

Stephen Simes

One Shoe
Over
the Fence

How we rescued our marriage
(and I got my shoe back)

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I dedicate this book to Rebecca, my P.L.H.F. and (a)muse.
Thank you for adventuring with me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was far from a solo effort.

Without my wife, Rebecca, there wouldn't be a book. Every day she reminds me to live from my heart and my senses. My world is gentler, kinder and far more beautiful than I ever could have imagined because of her presence.

I must also acknowledge how generous it is to allow me to tell my version of our history. Our stories are intertwined so it would have been impossible to say anything meaningful without being able to touch on her life as well. The bravest aspect has been that Rebecca has not asked me to edit anything, even when her recollection is at odds with mine. I am incredibly grateful to be married to her. Everyone should be so lucky.

My children are the soul reason I became so determined to 'make it work.' They teach me about hope and joy and the remarkable potential in every single person. It is a privilege to watch them grow. I am thrilled to be their father and I need to thank them for keeping me focused on the important things in life.

As I moved forward in my journey I came to rely on a number of people who's work is both informative and inspiring. All of the following helped me understand fundamental issues and as a consequence have had a large impact on this book and my life. I am indebted to the wisdom of John Gottman, Nan Silver, Harville Hendrix, Gary Chapman, Caroline Myss, Thomas Moore, The Dalai Lama, Howard Cutler, Esther Perel, Marc Allen, Meryl Yvonne, Fred Luskin, Margot Anand, Kerry Riley, Diane Riley, Cathy Winks and Anne Semans.

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INTRODUCTION

‘My most brilliant achievement was my ability to be able to persuade my wife to marry me.’

Winston Churchill

The effort we have invested in improving our marriage has yielded magnificent results in all areas of our life.

The shoe throwing incident outlined in the first chapter was the catalyst for action. Things had to change or we weren't going to make it. We were forced to ask ourselves what we wanted from our marriage and the answer was a lot more than just ticking off the years. We wanted a marriage that was interesting, creative, loving, supportive and maybe even fun.

Once we committed to improving our marriage the critical areas became apparent. There was no avoiding our personal deficiencies in almost all realms. We had to work through issues associated with who we were, what we wanted, how we related to ourselves, how we related to each other; even down to challenges such as having fun and being playful. They all had to be addressed if we were to have the life we wanted.

Today I live in a lively house with happy people. I like being here. My marriage and family are central to who I am. I can confidently state that being married is my best option. I choose it.

Who are we?

I'm in my mid forties and have been married for 19 years to a woman whom I love as much as I can. We have two gorgeous healthy children, a mortgage, and a nice house in the suburbs with a mortgage. Our aspirations revolve around our family. Telemarketers ring us way too often.

I work in IT and don't have any qualifications in the field of relationships. I'm clear that I know little so I've studied the work of the leaders in the field. We tried many ideas; some were useful some were not, occasionally they were life changing. If they helped us create real results then I have included them in this book.

Rebecca is also an amateur when it comes to relationships but has a life-long interest in healing of all kinds. She is constantly strengthening our immune systems with some potion or other and her smoothies are packed with secret ingredients. Her first approach to any problem is always to feel and intuit.

In terms of credibility there is only one claim we can make and that is we 'made it work.' Our marriage was miserable and now it's very enjoyable. We turned it around through conscious, intelligent and persistent effort.

There's no reason to believe that you can't get results too.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

‘Once in his life every man is entitled to fall madly in love with a gorgeous redhead.’

Lucille Ball

I remember the moment I knew I was in love.

We had only been together a few months and I was attending my first family event. Rebecca maneuvered me into a corner, sat me down next to an elderly gentleman and with a twinkle in her eye said, ‘This is my uncle Mason, the one who lives on the beach up north.’

I was blank for a moment then I remembered the story; Mason was the black sheep of the family. As a child he had been the tormentor of his siblings. As an adult he had buccaneered his way through family and business. Mason grabbed my hand and gave it a firm shake. He was getting on in years but the force was still strong.

The next 20 minutes flew past in a flurry of tall tales and genuine interest. Mason was holding the floor, lightly skimming over a multitude of topics. The connection was easy and the energy was high. I relaxed.

Then along came the words that sealed my fate.

Mason paused, looked at his pretty niece with uncensored admiration and said, ‘I have to say you are the brightest little thing I know.’

I gasped. Mason had nailed it. That’s what she was, one of the brightest buttons in the shoebox. She positively glowed. The light, her soul, that essential something was clearly visible. I saw it, felt it and wanted to be around it all the time.

I was gone and I knew it.

Ten years later, six months after the birth of our first child, things were not going well.

Rebecca snatched my shoe and flung it over the fence. 'Get out,' she screamed, 'leave now!'

I stared at my wife. I was married to a beautiful woman who was tired and angry. We loved each other and would probably stay married, at least until the kids grew up, but it wasn't much fun.

I knew what had started the argument, but how could the dishes be responsible for this level of disgust? I was aghast at the way we treated each other; neither of us would dream of being this vicious to anyone else. We were supposed to be building a life together and yet all we seemed to do was argue. I felt the depression settle into my belly.

When we got married I had assumed that problems would come and go but I hadn't counted on anything like this. I tried to remember the last time we'd relaxed in each other's company and had a good time. I avoided asking what had happened to our sex life. That would be too much right now. I was struggling to remember days of happiness. Had we ever been happy?

I felt heavy and dull, my thoughts were morose. 'Here I am married for 10 years to a woman who's lovely to everyone except for me. She looks fantastic yet when was the last time we rattled each other's bones? We have a gorgeous baby boy who lights me up every time I see him but if this goes on the court may tell me how often that happens.

I stopped in my tracks. I had never thought it possible that I would be a part-time dad, spending the weekend at the park trying to make up for the missed time during the week, struggling to manage handover without dredging up the pain and disappointment. Part-time wasn't what I wanted.

I felt a wave of resolve. I squared my shoulders and with great certainty shouted, 'No son of mine will grow up in a broken home.' It was a moment of clarity in the swirling madness. I'd hit rock bottom. I would not allow it to get any worse. Whatever it was that had led us to this misery would

change, starting now! I could see the fear settle on her as she realized what she had risked.

So there it was. I'd said it out loud. After 10 years I wasn't very good at being married. We were in trouble. There was so much I didn't know and this lack was really starting to bite.

