

SERIOUS ABOUT
LOVE

A decorative flourish consisting of a thick, dark grey ribbon that loops under the word 'LOVE' and extends to the right, ending in a wavy tail.

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**DEDICATED TO MY CHILDREN AND THEIR
MARRIAGE PARTNERS**

Kim and Ed
Kari and Jeff
Kevin and Angela

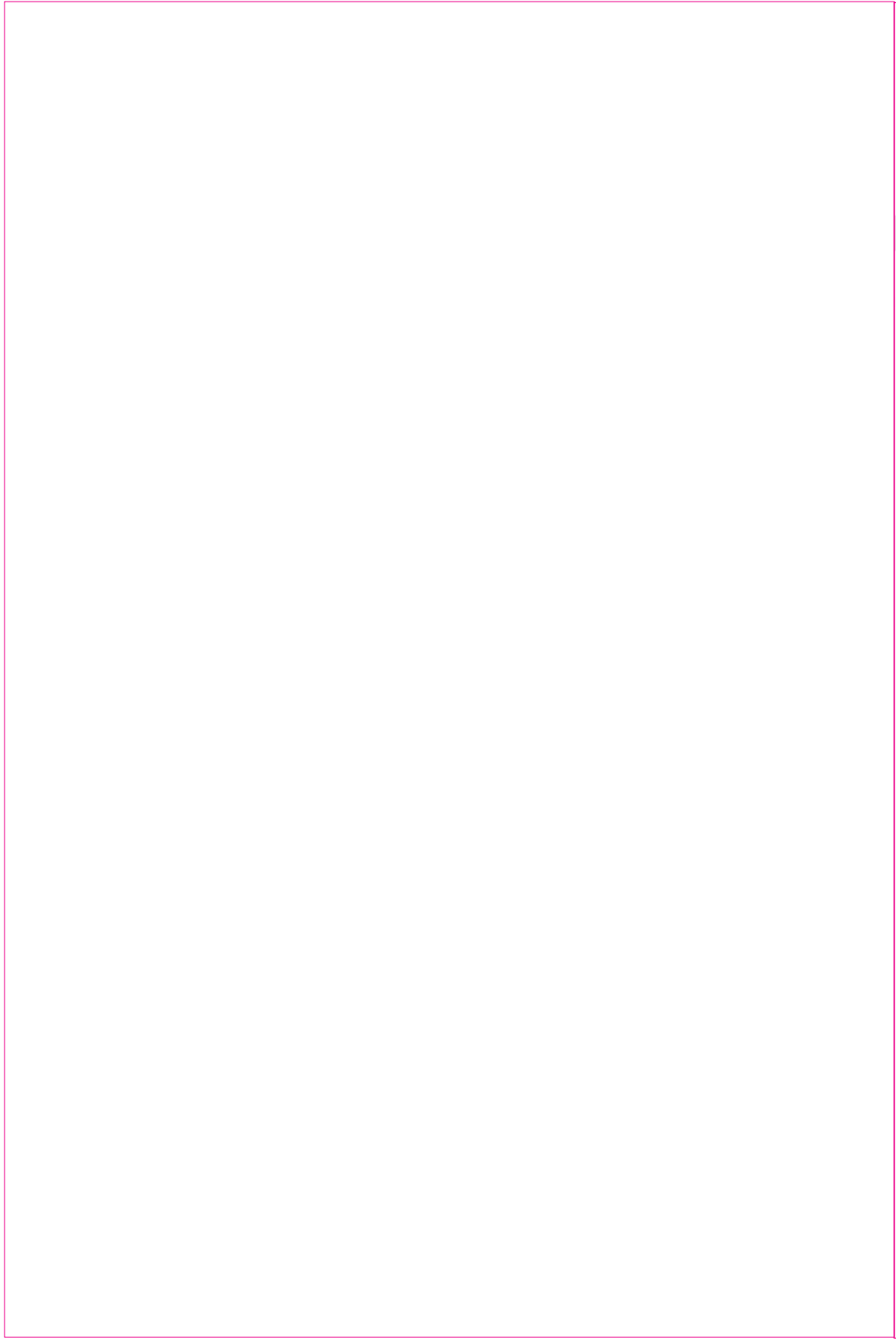
May you always remember that . . .

