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Sacred Marriage

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ONE

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE WORLD

A CALL TO HOLINESS MORE THAN HAPPINESS

By all means marry. If you get a good wife, you'll become happy.
If you get a bad one, you'll become a philosopher.

—Socrates

Like everything which is not the involuntary result
of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will,
any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely
more interesting than any romance, however passionate.

—W. H. Auden

I'm going to cut him open.

Historians aren't sure who the first physician was who followed through on this thought, but the practice revolutionized medicine. The willingness to cut into a corpse, peel back the skin, pull a scalp off a skull, cut through the bone, and actually remove, examine, and chart the organs that lay within was a crucial first step in finding out how the human body really works.

For thousands of years physicians had speculated on what went on inside a human body, but there was a reluctance and even an abhorrence to actually dissect a cadaver. Some men refrained out of religious conviction; others just couldn't get over the eeriness of cutting away a human rib cage. While an occasional brave soul ventured inside a dead body, it wasn't until the Renaissance period (roughly the fourteenth to the sixteenth century) that European doctors routinely started to cut people open.

And when they did, former misconceptions collapsed. In the sixteenth century, Andreas Vesalius was granted a ready supply of criminals' corpses, allowing him to definitively contradict assumptions about the human anatomy that had been unquestioned for a thousand years or more. Vesalius's anatomical charts became invaluable, but he couldn't have drawn the charts unless he was first willing to make the cut.

I want to do a similar thing in this book—with a spiritual twist. We're going to cut open numerous marriages, dissect them, find out what's really going on, and then explore how we can gain spiritual

This is a book that looks at how we can use the challenges, joys, struggles, and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God and to grow in Christian character.

meaning, depth, and growth from the challenges that lie within. We're not after simple answers—three steps to more intimate communication, six steps to a more exciting love life—because this isn't a book that seeks to tell you how to have a happier marriage. This is a book that looks at how we can use the challenges, joys,

struggles, and celebrations of marriage to draw closer to God and to grow in Christian character.

We're after what a great Christian writer, Francis de Sales, wrote about in the seventeenth century. Because de Sales was a gifted spiritual director, people often corresponded with him about their spiritual concerns. One woman wrote in great distress, torn because she very much wanted to get married while a friend was encouraging her to remain single, insisting that it would be “more holy” for her

to care for her father, and then devote herself as a celibate to God after her father died.

De Sales put the troubled young woman at ease, telling her that, far from being a compromise, in one sense, marriage might be the toughest ministry she could ever undertake. “The state of marriage is one that requires more virtue and constancy than any other,” he wrote. “It is a perpetual exercise of mortification. . . . From this thyme plant, in spite of the bitter nature of its juice, you may be able to draw and make the honey of a holy life.”¹

Notice that de Sales talks about the occasionally “bitter nature” of marriage’s “juice.” To spiritually benefit from marriage, we have to be honest. We have to look at our disappointments, own up to our ugly attitudes, and confront our selfishness. We also have to rid ourselves of the notion that the difficulties of marriage can be overcome if we simply pray harder or learn a few simple principles. Most of us have discovered that

these “simple steps” work only on a superficial level. Why is this? Because there’s a deeper question that needs to be addressed beyond how we can “improve” our mar-

riage: What if God didn’t design marriage to be “easier”? What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place?

What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy? What if, as de Sales hints, we are to accept the “bitter juice” because out of it we may learn to draw the resources we need with which to make “the honey of a holy life”?

*What if God designed
marriage to make us holy
more than to make us happy?*

Romanticism’s Ruse

If this sounds like a radically different view of marriage, it’s important to remember that the very concept of “romantic love,” which is so celebrated in movies, songs, and cheap paperbacks, was virtually unknown to the ancients. There were exceptions—one need merely

read the Song of Songs, for instance—but taken as a whole, the concept that marriage should involve passion and fulfillment and excitement is a relatively recent development on the scale of human history, making its popular entry toward the end of the eleventh century.²

C. S. Lewis—whose marriage to an ailing woman was seen as somewhat “odd” by many of his contemporaries—explained that such a monumental shift in cultural thought as the development of romantic love is “very rare—there are perhaps three or four on record—but I believe that they occur, and that this [romantic love] is one of them.”³

This is *not* to suggest that romance itself or the desire for more romance is necessarily bad; good marriages work hard to preserve a sense of romance. But the idea that a marriage can survive on romance alone, or that romantic *feelings* are more important than any other consideration when choosing a spouse, has wrecked many a marital ship.