There was no alternative and no second chance, we'd invested too much time, love and hope. Starting again was not an option. If we did break up, who could say that the second time would be any better? We'd make this marriage fly. I felt certain.

The student was ready. I took a deep breath and trusted the help would come.

Later that day I noticed my shoe was back on the shelf.

The bitter argument that resulted in my shoe being thrown over the fence provided the stimulus for us to resolve to 'make it work.' The game of marriage became real. Arguments which only impacted on us were going to be witnessed by a sensitive little being. Terse comments would become part of his vocabulary and sharing him across two households was not what we wanted.

As I accepted my choice and came to understand what marriage was asking of me some dilemmas became apparent. I never questioned my love for Rebecca but my behavior was awful. Arguments were often bitter and I provided little in the way of generous support. I knew there was love but often I didn't feel liked. Somehow everything I said was wrong and needed to be corrected, nothing was good enough and no matter how hard I tried I just couldn't make her happy.

There were a number of times when I believe we were just one sentence away from breaking up. If one of us had said 'enough' then I'm sure we would have divorced. I despaired of ever making her happy. I had failed to rescue her from her insecurities and turmoil. Divorce seemed certain.

‘Ah yes divorce... from the Latin word meaning to rip out a man’s genitals through his wallet.’

Robin Williams

A breakthrough came when I realized that it wasn’t my job to make Rebecca happy. The responsibility for stability and love of life was hers. It was an arrogant delusion to think that I could solve her problems for her. I couldn’t. I didn’t have the skills or the energy and worst of all by trying I was stopping her from addressing them. The road out of co-dependency is complex but for me it was absolutely essential.

As we let go of the feeling of defeat progress became much more likely. We were increasingly dealing with our problems, our behavior and defining our boundaries. There was hope. We went in search of help and we worked.

One day, after four years we realized that we had worked our way to a ‘nice place.’ Life was good.

I was scowling on the outside but smiling on the inside. For the third time in two weeks an acquaintance had sidled up and said ‘I was driving and saw you and Rebecca walking hand in hand. You looked very lovey.’

Being sprung in a PDA (public display of affection) is not really in my comfort zone. The first two sightings were fair cops, on both occasions we were strolling around the coast enjoying a bright, sunny day. But the third was much more complex. It wasn’t exactly as it seemed.

For years I have driven to work by myself. I leave the morning chaos, get into the solitude of the car and turn on the news. If I’m on time I hear the sports news. If I’m a few minutes late I miss it. If I’m ten minutes late the traffic is quite a bit heavier.

In the last few weeks we have had to traverse very tricky territory. Rebecca has started working in town one morning a week. She announced, ‘we can drive in together, it’ll be nice.’

The morning of our third PDA was a drive in day. Every aspect of my treasured routine was treated with total disregard. The morning chaos climbed to a new level because the mother in law arrived early to take the kids to school. Sports teams the world over played without my knowledge. The traffic was heavy and I was told in no uncertain terms that I should get over it. Then, she started to chat.

I didn't know what to do. I was trapped in a confined space in slow traffic with a person who wanted to make light conversation with me. I couldn't run or hide and I was expected to participate, all before 8am. My first refuge was a self righteous evaluation of how this had come to be. I was ready on time, she wasn't. I was happy to listen to substantive commentary on the radio; she wanted to skip lightly over the trivia of the day. I loved my cone of silence; she stuck her head in and chirped. It was infuriating.

After parking the car we walked a short distance to town. I was rattled so of course she came in for the kill. She grabbed my love handles and cooed, 'oohh you are losing that flab, not far to go, I want that six pack.' Then she pinched under my arm and as I squirmed held on tight so it looked like we were happily entwined. It was at this moment that the third person had driven past.

The spy had seen us holding hands as we walked to work. What she didn't have time to notice was that I was jumping all over the place because Rebecca was in my face and under my skin. I'd had the gall to suggest that being on time was necessary and that chatting was not good (possibly evil) so of course Rebecca came at me guns all blazing. It wasn't lovey.

But here's the thing. I couldn't help but be amused. To keep up appearances I kept yelping on the outside, but I was smiling on the inside, and she knew it.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Perhaps the single most important element in mastering the techniques and tactics of racing is experience. But once you have the fundamentals, acquiring the experience is a matter of time.'

Greg Lemond

BUY NOW

The Secret Key

‘If you can’t say something nice then don’t say nothing at all.’

Thumper’s rule

I am excited, at last I am going to be handed the secret key. Finally after years of study and experimentation I will be told how to create a passionate and fabulous relationship.

The great Harville Hendrix is speaking in our little town. This is a rare opportunity. He is one of the most respected authors in the field of relationships; a professor who has spent decades unraveling the mysteries of how we can best relate to each other. He has applied the full force of university research and scholarship for decades so when he says he knows what is necessary I believe him. I can’t wait.

The venue is a local church. The audience is small and a lot of people seemed to know each other. We have stumbled into a group of therapists and counselors. Obviously what he has to say isn’t for just anyone. I feel a bit special.

Harville arrives and immediately charms the room. He is lively and entertaining and definitely knows his topic. As with most speakers he spends some time laying out his credentials and outlining the work he had done to gain his insights. My anticipation is growing.

So we’re sitting in the audience at full attention ready for the pearl to be laid at our feet. We’re excited, but something is amiss, Harville isn’t. He starts to express some disappointment.

He says something like this.

‘You know folks I’m a professor committed to scholarship. I have run research programs, published papers and written books. I have had a conversation with my wife that has been going on for decades, every day we

talk for hours trying to get to the core of what makes a great relationship.'

'I love this work and I was always sure that one day I would discover something that would be lauded by my academic colleagues. I was convinced the key would be complex and only able to be fully grasped by a few. I wanted my discovery to be clever and intricate.'

I start squirming in my seat.

'But you know what? It's not. The key is not complex or elusive or hidden. It may be challenging to implement but it is simple to understand.'

I was silently screaming 'what is it?'

Harville obliged, 'the key to a great relationship is to make each other feel safe. That's it. Sure there are other really important elements like shared values and goals and we want to feel passion but safety is the key. If you feel safe you can relax and trust and feel.'

I'm stunned but I'm not disappointed. A master has shown me a simple and elegant truth.