*“Through wisdom a house is built,
And by understanding it is established;
By knowledge the rooms are filled
With all precious and pleasant riches.”*

Proverbs 24:3, 4, NKJV

With special thanks to Kari St. Clair for the time, wisdom, and insights
she shared with her mom as she edited this book.

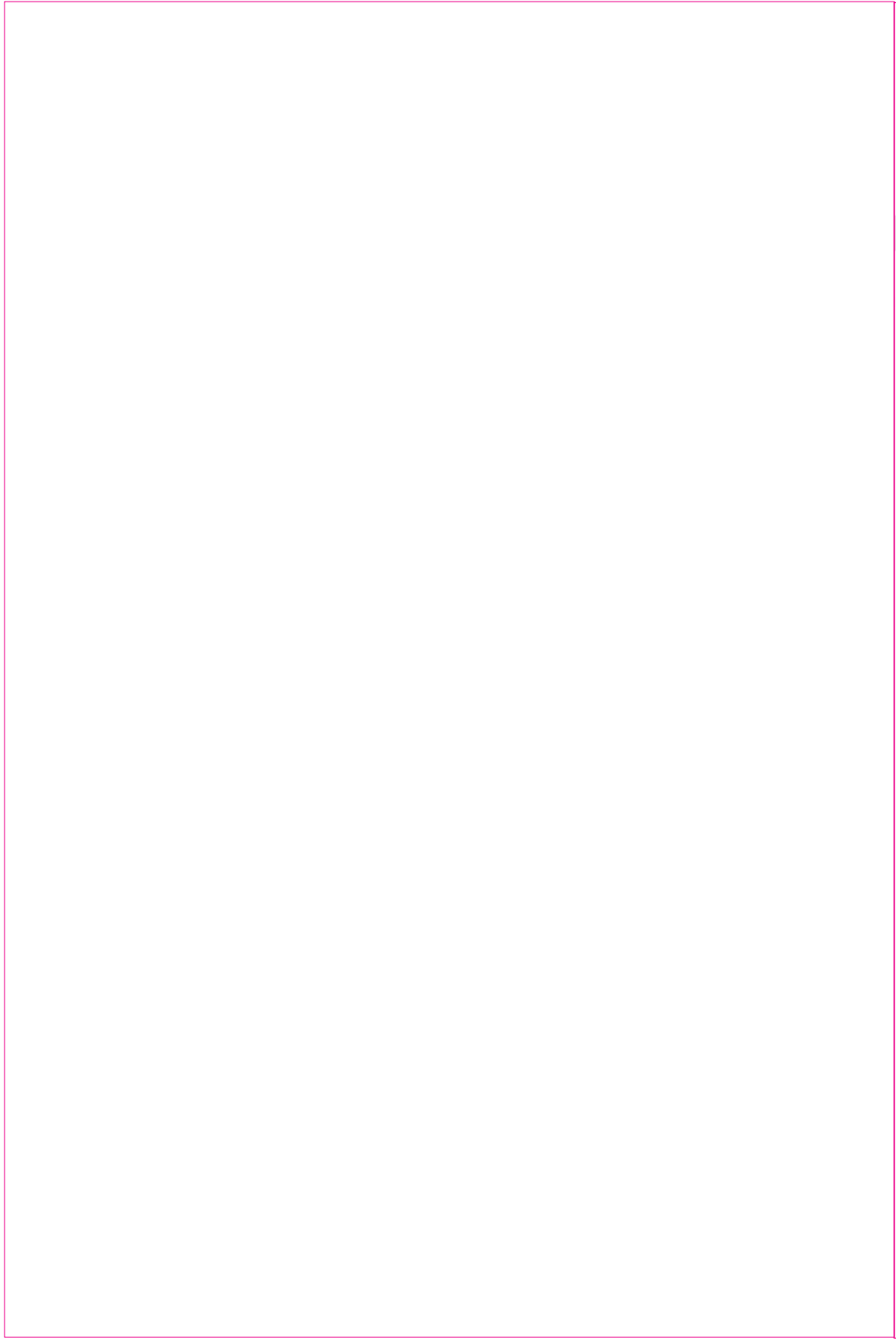
It wouldn't have been the same without her!





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INTRODUCTION

Are you anticipating making an investment in marriage sometime soon? Marriage isn't like the stock market—you don't pick up a good-looking marriage partner and hold on to it as long as it proves to be a good investment and then dump it for another when it starts to slump. Marriage is an investment for life.

