moment my husband turned the corner that autumn afternoon wearing his headlamp.

The Problem of Cleaning

Although Joey explained that he didn't expect me to clean the way that he did, the next few weeks began to show something different.

I'd clean.

Then my husband would reclean.

He'd come home from a few days of traveling for work. After a few minutes, his joy would turn to mild disappointment as he saw the mess of our house. A mess that I honestly just couldn't see. Even on weekends, when I'd tried hard to deep clean—well, not “headlamp” hard, but hard for me—it still wasn't up to code. After a few months of this, we were both frustrated.

It seemed to me that Joey thought I was a messy, irresponsible slob, and I thought he was acting like a teacher who keeps telling you that you have great potential if you'd only “apply yourself.”

The worst part was that the dissatisfaction we were both feeling with each other started to spread to other areas of our relationship. We began to fight about other things that seemed to pop up on the “heads up” display in front of us. Differences in how we did the laundry. How we managed the budget. Or what we watched on television. Differences in loading and unloading the dishwasher. The correct way to fold towels. And even what we were having for dinner.

Honestly, it felt like we were fighting about everything. I struggled to find one issue where we seemed to be on the same page.

Remember that chilling stat from Dr. Gottman about how so many of the problems we face are driven by fundamental differences in personality? Well, as you may understand, these differences can develop into perpetual problems—disagreements that seem to come back again and again. We feel like we can't get free of them.

This is exactly where Joey and I found ourselves. It was never *big* issues like honesty or integrity. It was a million little issues that were adding up and beginning to wreak havoc on our relationship. It was relational death by a thousand emotional paper cuts.

Before we knew it, we were six months into our marriage, and

both of us were wondering what our future would look like. *Had we made a huge mistake?*

Realizing that we needed help, Joey and I set up a lunch date with our friends Mike and Jenn. Mike and Jenn had been married for three years. From our perspective, this made them newly married enough to remember the challenges but also married long enough to have worked out some of the kinks. Or so we thought.

As we sat down at one of our favorite cafés, Mike asked the question we both knew was coming: “So, how are you guys doing?”

Joey and I glanced at each other and then jumped right into it.

“I guess we are feeling really discouraged. We really love each other, but we didn’t expect marriage to be this hard,” Joey said, squeezing my hand.

“The worst part is, it seems like everything we are struggling with is really small,” I added. “Or we keep fighting over the basics, like budgeting and paying bills. Things that we were both doing successfully before we got married.”

Nodding in agreement, Joey said, “It just seems like no matter how hard we try, we can’t figure out how to do these things *together*.”

We anxiously waited to hear a nugget of wisdom that would solve all our problems immediately—and hopefully forever.

Their life-changing response? Our so-called friends burst into laughter. It was hysterical to them. But after a few moments of seeing us sitting there stone-faced, they stopped laughing and wiped their eyes.

That’s when Jenn grabbed my hand and said with a giggle, “Welcome to the Merge, friends!”

Welcome to the Merge

Joey and I both stared at them blankly.

“The *what?*” I finally asked.

“The Merge!” Mike said with far more excitement than I felt this mysterious and seemingly unhelpful phrase deserved.

Little did I know at the time that Joey and I were about to learn more than just a new phrase to describe the beginning of a marriage. We really *were* about to get that God-given nugget of wisdom we'd been praying for from our friends.

The wisdom that our friends offered us that day would help us immensely over the next six months of our marriage. And we still use it today. It's allowed us to blend our differences into blessings, helping us nurture a more intimate relationship. And it's something we've taught couples and families across the country. And now we are honored to share that wisdom with you.

We weren't able to anticipate any of this at the time, however. That morning at the café, after she had stopped laughing, Jenn went on to say, "Marriage isn't easy. You both need to have some grace for each other."

I rolled my eyes. I didn't want to hear *that*.

"Blending your lives is a process," Jenn continued. "It's going to take time, and it's going to have ups and downs. You need to take it one small step at a time."

Her words felt like a cheese grater on my already blistered and sunburned emotions. Yet some part of me knew she was right. Real wisdom rarely starts with a quick fix. Joey and I were going to have to put in the work, grow together, and learn to adapt.

We had no idea how to actually do those things. But that conversation marked an important shift in our marriage.

Health and bonding began to replace anger and frustration, and it started with the mental picture that Jenn painted for us that day.