He continued, 'So how do achieve this feeling of safety? Well you remove all negativity from all forms of communication. What is negative? Anything your partner says is negative. If they perceive it to be so then it is. For the next 24 hours eliminate negativity from your relationship. Then expand that challenge to a week and so on.'

'Good night folks and thanks for coming.'

Creating a feeling of safety is the most fundamental step you can take to grow a relationship based on love and respect.

Like most kids in our neighborhood my father drank too much. At no time were we physically threatened but when he came home from the pub everyone would know where he was and you would do your best to keep out of his way.

If we thought he'd been drinking we didn't invite friends home because we never knew how he would act. Saturdays were the worst because he

would drink earlier in the day and be home by early evening with a drunken bitter edge. Television became a very important refuge.

Like millions of people world wide I grew up in this atmosphere so I had no idea that I was anxious. The threat was not physical or even focused. It was the random possibility of a sudden shift in atmosphere that demanded attention. At any time I may have to deal with a man that was angry or bitter, or wickedly funny or witness my mother dredge up her disappointment. The real horror of this situation is that it is so common.

If you aren't exposed to alcohol in your home there are plenty of examples in most communities. I'm sure we all know of someone similar to this man. He has a reasonable job, is involved in the community and frequently drives while drunk. If you are involved with him in any way you have to be vigilant because he screws up all the time and then gets very defensive if you call him on it.

Overtime he has collected a group of family and friends who spend a lot of energy covering up for him and correcting his mistakes. Unfortunately they have become his enablers. By covering for him they allow him to continue to drink. If they stopped making everything OK then he would have to deal with the consequences of his behavior.

So is anyone safe around him? It is not only his family but his community and workplace who have to deal with the constant possibility that he will be impaired. It is necessary to keep your defenses up around him. It is unwise to relax and assume he can be trusted.

His addiction is easily categorized and we can talk about how difficult it is to truly feel safe around him, but what about the more subtle threats that cause us to hold back?

With their physical needs relatively satisfied, the individual's safety needs take precedence and dominate behavior. These needs have to do with people's yearning for a predictable orderly world in which perceived unfairness and inconsistency are under control, the familiar frequent and the unfamiliar rare.

Abraham Maslow

I can't relax if Rebecca is complaining to her friends about household appliances not working. I'm not a repair man but somehow I feel responsible and her complaint feels like an attack on me personally. I know this to be irrational but I never promised to be rational all the time. My smart quips chip away at her feeling of being cherished. These are not large or brutal acts of danger however they do mean that trust and relaxation are not constant. We are still holding back.

If you are fortunate enough to have removed obvious physical danger and emotional abuse from your life then you have the opportunity to take safety to the next level.

Imagine that you are going for a massage with the top body therapist in town, someone renowned for helping even the most guarded and defensive individuals feel safe and relaxed. A session with such a person would have many elements which you wouldn't notice explicitly.

You would arrive and the therapist would be ready to give you their full attention. From their greeting and manner you would feel sure that they are keen to see you and there will not be any terse remarks or pointed comments. You would know what was expected of you, where the boundaries were and what you could expect from them.

On the table there would not be any sudden movements. Your primal urge to fight or flight would be able to be put to one side. The room would be warm and secure and you could allow yourself to be vulnerable. You would do what you do when you feel truly safe. Some of us would sleep, others would talk.

Now imagine that your relationship was like this. How would we be if you could relax and trust? If moment to moment you knew deep in your bones that you were safe, that your partner did not represent any threat at all?

Nasty, horrible arguments

‘A lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship.’

John Gottman

We had started arguing about the dishes but within a few minutes I heard myself yelling. ‘It doesn’t matter what I say your response is always the same – not now – it’s my fault and if only I did everything differently we wouldn’t be in this mess.’

Rebecca snapped back. ‘I hate the way you talk to me. I’m not your slave and I won’t be treated like one. I don’t even want to be around you anymore.’

I was stunned. ‘But I just said..’

She rolled on. ‘I don’t care what you said it’s the way you say it. Everything that comes out of your mouth is covered in disgust. You’re obviously not happy. I don’t think you even like me. Did you ever like me or was I just convenient?’

The pause was brief. ‘Maybe we should just call it quits and try with someone else. Would you be happy with someone else? Lord knows it’s beyond me.’

As she headed for the door I thought that we had probably set a new record - from the dishes to contemplating divorce in less than 3 minutes.

At least we were good at something.

Learning to argue without damaging each other is a necessary skill if you want to thrive in your marriage.

The most awful aspect of our nasty arguments was the realization that I was capable of being coldly destructive.

As our arguments escalated in scale and frequency I found myself deciding to inflict harm. Voices and emotions would rise. I would get to the moment of choice knowing that the next comment would be too much, too mean, unnecessary. I would feel my cruel streak, understand what I was about to do and then consciously decide to proceed. I was clearly willing to destroy and inflict pain.

These arguments made me know that I am capable of being a prick. I was abusive when I didn't have to be. I was lazy, cold and arrogant because it felt good and in that moment I would shrug, 'whatever.'

It wasn't one sided. When Rebecca threw my shoe over the fence I could see she was enjoying the power and energy that her anger delivered. The action was invigorating but the moment it was over and the consequences started to play out it no longer felt like a good choice.

The aftermath was always depressing, awkward and disappointing. It was hard work to get back on track. I hate wasting time and energy and this cycle of casual abuse was the worst example of senseless effort I knew. Some real change was required.

I needed to become trustworthy. We needed to be friends. How could I expect someone to trust me when we were regularly taking shots at each other? How could we relax and enjoy each other if there was the possibility that a stray comment could ignite a nasty confrontation?

I didn't want to be that guy anymore. I didn't want to be tempted. I've seen the cruel me and it's not nice.

I have always thought of myself as non-violent. My last fight was when I was fourteen and that was quickly over with no real damage. I played a reasonable amount of sport and never got seriously provoked.

My temper can flare quickly but I always have a choice. Before I retaliate there is an instant where my rational mind kicks in, I assess the situation, and I decide. I can back off if I want to. I am not compelled to lash out. I

can walk away if I need to. In my whole adult life I have never made the decision to physically attack. I have often decided to verbally abuse.