You owe it to yourself to find out what it takes to be happy and fulfilled in a lifetime commitment. Do you have the information you need to choose a marriage partner wisely?

You're mature enough to realize that love and marriage aren't necessarily forever. You've watched some of your friends fall in love, marry, and divorce. Others are struggling to hold things together, and many are merely existing as married singles. Or perhaps you've gone through a bad relationship, experienced a traumatic breakup, and want desperately to avoid making the same mistake again! You want something better. Not only do you want to avoid the devastating agony of rejection and divorce, but you also want to experience all that God intended marital love to be.

This book is for those who are serious about love. It is for you who have gone through the teenage turmoil of falling in and out of puppy love and are now seriously searching for a lifetime marriage partner.

Walk as rationally as possible through the dating process. Give yourself time to determine whether you are courting the right mate. There is nothing more bankrupting than making a long-term investment in what turns out to be short-term interest.

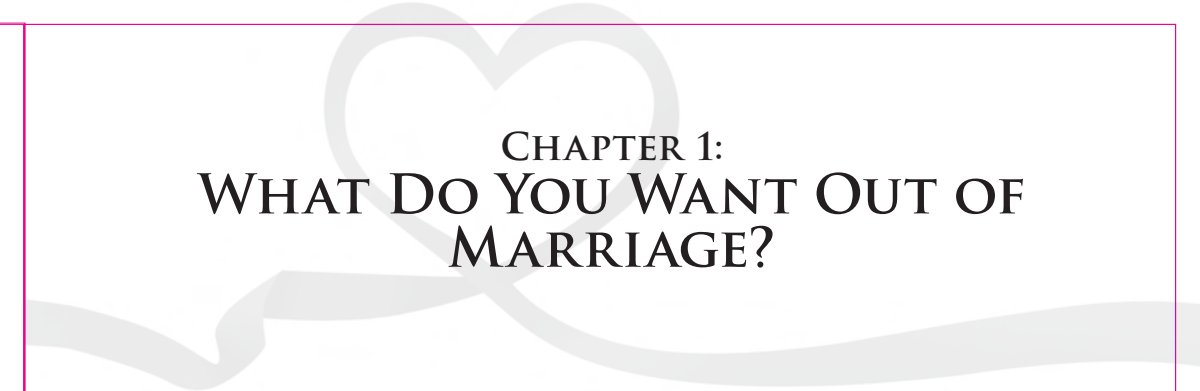
Don't give up your idealism. It is possible to have your dreams come true. In spite of difficult days, you can experience a sustaining sense of intimate, unconditional love in your marriage. But don't kid yourself—it won't happen by chance.

Finding the happiness you're looking for depends a great deal on two factors: choosing the right mate and being the right mate for the person you choose. A little advice: choose wisely. Love is not enough to keep a marriage together.

If you are seriously considering marriage, read this book with your loved one. Make a promise to yourself and to each other to evaluate the risk factors for alienation and divorce. Work out major and minor problems in your relationship *before* you marry.

Marriage is a commitment for life. The choices you make before marriage are critical for your future happiness. They help you discover who you are and what makes your heart sing. So live each day to the fullest, becoming the person God wants you to be. Believe that God has good things planned for you and it is His heart's desire to give you your heart's desire. Don't settle for anything less.

—Kay Kuzma



CHAPTER 1: WHAT DO YOU WANT OUT OF MARRIAGE?

A bishop was administering confirmation to a group of young people and asked a nervous child, “How does the catechism define *matrimony*?”

The child hesitated for a moment and then said, “It is a state of terrible torment which those who are compelled to enter undergo for a time to fit them for the better world.”

“No, no,” interrupted the parish priest. “You’ve mixed up the definition of *matrimony* with the definition of *purgatory*!”

“Let it be.” The bishop smiled. “How do two priests like you and me know that the child is not right?”

Every bride and groom says “I do” with the expectation that their marriage is going to be different. They believe their union will bring true fulfillment and intimacy. A young couple would never walk down the aisle if they knew they were entering a state of “purgatory.” People get married because they dream of living happily ever after. They want heaven on earth—not hell!

But so few reach the ideal! Why is that? Is there something you can do to enable your marriage to be everything you hope it will be?