Romanticism received a major boost by means of the eighteenth-century Romantic poets—Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake—followed by their successors in literature, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. These poets passionately argued that it was a crime against oneself to marry for any reason other than “love” (which was defined largely by feeling and emotion), and the lives of many of them were parodies of irresponsibility and tragedy.

One of the writers who embraced this romantic notion with fervor was the sensuous novelist D. H. Lawrence, whose motto was “with *should* and *ought* I shall have nothing to do!” Lawrence fell in love with Frieda Weekley, a married woman, and sought to woo Frieda away from her husband, as his “love” demanded he do. As part of his less-than-noble designs, Lawrence sent Frieda a note, proclaiming that she was the most wonderful woman in all of England.

Being married with three children and having already suffered a couple of affairs, Mrs. Weekley saw through Lawrence’s emotion and coolly replied that it was obvious to her he had not met many Englishwomen.⁴

Earlier in this century, Katherine Anne Porter bemoaned how “romantic love crept into the marriage bed, very stealthily, by cen-

turies, bringing its absurd notions about love as eternal springtime and marriage as a personal adventure meant to provide personal happiness.” The reality of the human condition is such that, according to Porter (and I agree), we must “salvage our fragments of happiness” out of life’s inevitable sufferings.

In her startling and insightful essay on marriage written in the 1940s (titled, interestingly enough, “The Necessary Enemy”), Porter carefully explores the heights and depths of marriage, making the following observations about a young bride:

This very contemporary young woman finds herself facing the oldest and ugliest dilemma of marriage. She is dismayed, horrified, full of guilt and forebodings because she is finding out little by little that she is capable of hating her husband, whom she loves faithfully. She can hate him at times as fiercely and mysteriously, indeed in terribly much the same way, as often she hated her parents, her brothers and sisters, whom she loves, when she was a child. . . .

She thought she had outgrown all this, but here it was again, an element in her own nature she could not control, or feared she could not. She would have to hide from her husband, if she could, the same spot in her feelings she had hidden from her parents, and for the same no doubt disreputable, selfish reason: She wants to keep his love.

Above all, she wants him to be absolutely confident that she loves him, for that is the real truth, no matter how unreasonable it sounds, and no matter how her own feelings betray them both at times. She depends recklessly on his love.

With only a romantic view of marriage to fall back on, Porter warns, a young woman may lose her “peace of mind. She is afraid her marriage is going to fail because . . . at times she feels a painful hostility toward her husband, and cannot admit its reality because such an admission would damage in her own eyes her view of what love should be.”⁵

Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters. Mature love, the kind demanded of a good marriage,

must stretch, as the sinful human condition is such that all of us bear conflicting emotions. “Her hatred is real as her love is real,” Porter explains of the young wife. This is the reality of the human heart, the inevitability of two sinful people pledging to live together, with all their faults, for the rest of their lives.

A wedding calls us to our highest and best—in fact, to almost impossible—ideals. It’s the way we want to live. But marriage reminds us of the daily reality of living as sinful human beings in a

Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters.

radically broken world. We aspire after love but far too often descend into hate.

Any mature, spiritually sensitive view of marriage must be

built on the foundation of mature love rather than romanticism. But this immediately casts us into a countercultural pursuit.