Unskillful arguments can cause untold damage

When we were arguing poorly we would find the sharpest barbs we could and hurl them at any topic. So we'd start off discussing how to get the shopping done. This would escalate into an argument about who does what around the house which is a topic that opened the door to all our stress and disappointment. There was no place to hide and we were forced to defend ourselves.

After a hurtful argument it took about three days before we could relax or look each other in the eye. We would shuffle around the house acutely aware of each other, painfully polite and uncomfortable in each other's presence. We were not only wary of each other but also of ourselves, our behavior surprised us and it took time to accept that we could be so hurtful. But even after the recovery there was always a sense that we were diminished, that we were less than we had been.

We needed some solid strategies that would deliver real results. We have applied the following information and have almost completely eliminated the hateful distressing arguments from our relationship. We do still disagree, rile each other up and generally bug each other. We just don't let it go too far.

Arguing can be good, really!

‘Behind every great man is a woman rolling her eyes.’

Jim Carrey

Rob is a well regarded professional, a witty conversationalist and if you listen to his wife, a relentless disappointment.

On a beautiful winter’s morning he was in the middle of a huddle of excited children donning their uniforms before the football game. A loose circle of parent’s hovered nearby. The weather was bright, the pitch was recently mowed and the opposition seemed like a nice bunch. Perfect.

Unfortunately Rob had made a mistake with the team gear. Some water spilled on a uniform and one of the team was going to have to play with wet sleeves. The parents shrugged and the kids weren’t concerned ‘cause he’s a drip anyway.’ Ha ha.

Rob was standing up, half way through an apology when from the outer circle a commentary started.

‘Typical, why can’t you ever take care? All you had to do was screw a simple top on a water bottle and that was too much.’ She scanned the group of parents looking for supporters, eyes rolling.’ Look what you’ve done.’

Rob kept his head down and clenched his jaw shut to stop the response from spilling out.

A good argument can be beneficial in a marriage. Arguments need not be damaging to a relationship, they can be a useful way of clearing the dross and moving forward. Arguing is a skill and we can learn to do it well.

It is not the frequency of the argument or the subjects that you argue about that matter. The critical factors are how you argue, whether you damage each other in the fight and the ratio of good times to bad.

First we need to understand the difference between complaining, criticism and contempt. Complaining is when you address an issue or an action clearly and precisely without being personal. Example: ‘You said you would do the dishes and you haven’t.’ Criticism is personal and often has a global statement such as ‘always’ or ‘never.’ Example: ‘You said you would do the dishes. You never keep your word.’ Contempt adds an insult. Example: ‘You said you would do the dishes. You really are a low life.’

We need to be able to complain; there are issues that have to be addressed. No one wants to get landed with the dishes all the time. However there’s no place in a thriving relationship for criticism or contempt. They need to be banned.

I suggest you make an agreement with your partner to ban criticism and contempt from your communication. Be disciplined when you complain, don’t slip in a criticism or a contemptuous remark. It’s not easy but you’ll get immediate results. The horror of the punch and counter punch will be eliminated.

Another point to catch yourself on is when you try to justify your contemptuous statement. For example, if you have called your partner stupid and they pull you up on it; don’t spend the next five minutes explaining to them why they were thick.

One subject per argument

Stick to the subject you started with. For example, if you start off arguing about the dishes then this argument is about the dishes only. Argue about any other issues later, and one at a time.

Pick your moment

Timing is everything. If your partner is already struggling to cope with a hard day then delay until they are settled; the dishes can wait. Value your relationship higher than a single issue. If it never seems to be the right time then you have a bigger issue to address.

Start as you would like it to end

Avoid the harsh start up. The way you start is very predictive of the way you'll finish. If you leap in all guns blazing then it will probably end in an inferno, so be really careful about your first sentence. If you want it to end with respect and understanding then set the tone right up front.

Some arguments will never get resolved

Not all issues are resolvable. It doesn't mean you can't argue about them, it just means that holding the false hope of resolution may force you to argue beyond what is useful.

I know there are disagreements we will never resolve. Here's an example; to me overspending the budget is just overspending. If she spends the money at a sale then to her it is a saving. I know every accountant in the world agrees with me but I can see where she's coming from and for some reason we can't get to a point of agreement. We've been over this many times and we just see things differently, and that's that. Every so often I need to say my piece but my goal is to be heard, not to force a concession.

There are also arguments that we don't have the skill to resolve. In those first ten years our arguments were so full of our own pain it was impossible to make rational sense of them. I remember being very eloquent in my defense of my unemployment. I spewed a complex rationale to hide the fact that I was exhausted and aimless. I had deep issues to deal with and used seemingly coherent arguing to cover them up.

It was a relieving moment for me when I realized that I didn't have the skill to get through everything just yet. You can park these ones or seek help from mentors and professionals. There's plenty of help available if you look for it.

Poke out your tongue

The repair mechanism, sometimes called a time-out or a circuit breaker, is a way to ensure that things don't get out of hand. It's a signal or a comment that alerts both parties to back-off or slow down, that there's danger

ahead. It could be a comment like, ‘we’re off the topic’ or ‘that was unkind’ but my favorite is the poked out-tongue. When things start to get a bit crazy, one of us will drop a sly little look and stick it out. It’s difficult to continue with any enjoyable venom. How can you yell at someone who is smart enough to realize how ridiculous you’re being?

It doesn’t mean that the argument is not valid or should not be completed. It just means that now you’re going about it in a way that may end up damaging us; and us is more important than finishing the argument now.

Repair mechanisms have a positive aspect too. They allow you to argue with confidence. If I know for certain that I won’t get into a whirlwind of recriminations and bitter memories at first mention of the budget then it’s possible to start talking about it. We may not be able to reach resolution, but we can at least try. We can proceed until there’s a sense that it’s about to become unpleasant, out comes the tongue and we back off.

Of all the techniques I’ve learned, this is the one that has helped me feel really safe. In the past there’s been a certain anxiety about entering into discussions that could get argumentative simply because there was no safety net. There was always the possibility that at any given moment a hot button could get fired up and off we’d go, into the boxing ring letting go of as many combinations as we could.

Too much, too much

Another concept that’s very helpful to understand is flooding. This is when there’s too much stimulation and you’re feeling overwhelmed. If the kids are shouting and there’s noise from the kitchen I often find that I have to turn the radio off in order to think. There’s just too much going on. I am flooded.