Jenn's picture was of two very different lives colliding like two rivers, with the resulting turbulence eventually mellowing into a single, peaceful waterway. It was an effective image for Joey and me; we immediately pictured the beautiful clashing of water at Spokane Falls in the heart of downtown Spokane, Washington, right near where Joey went to college. It's a popular place to go whitewater rafting.

If you've ever been whitewater rafting, you know that it can be lifesaving to have a guide go with you. Someone who knows the river. Knows its twists and turns. Someone who can help you avoid rough spots where you could get stuck or where your raft could turn over. And having a guide or mentor can be helpful on the journey through marriage, too. In this book, I want to be the guide that Joey and I wished we'd had during the early weeks and months of our marriage.

Maybe you're in the newlywed stage and are reading this book because you feel the way Joey and I did. Maybe you are reading this book before your wedding and are hoping to learn new strategies to make your marriage stronger before it starts. Or maybe you've been married for years and are still learning to merge your differences and grow together. No matter what stage of marriage you're in, my prayer is that we can all learn and grow together. You do not have to spend your whole married life stuck reliving those perpetual problems.

It won't be easy. However, learning how to make the Merge work better will be incredibly rewarding. And we hope that when you're done reading this, you'll share your Merge story and wisdom with other couples to help encourage them as well.

None of us are perfect, and I certainly don't have all the answers. But I do know that God has changed me through the use of the small, practical ideas this book discusses. He's changed Joey, too. And by God's grace, these ideas have helped other couples as well.

For Joey and me, learning to make the Merge has strengthened our relationship. Yes, we still have conflict, but now we have tools to help us get through those times. We have healthy processes to keep our issues manageable and our relationship strong. Most of all, we have the perspective and the faith that we can work through our issues. We know that when we fail, there is a way to repair and make our relationship stronger than it was before. We know firsthand that

the Merge has strengthened us rather than destroyed us. Joey and I hope that as you read this book, this will be your experience too.

In this book, I'll often be using "we" to represent Joey and me. While I may be the one writing, I must be clear that nothing in this book would be possible without my husband. Joey has been instrumental in brainstorming, listening, and editing. He's also way better at this process of merging than I could ever be. While I sometimes think it's his name that should be on the cover, the thought of writing gives Joey hives. But his voice is here. His ideas are here. His stories are here. And his *wisdom* is here. So, from my perspective, that makes this book a "we"—not just a "me."

One other important thing to note: The advice and tools in this book are *not* designed to help if one or both of you are experiencing active addiction, extreme mental health issues, or abuse in your marriage. As someone who has lived through abuse personally, I know firsthand that no marriage book can stop abuse. And no book can stop the effects of addiction or mental health challenges. (In fact, depending on the book, it could actually increase the ability of the abuser or addict to manipulate, control, and harm.)

But there *are* resources that can help. Hope, healing, and safety are all possible for you, and for your spouse, if he or she chooses. If these situations are present in your marriage, I'd like you to do two things:

1. Get help. The National Domestic Violence Hotline at thehotline.org is a great resource. So is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at samhsa.gov. Focus on the Family also has resources that can help. Contact a counselor at (855) 771-4357.
2. Tell someone you trust what you are experiencing. Please know that you are not alone. If you would like to chat or share your story, I'm here to help and listen as well.

Remember, God's design for marriage never includes abuse. Or addiction. And there are helpful resources that are available, but they are not found in this book.

The Plan for Helping You Make the Merge

To help you make a successful Merge, this book is divided into four parts.

In the rest of part 1, we'll help you better understand the Merge and coach you through the process of discovering what it looks like in your marriage.

In part 2, we'll introduce five tools that can move you from conflict and chaos to connection and greater commitment. At the end of each tool, you'll find suggestions for a date night. You can use the ideas we've provided or create your own. The goal is to make sure that you are intentionally making time to better understand and apply each tool we've discussed—a tangible way of moving from information to transformation.

In part 3, you will use the five tools to create your personal Merge Map. Your Merge Map is a powerful tool that will help you navigate the Merge together. We'll also discuss the importance of Merge Mates and how they can help you maintain positive, long-term change.

Finally, part 4 will challenge you to do something great: to help one other couple currently struggling through their own Merge. Help them calm the waters by sharing some of the small things you've learned to create connection in your own marriage.

We began this chapter by sharing what may have seemed like a small, inconsequential thing: Joey wearing a headlamp. It was the moment I started to realize what the Merge was going to mean for me. But let's dig deeper into this idea of the Merge to better understand how small things really can be the things that break or bond you.