In his classic work *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis satirically ridicules our culture’s obsession with romanticism. The demon Screwtape gloats, “Humans who have not the gift of [sexual abstinence] can be deterred from seeking marriage as a solution because they do not find themselves ‘in love,’ and, thanks to us, the idea of marrying with any other motive seems to them low and cynical. Yes, they think that. They regard the intention of loyalty to a partnership for mutual help, for the preservation of chastity, and for the transmission of life, as something lower than a storm of emotion.”⁶

I think most of us who have been married for any substantial length of time realize that the romantic roller coaster of courtship eventually evens out to the terrain of a Midwest interstate—long, flat stretches

A wedding calls us to our highest and best—in fact, to almost impossible—ideals.

with an occasional overpass. When this happens, couples respond in different ways. Many will break up their relationship and try to recreate the passionate romance with

someone else. Other couples will descend into a sort of marital guerilla warfare, a passive-aggressive power play as each partner blames the other for personal dissatisfaction or lack of excitement. Some couples decide to simply “get along.” Still others may opt to pursue a deeper

meaning, a spiritual truth hidden in the enforced intimacy of the marital situation.

We can run from the challenges of marriage—as doctors did from the human body, refusing to cut open the cadavers and really look at what was going on—or we can admit that every marriage presents these challenges and asks us to address them head-on. If we find that the same kinds of challenges face every marriage, we might assume that God designed a purpose in this challenge that transcends something as illusory as happiness.

The romantic roller coaster of courtship eventually evens out to the terrain of a Midwest interstate.

This book looks for that purpose and meaning—how can we discover in the challenges of marriage the opportunities to learn more about God, grow in our understanding of him, and learn to love him more?

Numerous married couples have opened up their lives for us in this book, so I suppose it's only fair that I should allow my own marriage to be dissected first.

An Unexpected Engagement

Lisa and I often wonder what would have happened if she had said “yes.”

During a free afternoon at a college campus-ministry retreat when we were still dating, I asked Lisa to join a group of us for a round of Frisbee golf.

“No,” Lisa said. “I think I’ll go for a walk instead.”

She had recently returned from a summerlong missions trip to Mexico, and this retreat was supposed to be a time when Lisa and I could get reconnected. We had known each other since junior high and had been dating for about a year, and we were getting “serious.” Unknown to Lisa, I had asked my best friend, Rob Takemura, to begin praying about whether I should ask Lisa to marry me. And unknown to me, Lisa and her mother had spent a Saturday afternoon the week before looking at wedding dresses, “just in case” Lisa should ever need one.

I was somewhat frustrated that Lisa wasn't being cooperative, so I said, "Fine, I won't play Frisbee golf either."

"You can," Lisa said. "I don't mind walking alone."

"No, I'll go with you," I said. Neither of us realized it at the time, but this turn of events would change both of our lives.

We walked along the river, set inside a stunning valley on the outskirts of Glacier National Park, and talked for about forty-five minutes. Suddenly, I stopped skimming rocks, and virtually out of nowhere I said to Lisa, "I want to marry you."

Lisa's mouth dropped open.

"Is that a proposal?" she asked, astonished.

I shook my head yes, just as astonished as she was. Lisa came up and hugged me.

"Is that an acceptance?" I asked, and Lisa nodded in the affirmative.

"Whew," she said after a brief moment. "Imagine if I had agreed to play Frisbee."

We laughed about it, and then experienced one of the most intense times emotionally I've ever known. There was a strange, almost mystical commingling of souls. Something was going on inside us, around us, and through us that superseded any physical connection. It was somehow deeper, more meaningful, and more amazing than anything we had ever experienced.

Over the next nine months, we made plans, as any engaged couple does. We talked about missions, family, seminary, serving God—you name it. It was an intense time, and we often prayed, "Lord, wherever you want to take us, however you want to use us, we're all yours."

We never slept together until our wedding night, so the honeymoon was a rather intoxicating experience, but once the honeymoon was over, reality immediately set in like a dense Seattle fog.

Because I was planning to save up money for seminary, we spent our first few months living in a very tiny home, offered to us rent-free by a family friend. I left for work two days after we got back, and Lisa was stranded in a small community, out in the middle of nowhere, and she began to cry.

It was a sunny day, so she called me at work and asked if I could come home early so we could drive to a lake. I thought she was crazy.