I respond poorly if people come at me too quickly with too much information – or if they suddenly interrupt my concentration. The kids know that if I am on the computer it is best to approach from the side, get into my peripheral vision, say something slow to start with and wait a second. This allows me to shift gears and all goes well from there. If they yap at me from behind and demand quickly I am much less reasonable.

It feels odd to realize that my reactions are so dependent on those first few seconds.

In an argument situation it may be that the feeling has got too high and one of you becomes flooded. In this situation the worst thing you can do is push. The flooded person is in a state of not being able to respond, they need to be able to collect themselves. Anything more may feel like an attack. Even innocent remarks may lead you into very tricky territory.

Stonewalling

The unskillful response to flooding is to stonewall. It's where you disengage from the argument completely, maybe by refusing to talk, staring at the TV or just storming out. This leaves one partner trying to engage while the other is refusing to even try. The power struggle is intense and may be very frightening for the one who is still attempting to communicate.

One person is feeling attacked to the point where they can not or will not respond and the other is trying to force a response. It's like trying to pour more water into an engorged sponge; there's no more room. No amount of force is going to achieve anything.

Stonewalling needs to be avoided. It will damage your sense of 'us' because one of you has withdrawn from that space.

Watch your mouth and show some respect

When you break it all down this is what we're left with. If you apply some discipline to your words and actions then a fiery exchange does not need to become explosive. It can be emotional and truthful and daring, without being damaging or hurtful. You can say what needs to be said, express disappointment and discuss edgy topics without having to defend yourself because you'll not be under attack. There's nothing complex here, just some discipline when under fire.

ACQUIRING SKILLS AND FACING ISSUES

‘Great things are not done by impulse but by a series of small things brought together.’

Vincent Van Gogh

Monogamy, are you serious!

'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.'

Bill Clinton

I spluttered a bit. 'You know this whole monogamy thing.'

With no hesitation she snapped 'Are you having an affair?'

'no.... no'

'Do you want to have one?'

'I don't think so. No! in fact I'm not even looking. It's just that sometimes I wonder why I'm not. I mean you're gorgeous and I love you but the world is full of attractive women. What would be the harm?'

Silence.

'If I felt a buzz with someone we could follow it to see where it lead. Maybe it would die away or maybe it would be hot. Surely that's just being honest and true?'

More silence.

Then the lights went on and Rebecca joined in. 'Ahh I understand now. By having sex with other women you're just being honorable - a foot soldier for the truth in this world of emotional deceit. A man of integrity'

'Yes being real. That's what I'm doing. Agreed.'

'Unfortunately there is one big flaw in your approach to this issue.' I looked for the answer in her eyes. When she was sure I didn't get it she spelt it out.

'You're thinking like a male.' She smiled, 'I've warned you about this before.'

'We are in a monogamous relationship because it works. Taking on the challenge of investing in this relationship is the best way to protect the family unit. Males who think they can have their cake and eat it too haven't fully embraced what the family needs from them. They are not interested in being adult men. They are the eternal boys, the peter pans. No woman finds that attractive.'

Now it was my turn to be quiet.

'Hey Romeo, you know what women do find attractive.'

'um, err maybe, well not exactly.'

'A clean kitchen. A man who could clear the table and get the lunch dishes done may find that he does not need to look further afield for appreciation.'

If I'm to stay monogamous for decades then I need to be sure that there's something to be gained. I need to be rewarded for my effort and discipline.

I understand that there are financial and emotional consequences if I don't honor my vow; however, this is not enough for me. I seem to have given up a great deal of freedom. Why have I given up the right to roam? Long term exclusivity would seem to need some serious justification if it is to be adhered to.

The monogamy issue confused me for a long time because the debate is actually about two different issues; and they are constantly mixed up.

The first issue is whether life time sexual exclusivity is the best option. There are many other options such as polygamy, swinging and celibacy. I assumed that monogamy came with the marriage ceremony. I don't think I had any sense that there were other options or that I was actively choosing monogamy.

The second issue is cheating. It is very simple. If you make an agreement you should keep it. This is a basic principle; however I think we might have a tolerance for the cheat because we don't really believe that monogamy is reasonable. Most of us didn't explicitly choose it, we're not

sure of its value so it can be disregarded. We break the agreement rather than negotiate a change in the conditions or give notice of a cancellation.

The truth is that monogamy is not an easy agreement to keep. I was confused because I asked a poor quality question, what's in it for me? Monogamy isn't about me, it's about us. As soon as I asked, what's in it for us? the explanation sounded much more authentic.

Here are some of the reasons I've stayed monogamous. See what you think.

I must keep the relationship in order. If I only have one source of sexual gratification then I'd better make sure that we're on good terms. If we're not feeling it then I'm not going to be getting it. This pressure keeps me attentive. It ensures that we keep dealing with issues. If I have the option of satisfaction from other people then I don't have to be so focused.

If I'm trying to hook up with other people then my energy will be dissipated. I'll be scanning the room at social events, looking for the next opportunity. My social planning would become complex and demanding. If you want to reach the top in any field you need to be more laser than radar; even Michael Jordan wasn't great at two sports.

The more you can trust and relax the more you can feel. The more you can feel the greater your knowledge of who you are and what is happening in your life. With more self-knowledge comes a greater range of expression, more energy and a wish to connect. If you want to have a depth of experience you must be able to trust and let go. If you're cheating or distracted you are less aware.

This raises another very interesting question. When have you cheated? If my rationale for staying monogamous is to increase trust and not just guard the blood lines then where's the most appropriate point to draw the line?

I'm sure we would all agree that sexual penetration has stepped over the mark, but what about three hours previously as I'm rearranging my schedule to meet my mistress in the hotel? Have I cheated at that point?

In order to get to the hotel room I would need to make a number of decisions and take many actions. There are lots of steps and at each point I

would have the option not to continue. Each step down the path would take me further away from building trust and focus in my primary relationship. Technically I probably haven't broken my vow, yet I've already started to lie and my energy is not completely engaged in my marriage.

The bottom line is that I'll maximize the possibility of my relationship by building trust and energy within the boundary of us. Any dissipation or destruction of this process will mean that I'll place an unnecessary limitation on my experience. So for me the demarcation line has to be to never take an active step towards seeking a sexual liaison with anyone except for my wife. The smallest lie will start the corrosion.