CHOOSING A MARRIAGE PARTNER

Marriage is a pivotal point. In one way or another, everything beyond it will be affected by the one you choose as your mate. Choosing a marriage partner who will stand the test of time is the most important decision you will ever have to make. Yet many people are more serious about checking out the car they want to buy than the person they want to marry. Can you imagine buying a car on feelings alone?

If you want to avoid marital misery, you have to have a goal above and beyond merely finding the person who turns you on. And it’s probably not wise to get married just because you’ve found someone who meets your needs. You must consider every aspect of the other person’s life in relationship to your own.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment, regardless of personality, handicaps,

temperament, money, looks, or health. This commitment shouldn't be hard to keep. It shouldn't be work! To love your mate as yourself is meant to be the most natural response of your being.

It takes a great deal of effort to have a good marriage, but it doesn't have to be a chore. If you have a job just to get a paycheck, that's work. But if your job is something you would do regardless of the pay, you can give it everything you've got and it wouldn't seem like work at all. Every successful marriage takes effort, but if you marry the right mate for you and you choose to be the right mate for the person you marry, you'll find satisfaction is easier to obtain.

What's the right mate? It's someone who sees your dreams and your potential and helps you pursue them. The right mate encourages you to become the highest version of the grandest vision that you are! Being the right mate means your greatest desire is to do the same for the other.

I believe many marriages end up in a state of terrible torment because people don't know themselves and what makes their hearts sing. They don't have a plan for their lives. Instead, they follow their feelings, make poor choices in the person they date, and then hope their beloved will magically change, become their ideal mate, and bring them lasting fulfillment by meeting all their needs. Let me tell you, that scenario seldom happens.

AVOIDING THE LESS-THAN-IDEAL MARRIAGE

Before you choose a mate, it is very important to decide what you want out of marriage. You need to know where you're going in order to determine how to get there.

Most people want romance, intimacy, a sense of fulfillment and companionship in a marriage. They want an equal partnership—not a union in which one dominates the other. The ideal marriage is two people continuing to grow in love, understanding, and unity. They are totally committed to explore and rediscover each other as they experience life together, meeting each other's needs regardless of health, wealth, or whether the cap gets put on the toothpaste tube. That's marital bliss.

Most newlyweds start out expecting that theirs will be the ideal marriage. But few retain this expectation past the first five years. The ideal is possible only when the couple commits to and actively works on keeping their marriage vital by encouraging each other's personal growth.

Many marriages simply die after the first few years. The divorce statistics

verify this fact. And what happens to the rest? They may survive, but too often they become something less than the ideal. Usually these marriages fall into one of the following categories: a marriage of convenience, a devitalized marriage, a dominant/submissive marriage, or a conflict-filled marriage.

Let's peek at these less-than-ideal marriages. If you don't like what you see and want to avoid them, the rest of this book will help guide you through your dating and courtship period so your marriage can be everything you want it to be. If you date wisely, you will have the best possible chance of experiencing a dynamic marriage in which both partners are committed to growing together in a meaningful, lifelong relationship.

THE CONVENIENT MARRIAGE

A marriage of convenience is like a business partnership. The husband and wife need each other to pay the bills, take care of the kids, entertain, and share the driving on vacations. But as far as the day-to-day routine, there is very little, if any, pizzazz in their relationship. They might consider getting a divorce because marital satisfaction is low, but for the time being, it's just convenient for the kids and each other to stick it out.

Jerry and Trish live in a convenient marriage relationship. Jerry is a physician with a life of his own. He needs a wife to take care of things on the home front, and Trish is comfortable to have around. If something ever happened to her, he admits he would get married again.

"Being married solves a lot of problems," he says. "You have someone to talk to, cook meals, do the shopping, entertain guests, and someone to escort to social functions."

And how does Trish feel about her marriage?"

"Well," she says, "it's certainly not the Romeo and Juliet romance I used to fantasize about when I was a kid. I knew my parents had a marriage of convenience—they would have never survived out on the farm without each other—but I never thought my marriage was going to turn out like this.

"It's a stable marriage, though, so I'm a lot better off than many of my friends. I know Jerry needs me to keep things up around the house, but he has his own career and I have mine. I've just recently become the chairperson of the United Way campaign in our district and find myself working almost as hard as Jerry. I have my own friends, and Jerry has his.

"At night it's nice to know there is someone around. It would be terribly

lonely living alone now that the kids have left the nest.”

This is a typical marriage of convenience. It isn't a bad marriage; it's just not the type most young lovers look forward to.