“I can’t just leave work because the weather’s nice!” I protested. “Besides, I just started!”

“Well what’s the use of getting married if I see you less now than when we were engaged?” she complained.

What’s the use, indeed?

Fast-forward ten years. We had three small children, two of them

in diapers. I was working for a Christian ministry, and we were still “just making it” financially, ensconced in a town house in northern Virginia. We were about to enter our Friday-night ritual—laundry and a video from Blockbuster.

“What do you want to watch?” I asked Lisa as I gathered my keys and headed out the door.

“Oh, how about a romantic comedy?” Lisa answered.

I cringed. The last three videos we had watched together had been romantic comedies. If I had to watch another impossibly beautiful couple meet under extremely improbable circumstances, fall in love, get in a fight, and then spend sixty minutes falling back in love again, I thought I’d die.

I sighed, turned around, and looked at Lisa. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I just can’t do it. I have to see at least one building blow up and one car crash. If I can find something that has a little romance to add to that, I’ll see what I can do.”

I took three steps out the door, then thought to myself, “When did, ‘Please, God, change the world through us’ suddenly become, ‘Should we watch Arnold

Schwarzenegger or Julia Roberts?” I didn’t remember any fork in the road or any flashing neon signs that pointed in that direction, but somehow, somewhere, it had happened.

I remembered the intensity of the night on which we had become engaged; the joyful exploration of our honeymoon; filling out a preliminary application for a mission organization; bringing our first

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child home—but now, ten years later, we had “evolved” into spending Friday nights watching other people fall in love according to the machinations of a Hollywood script.

That night I didn’t have any answers, but taking an honest look at my situation definitely shook me awake. What was this thing called marriage? How had I ended up here? Was there no more purpose to it than this?

“It Is Good for a Man Not to Marry”

I became a Christian at a very young age. In truth, I can scarcely remember a moment when God was not an active and conscious

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presence in my life. Because of this, I felt drawn to Jesus early on.

I was drawn to more than Jesus, however. I also remember being drawn to girls. I had a pretty

big crush on a dark-haired girl *in kindergarten!* The first time I actually held hands with a girl was in fifth grade. Tina and I rolled around the skating rink, both of us blushing as the Carpenters’ melodious harmonies described us well: “I’m On Top of the World.” It sure felt like it!

As I grew older, both of these movements—toward Jesus and toward females—sometimes created an uneasy tension. The man I most admired, the one person on whom I wanted to model my life and to whom I wanted to express my commitment, was a *single* man.

As far back as I can remember, I was fully aware of the long-standing tradition of celibacy—monks and nuns who lived out their dedication to God by pledging to abstain from marriage and sex. Part of me wished I could embrace this; I wanted to be “sold out” for Christ, and in college I struggled with the apostle Paul’s words, “It is good for a man not to marry” (1 Corinthians 7:1).⁷

In fact, there is much in Christian history that has unofficially (and at times blatantly) considered married believers to be “second-class Christians” who compromised their integrity or who were too weak to contain their sexual urges. Augustine thought he was being

charitable when he wrote, referring to the intent to procreate, “Marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust.”⁸ While Scripture is reliable and even infallible, Christian history isn’t, and unfounded prejudices do exist.

There’s no question that the “first pope,” Peter, was married. (Jesus couldn’t very well have healed Peter’s mother-in-law if Peter didn’t have a wife!) But there is also evidence in Scripture (1 Timothy 5:9–12) that during the first century young widows were already taking vows of celibacy. By A.D. 110, celibates could take vows that mirrored marital vows. This became a little more institutionalized so that by the third century, lifelong vows of celibacy were not uncommon. By the fourth century, such vows were commemorated by a full liturgical celebration.⁹

Although Christianity was born out of Judaism, a religion in which marriage was considered a religious duty (one rabbi suggested that a man who does not marry is not fully a man¹⁰), it wasn’t long until married believers were scarcely an afterthought during

centuries of writing on “spiritual theology” (studying how Christian believers grow in their faith, learn to pray, and draw closer to God). Most of the Christian classics were written by monks and nuns for monks and nuns. The married could at best feebly try to simulate a single pursuit of God;

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the thought of pursuing God *through* marriage wasn’t really given serious consideration; instead, the emphasis was largely on pursuing God *in spite* of marriage.