Monogamy is a tough issue. There is no getting away from the fact that I am giving up a freedom. I have chosen to agree to a set of rules that I know are the best option for me. So it is no longer about sex. It is now about my ability to act within the letter and spirit of the promise I made to someone I love.

PASSION AND SEX

‘Sex lies at the root of life, and we can never learn reverence for life until we learn reverence for sex.’

Margot Anand

A friend told me a story that illustrates my end goal perfectly. She remembers being a child in Sweden, sitting with her grandfather in their pajamas. The kitchen was warm and full of the smell of fresh baking. They sipped hot tea from heavy cups and saucers. As they chatted grandma walked in naked. This was not unusual she was a fine looking woman completely comfortable in her own skin.

Grandma kissed her grand-daughter on the head then proceeded to bend over to check the oven. My friend became aware of a chattering sound similar to that made by someone who is very cold. She looked around to see Grand dad staring at his wife of 45 years with ‘the look of a hunter.’ Grandma had bent over right in front of him and his cup and saucer were shaking in his hands.

I want this story to be true for us in thirty years time.

After 20 years is passion possible?

‘Complaining of sexual boredom is conventional. Nurturing eroticism in the home is an act of open defiance.’

Esther Perel

I was about to walk into the valley of death. The mother of my children was sitting on the couch, dressed pleasantly and smiling gently. I girded my loins, opened my mouth and started to splutter.

‘I asked to have this talk because I’ve been thinking about you and me and the shape of the couch.’

She raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

‘That didn’t come out right,’ I said, ‘I meant to say that you and I’ve become like this couch.’

‘Would that be stuffed and covered in baby spit?’ enquired the seatee, ‘or perhaps a bit lumpy and in need of more spring, or maybe (mock gasp, shock horror) past its use by date and ready to be tossed?’

I blushed, looked at the ground and shifted my feet. Then I glared at her and collected my thoughts.

‘Grrr, none of those, you’re being bad. What I was trying to say is that we’ve become like this couch. We’re comfy and familiar, wonderful to cuddle into at the end of a long day, and yes,’ I conceded, ‘covered in many kinds of baby gaga.’

I kept going. ‘I love this couch. It is solid and reliable. It’s where I feel best and choose to spend the most time. It knows me and has changed to accommodate my shape. I know it will always be there, which I appreciate.’

I took a deep breath, and without catching her eye continued. ‘However, the couch is also uninspiring, completely lacking in surprise or spontane-

ity and is not as sharp as it used to be. The colours have faded, the edges have softened and one evening on the couch is very similar to the previous few thousand.'

I was about to continue when she interrupted. 'Are you saying that you need to go and sit on a chaise longue?' her voice became steely, 'maybe a newer, brighter version!'

I seized the moment, 'Yes, sometimes I do want that, and sometimes a wicker beach settee and other times a big old heavy leather beast, all cracked and in need of a good polish.' I could see the question in her eyes. I hadn't stated a preference for old and heavy before.

I stumbled on. 'With you, I want to have all these different experiences with you. The couch is a metaphor for our relationship.' I paused and continued quietly, 'I would never call you lumpy.'

I looked up from the floor and ran straight into the lounge's most direct of gazes. It was the one she used when she had my number. No question she had understood.

'Let me get this straight,' she said, 'you think just because I make a few flippant comments that I'm bad.'

I had no idea where this was going and didn't manage to reply.

'Let me tell you something,' she continued as she stood up, 'you are the bad one here. Comparing our relationship to this old thing is not acceptable...and you deserve to be punished.' She raised an eyebrow.

My eyes popped and my eyebrows shot up. It had been so long.

'Assume the position,' she barked.

I immediately started to bend down. As I was halfway to the floor she added insult to future injury.

'Not there, on the couch!'

Is it possible to have a relationship that becomes more exciting the longer it goes on, where you're attracted to each other in an edgy, must have, sort of way rather than just being comfortable and content? Where you don't settle for the comfort zone?

The first challenge is to question the mass belief that decline in attraction is inevitable. It's assumed by many that the initial buzz will quickly disappear and be replaced by a dull white noise. They saw it happen to their parents and friends, so they assume it will happen to them. They don't have any interest in taking up arms against this insidious intruder.

It may not be easy, but let us be brave enough to ask the question: How can I have great sex with my long term partner? What do we need to do differently from the majority of erotically bored couples?

We want to experience incandescent burning need, a yearning for satisfaction, to be released from the chains of unreasonable desire. We want to go to that state of meditation where everything is now, where the impromptu is perfect. Where needs erupt in a flame, remain unsatisfied for an instant too long and are then met completely, and extinguished.

One by one all my friends have gone down the same track. As soon as they had children they took on the necessary roles of reliability and routine. Some went gracefully and others went kicking and screaming, but they all went. Lives that had been chaotic and unpredictable have been reigned in and a new set of values established. Families have been built around themes of routine, predictability, certainty and steadiness.

This safety soothes the soul of the family. Children and parents thrive on the same old, same old. The picket fence stands straight and newly painted. All is well in the suburbs.

However, there's a set of dark clouds on the horizon. The comfortable life which has provided a solid foundation for the family may be slowly choking the passion and intensity out of their sex life.

In some couples it's caused by intimacy which has tipped over into merging. There's no sense of separation which you heal through sex. The gap is already closed so you cuddle up. In other couples it may be because you

have invested so much in each other that it seems weird to be edgy and demanding. Or maybe you have stopped seeing your wife as lover and all you can see is mother.

Phil: You're such a great mother. Sometimes I wish you were my mother.

Claire: Oh gosh. I'm already queasy.

Modern Family

The security, gentleness and routine are incredibly valuable and not to be dismissed. However, they are the anti-sex. The same old, same old is by definition not exciting.

We need strategies to cope with the lack of surprise and spontaneity in a long-term relationship. We're tasked with creating interest and excitement in circumstances that are familiar, with a person who we know well. The problem is that desire is in large part based on the unknown or the yet to be gained.

One strategy to counter the sameness is to make time for the erotic. Get over the idea that sex should be spontaneous and randomly generated. It's too important to wait around for.