I carried some of this baggage into my own relationship, but early on, my eyes were opened to a different reality. I remember my brother asking me a few questions about what marriage was like. I thought for a moment and said, “If you want to be free to serve Jesus, there’s no question—stay single. Marriage takes a lot of time. But if you want to become more like Jesus, I can’t imagine any better thing to do than to get married. Being married forces you to face some character issues you’d never have to face otherwise.”

Jesus, of course, was celibate his entire life, so it's somewhat ironic to suggest that marriage is the preferred route to becoming more like him. But Jesus *did* live in a family, and, as Betsy Ricucci points out, that's *all* he had done at the time the Father proclaimed, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). "What had Jesus done to receive such praise? Nothing but live in his own home, honoring his parents and serving his father's carpentry business. Apparently that was enough to please God."¹¹

Family life is clearly not a cop-out; and after you've been married for a while, you realize that the emphasis on celibacy is slightly overblown. All other things considered, the sexual aspect takes up just a fraction of a married couple's time. I was the first of my group of friends to get married, and I remember one of them asking me if it was still okay to just "drop in" unannounced.

"Oh, you better call first," I said gravely, capturing his attention. "Married couples walk around naked all day long, you know."

For a second, I almost had him!

The real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week commitment. This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ. Instead of getting up at 3:00 A.M. to begin prayer in a monastery, the question becomes, "Who will wake up when the baby's diaper needs changing?"

Marriage calls us to an entirely new and selfless life. This insight occurred to me some years ago when Lisa and the kids were traveling while I had to stay home and work. For the first time ever, it

Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value.

seemed, I had a free Saturday. For as long as I could remember, I had awakened each weekend and talked over with Lisa what the family would do; I almost didn't know how to ask the question—what do *I* want to do? Yet that was the question I had asked myself as a single man virtually every Saturday before I was married.

Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness.

Not that God has anything *against* happiness, or that happiness and holiness are by nature mutually exclusive, but looking at marriage through the lens of holiness began to put it into an entirely new perspective for me.

“But Since There Is So Much Immorality . . .”

I find it fascinating that just after Paul said, “It is good for a man not to marry,” he follows it up with these words: “But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2).

I would do violence to the Greek biblical text to suggest that this passage is referring to anything other than sexual relations—the New International Version tides it up a bit, but even a cursory exegesis reveals that, clearly, sex is intended. Even so, I suggest that we can elaborate the principle to reveal truth beyond sexual relations. Since there is so much immorality within us—not just lust, but selfishness, anger, control-mongering, and even hatred—we should enter into a close relationship with one other person so we can work on those issues in the light of what our marriage relationship will reveal to us about our behavior and our attitudes.

If the purpose of marriage was simply to enjoy an infatuation and make me “happy,” then I’d have to get a “new” marriage every two or three years.

I found there was a tremendous amount of immaturity within me that my marriage directly confronted. The key was that I had to change my view of marriage. If the purpose of marriage was simply to enjoy an infatuation and make me “happy,” then I’d have to get a “new” marriage every two or three years. But if I really wanted to see God transform me from the inside out, I’d need to concentrate on changing *myself* rather than on changing my *spouse*. In fact, you might even say, the more difficult my spouse proved to be, the more opportunity I’d have to grow. Just as physical exercise needs to be somewhat strenuous, so “relational exercise” may need to be a bit vigorous to truly stress-test the heart.

I didn't decide to focus on changing myself so that I could have a tension-free marriage or so that I'd be happier or even more content in my marriage. Instead, I adopted the attitude that marriage is one of many life situations that help me to draw my sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment *from God*. Lisa can't make me happy, not in an ultimate sense. Certainly we have some great times together, and she has been a wonderful wife, exceeding my dreams—but these great times are sprinkled with (and sometimes seem to get buried in) the demands, challenges, and expectations of paying the bills on time, disciplining children, earning a living, and keeping a house clean.