Take charge and plan pleasurable liaisons as part of your week. The important point is that you're planning for erotic time together, which may or may not lead to sex. You're not planning for sex because this may create pressure and resentment. You plan to honour the importance of connection and work to create an atmosphere in which attraction will thrive.

Thumbing your nose at the drab view of the masses may be the first challenge, but managing the paradoxes inherent in a long-term relationship is the core of the problem.

These paradoxes don't need to be resolved. They will never go away. They need to be managed. For example, we will always have a tension between creating a solid foundation of intimacy and the exciting edge of uncertainty and adventure. We need to manage this split personality, em-

brace the joy of the diverse experience; 95 percent happy suburbia and 5 percent international couple of mystery.

Instead of thinking of your relationship as a continually intimate experience, think of it as a series of episodes. For example, tonight I got home from work and had a series of nice little moments with everyone. I then changed into the practical mode of bike mechanic. For a moment I was called upon to be a stern disciplinarian. I then slipped into the routine of getting the children to bed. Before the week is out I may also get a turn at being the dominating lover, or the alluring romantic, or the relaxed recipient of all things pleasurable.

By dividing my roles into episodes, one role doesn't need to bleed into the others. The fact that I'm gentle with the children and get home on time does not need to make me a staid or unimaginative lover. Being ruthless in the pursuit of my own pleasure sometimes does not mean that I'm selfish or that I'll forget to pay the mortgage. These are just a few episodes in among hundreds.

There are many realms within a relationship where power sharing can work well. How to raise your children is an area where it would seem preferable that a consensus decision is reached: positions negotiated, two parties reach a solid agreement and then proceed with continual review and assessment. This is solid, skilful, steady and appropriate to this situation; however it's definitely not exciting. An egalitarian division of tasks and decision making can be wonderful but it's not skilful in all situations.

Power sharing doesn't work when you're trying to dance. Attempting to reach consensus in the middle of a high-speed twirl could be disastrous. If you do take a committee approach it's most likely that you'll end up sitting on the sideline watching the others.

Every dance needs a leader, someone to take charge. Speed and steps need to be signalled by someone in a decisive manner, not tentatively. If you want to dip and spin and let go to the rhythm then one of you needs to step up and the other needs to allow it to happen. You could swap this role throughout the dance if you wanted, but moment to moment there needs to be a leader.

In a classic tango, the woman chooses to be led for a few minutes. She is not without power; at any time she can walk away, she just chooses not to exercise it. The man is required to show clear intention and to skilfully control the woman's body, but he's not just handed this opportunity, he must seize it. It's a dance of power. The woman is seen to be strong and then relent; she allows and he steps up.

The power is shared, but not equally.

This is one episode and need not imply anything for other parts of your life.

‘Do you really have to be the ice queen intellectual or the slut whore? Isn't there some way to be both?’

Susan Sarandon

The bedroom can be an opportunity to express the opposite of your most common persona and thereby regain some balance.

Someone who spends the day giving orders may wish to be relieved of all decision making. A quiet introvert may wish to play the extroverted exhibitionist. These roles may not be suited to your everyday life but could still be important aspects that demand some expression. The suggestion is that we can choose to let off some steam, to try on different personas in a situation that's contained and safe.

As a generation we're suffering from a belief that everything will be made better if only we can express it fully, at length, to anyone who will listen, preferably on TV.

What would happen if you stopped talking and instead attempted to work out issues through your skin, your breath and your muscles? You could seek solace by rubbing your bare belly against that of your lover, let go of your anger by putting on your shorts and going for a run, seek understanding through your partner's sweat. We could share our day by combing our partner's hair, in silence.

One of the most chilling moments of our marriage was in the middle of an argument. Rebecca eyeballed me and announced, 'I've got options.' I was stunned.

It's a true statement. If she made herself available she would be in high demand. I've never forgotten. Knowing that you could lose someone is a sure way to stay attentive, both to them and to your own demeanour. The uncertainty is energising.

I now consider it a delightful privilege that she keeps choosing to be with me. It's definitely not a given and I need to keep encouraging her to make that choice.

To have a passionate marriage we may need to be a little separate.

One perspective on attraction is that we're trying to bridge a gap, to reduce the tension caused by being in the presence of an unknown or uncertain energy; the greater the risk, the more that's hidden, the greater the passion. An icon such as James Bond captures this perfectly. He's dangerous, very attractive and definitely not husband material.

My problem is that I've been married for nearly twenty years. The chance of me filling her with fear that erupts into overwhelming desire is remote.

However, there is hope. Does she know me so well that there can be no surprises? I learn new things about myself every day. My life and psyche are perpetual works in progress. So if I don't know me completely what are the chances that anyone else has the full picture either?

In short, it's madness to believe that you 'know someone better than they know themselves.' A consequence of this delusion is that you won't be looking for the new and surprising from your partner. If you make this mistake then of course the grass will look greener, and you'll be sentenced to a lifetime of peering over the fence longing for different pastures.

CHALLENGES AND GAMES

‘You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.’

Plato

The holy grail of a fabulous relationship is playfulness. To be able to be light and joyful and expressive with someone you have a history with takes skill, effort and determination. To still be thrilled to be in each other’s presence after all these years is an accomplishment worthy of great respect.

The purpose of these challenges and games is to help you to play with each other.

How to play

Select a challenge or game that’s interesting for you and your partner. Ensure that it’s achievable but that it will require you to stretch and change.

Set a goal to meet that challenge then start taking the necessary steps; work through the issues that are presented on the way. Cultivate the skills, perspective and energy required to have a full experience of your chosen adventure.

Enjoy striving together as a couple and keep moving towards your goal until you achieve it.

Then choose another challenge that’s even more inspiring, that will require more change and that will deliver even more fabulous benefits to you and your partner.

Do it again. Keep creating more adventure and satisfaction within your relationship.

Terms of engagement

This book is about finding ourselves through our relationship. The purpose is to help us to trust and relax so that we can let go and feel. In order to achieve this we need to establish some boundaries. Make sure you both agree to play by the same rules.

Here are some guidelines that worked for us. Please consider what is important to you and amend them as you feel appropriate.

- We are in a monogamous relationship. There is value in being exclusive.
- We will maintain a strong moral compass. If it doesn't seem right for us we won't do it.
- We will be brave in our requests and gentle in our replies.
- It's OK to ask. We won't be put down for asking, nor will we resent being asked.
- It's OK to say 'no' or 'not now.' We won't be put down for declining, nor will we resent being declined.
- We aim to create authentic skills and experiences so we will not rely on stimulants.
- We will decide what is fun, adventurous and interesting for ourselves.
- We maintain internal confidentiality. Spontaneous actions and expressions will not be used against us at a later time. We hold information within the relationship.
- We create an 'us.' Our relationship is an important part of our life; our separate lives are important too.
- We encourage playfulness and silliness.
- I'm responsible for understanding my wants and needs and communicating them clearly. I trust that you want to respond, and will if you can. Sometimes it won't be possible.
- We will play when we can and rest when we need to.
- We aim to play with grace, ease and lightness.

Pursuit of the Trivial

‘To know me is to love me and to love me is to know me.’

Unknown

Rebecca was in full flight and all I could do was breathe and allow the deluge of information to wash over me.

‘My best friend at school was Sarah who lived around the corner. We used to play with our Cindy dolls. And it was Sarah and I who put up with Cindys even though we wanted Barbies. It was all to do with bendy knees. Cindy couldn’t bend, Barbie could. It was very important at the time.’

She paused to make sure I was keeping up. A small nod was all that was needed.

‘So now you understand why I insist on the exact brand when I ask for something. If I don’t tell you exactly what I want you might buy me the one without the bendy knees.’

The game is to play trivial pursuit with each other’s history and personal preferences. It’s not about trying to influence or reframe that experience. It is about getting to know and understand your partner through the details of their life.

Whenever we drive up the coast we pass Rebecca’s childhood home. Last week we stopped in at her old school for half an hour. In that time we learnt that she had fallen off the jungle gym and broken her arm, loved the swimming pool, saw the house that her friend lived in and heard numerous other stories.

Four weeks before the trip her father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. As we were leaving the school she teared-up when she saw that a rose gar-

den he had planted thirty years ago was still thriving; some weeks after the trip he published his biography and made special mention of how much he loved roses. This information was noted and roses were kept beside his bed in the hospice. Small details, but perhaps not that trivial.

‘I think they should have a Barbie with a buzz cut.’

Ellen DeGeneres

A problem I’ve noticed with my own long-distance friendships is that you gradually lose the day-to-day interaction that builds a detailed knowledge of each other’s life. This can seriously impact on the small talk that maintains interaction and builds richness in your relationship.

We reveal ourselves in the details. For example, why do I prefer a certain hairdresser? It could be that I’m a creature of habit, or maybe they are a relative, or possibly they are considered the best and I’m status conscious. What about that summer when puberty grabbed me: What was on the radio? Which movie was big? How did my parents cope?

Knowing my haircutting schedule and the context of my puberty could be enlightening.

There’s a level of questions that are less factual and that may be revealing to both of you. For example, who is your favorite sibling? This may be a question you have never dared to contemplate and the answer may be surprising to you and your partner. We’ve had questions where I’ve confidently answered, only to be challenged and to then realize that she was right. It seems that in some areas she knows me better than I know myself.

You can create a shared history through questions such as, when did I first know that I loved you? This can be very helpful in stressful times. You can reveal yourself and increase intimacy through questions such as, who was the first to break your heart?

And then of course there are the ones that are just silly. Have fun.

How to play

Ask 20 questions which you both answer about each other. You can source the questions from the list that follows or make up your own.

For example:

Q ‘What is my favorite movie?’

A. ‘I know your favorite movie is Life is Beautiful.’

If this is correct you get a point. If it’s wrong you have learnt something new about your partner.

- **Name my favorite (or least favorite):**

Movie, Actor, Actress, Play, Song, Singer, Concert, Book, Author, Poem, Cartoon character, Book, Fictional character, Meal, Snack, Drink, Fruit, Vegetable, Dessert, Shoes, Outfit, Hat, School teacher, Holiday, Car, Sport, Sports event, Sports team, Pastime, Sibling, Friend, Parent, Relative, Animal, Artist, Magazine, TV show, Color, Web site, Charity, Restaurant, Childhood memory, Memory of our wedding, Hobby.

- **Who or what was my first:**

Lover, Best friend, Imaginary friend, School teacher, Boss, School, Big success, Hurtful failure, Accident, Job, Bike, Holiday, Car, Memory, Person I had a crush on, to break my heart.

- What was my childhood nickname?
- What is my highest academic achievement?
- What was my most thrilling sporting moment?
- How many bones have I broken?
- How many operations have I had?
- How big was my first paycheck?
- How much do I earn?
- Describe my ideal weekend.

- If I could invite any six people (alive or dead) to dinner who would I invite?
- Who do I most admire?
- Which of my friends are good for me?
- Which of my friends do I find hard work?
- Name the people who drive me up the wall?
- Name the people close to me who have died?
- What talent would I most like to have?
- What musical instrument is the coolest?
- Name three performers I would like to see live.
- What is my greatest regret?
- What is my greatest achievement?
- What brings me the greatest happiness?
- What do I dislike most about myself?
- What do I like most about myself?
- What would I change about myself if I could?
- What is the habit I would most like to give up?
- What is the habit I would most like to take up?
- If I had 24 hours to live, who would I call?
- If I could have any job, what would it be?
- What makes me angry?
- What makes me depressed?
- What is the biggest stress in my life right now?
- In the last week, what has been the most fun for me?
- In the last week, what has been my biggest challenge?
- Describe my bedtime routine.

- What time is my alarm set to wake me up?
- What was the best year of my life?
- What am I dreading most in the near future?
- What am I looking forward to most in the near future?
- What is my greatest fear?
- If I changed my name what would I choose to be called?
- If I was the opposite gender what would my name be?
- If I was a soap star what would my name be?
- If I could live anywhere, where would I choose?
- If I could own any car what would I choose?
- When do I intend to retire?
- When we first met what was I wearing?
- What country would I most like to visit?
- When did I first know that I loved you?
- When is my favorite time of the day to have sex?
- What environments make me feel sexy?
- If I asked for a rub what part of my body would I most enjoy?
- Who do I think is the sexiest actor or actress?
- Who would I turn gay for?
- How many lovers have I had?
- When did I lose my virginity?
- What was the wildest sexual experience I've ever had?
- What was the best sexual experience I've ever had?
- What is next on my sexual to do list?