I guess what I'm after is a quieter fulfillment, a deeper sense of meaning, a fuller understanding of the purpose behind this intense, one-on-one, lifelong relationship. As a man who believes his primary meaning comes from his relationship with God, I want to explore how marriage can draw me closer to God.

There's another reason to stress this: Marriage, for all of us, is temporary in the light of eternity. The truth is, my and Lisa's relationship with God will outlive our marriage. Most likely the time will come when either Lisa or I precede the other into eternity. The remaining spouse will be left alone, no longer married—perhaps even eventually remarried to someone else.

For the Christian, marriage is a penultimate rather than an ultimate reality. Because of this, both of us can find even more meaning by pursuing God together and by recognizing that he is the one who alone can fill the spiritual ache in our souls. We can work at making our home life more pleasant and peaceable; we can explore ways to keep sex fresh and fun; we can make superficial changes that will preserve at least the appearance of respect and politeness. But what both of us crave more than anything else is to be intimately close to the God who made us. If *that* relationship is right, we won't make such severe demands on our marriage, asking each other, expecting each other, to compensate for spiritual emptiness.

Unfortunately, as a fallible human being I can't possibly appreciate Lisa the way God appreciates her. I can't even begin to understand her the way she longs to be understood. I'd get bored with myself

if I was married to me, so it only makes sense that Lisa might occasionally be bored—or at least grow weary—of living with me. But God delights in both of us. God appreciates our quirks and understands our hearts’ good intentions even when they might be masked by incredibly stupid behavior.

One thing is sure: Lisa can’t look to me to be God for her. And even when I try to love her like only God can love her, I fail every time and on every count. I give it my best, but I fall short every day.

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

We need to remind ourselves of the ridiculousness of looking for something from other humans that only God can provide. Our close friends have a son named Nolan. When he was just four years old, he saw me carrying some rather large boxes and asked me, in all sincerity, “Gary, are you strongest, or is God strongest?”

His dad laughed a little *too* hard at that one. And of course we adults think it’s absurd to compare our physical strength with God’s. But how many of us “adults” have then turned around and asked, perhaps unconsciously, “Are you going to fulfill me, or will God fulfill me?” For some reason, *that* question doesn’t sound as absurd to us as the one about physical strength, but it should!

I believe that much of the dissatisfaction we experience in marriage comes from expecting too

I believe that much of the dissatisfaction we experience in marriage comes from expecting too much from it.

much from it. I have a rather outdated computer—a 486—so I know there are some things I simply can’t do with it; there’s just not enough memory or processing power to run certain programs or combine certain tasks. It’s not that I have a *bad* computer; it’s just that I can’t reasonably expect more from it than it has the power to give.

In the same way, some of us ask too much of marriage. We want to get the largest portion of our life’s fulfillment from our relationship with our spouse. That’s asking too much. Yes, without a doubt there should be moments of happiness, meaning, and a general

sense of fulfillment. But my wife can't be God, and I was created with a spirit that craves God. Anything less than God, and I'll feel an ache.

This is a book that looks and points *beyond* marriage. Spiritual growth is the main theme; marriage is simply the context. Just as celibates use abstinence and religious hermits use isolation, so we can use marriage for the same purpose—to grow in our service, obedience, character, pursuit, and love of God.

You've probably already realized that there was a purpose for your marriage that went beyond happiness. You might not have chosen

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the word "holiness" to express it, but you understood there was a transcendent truth beyond the superficial romance depicted in popular culture. We're going to explore that purpose. We're going to cut open many marriages,

find out where the commitment rubs, explore where the poisoned attitudes hide, search out where we are forced to confront our weakness and sin, and learn how to grow through the process.

The ultimate purpose of this book is not to make you love your spouse more—although I think that will happen along the way. It's to equip you to love your God more and to help you reflect the character of his Son more precisely. At the very least, you'll have a new appreciation for the person with whom you have embarked on this journey.