What causes a marriage to deteriorate into this living arrangement? It may be that the couple did not share the same ideal of what type of marriage they wanted. Or their ideas of marriage may have changed with the reality of daily responsibilities and busy schedules. They may have become so engrossed in the business of taking care of and supporting the children that they neglected their own relationship. They may not have had the communication skills necessary to discuss what was happening to their relationship or the commitment to turn it around. Similar interests that serve to pull a couple together might have been missing. Without these vital ingredients, it's easy for a dynamic honeymoon to disintegrate into a marriage of convenience.

THE DEVITALIZED MARRIAGE

The devitalized marriage starts out with high expectations and a keen sense of romance, but early in the marriage something happens. The couple forgets to continue those early attentions. They may have gotten married in the passion stage of their relationship and exchanged vows before they learned to communicate their needs. They didn't realize the importance of continuing to court each other after the intense feelings of desire mellowed to a stable state of true love. And now they wonder, “Why did we get married?”

More women than men categorize their marriages as devitalized, probably because women tend to entertain romantic fantasies fostered by society and media. And they may not be as fulfilled in their careers as men often are. These women usually get married with the idea that their Prince Charming will continue to sweep them off their feet as he did during their courtship. Unfortunately, many prince charmings tend to perform valiantly only when there is a prize to be won. Once the wedding and honeymoon are over, they move on to other conquests—not women, necessarily, but educational pursuits, career advancements, various leisure-time activities, or the stock market. These men love their wives, but they don't go out of their way to meet their emotional needs, and they don't see the value of spending lots of time together, especially if they have different interests and life objectives.

As men near the midlife crisis years (forty to fifty-five), some wake up to the fact that their marriage is no longer very exciting. Now, having achieved edu-

cational, career, athletic, and financial objectives, too many men think their lack of fulfillment stems from having married the wrong woman. Far too many make the classical midlife maneuver: he buys an expensive sports car, divorces wife number one and finds an young attractive woman, who soon becomes wife number two. The problem with this scenario is that five years later, he generally finds himself back in a devitalized marriage!

What does a devitalized marriage look like? Here is what Robin says about her devitalized marriage: “Richard was a real romeo during our courtship. Can you imagine, he even hired a couple of his friends to play their guitars and sing outside my dorm window on my birthday. I was really surprised when he asked me for that first date because he ran around with an entirely different crowd than I did. They were the partying type and enjoyed going to the beach or playing tennis on the weekends rather than attending church and giving some of their time to help others. But when I got to know Richard, I liked him. Though we didn’t have too much in common, he added a sparkle to my life. If only he would do that now!

“If you had known Richard back in college, you wouldn’t believe the change in him. He’s all work and no play, and our marriage has become dull—really dull. With three preschoolers, I have my hands full. On the weekends he often asks me to play tennis with him, but I don’t enjoy the game that much and hate to make a fool of myself. Sometimes he suggests going to the beach, but it’s a lot of trouble to take three preschoolers anywhere. Personally, I’d rather stay home with a good book.

“I know I’ve grown a little shabby since I’m home all the time, but if Richard would only bring me a rose, or call me passionately on the phone as he used to do, I’d feel more like going the extra mile to make myself more attractive. As it is now, I doubt if he’d even notice.”

Would you like to hear how things are from Richard’s perspective?

“Robin was one of the most admired women on campus. She was a school leader and highly involved in church programs. That’s why I was so surprised she accepted a date with me when I first asked her. I knew I was going to have to do something different to get her attention. I guess I fell for her because I knew I could get almost any girl on campus, but Robin didn’t seem to be interested in me. She was a challenge, and I liked that.

“It wasn’t long before we got married, and then everything seemed to change. I was always suggesting we go places and do things, and she preferred

to stay home. Reading some religious book was not my idea of a good time, so before long we fell into a pattern of each doing our own thing.

“I never expected marriage to be this way. I dreamed of my wife greeting me at the door and showering me with kisses when I got home after a hard day at work. I dreamed of us walking on the beach hand-in-hand or playing a good game of tennis and later relaxing in the spa. But it’s like pulling hair to get Robin to do anything with me. That’s why I’ve sort of given up.

“I guess we are two different people with different expectations and different needs. Marriage certainly isn’t what I thought it was going to be.”

Both Robin and Richard realize that they have a devitalized marriage, but each seems powerless to make changes. If they had taken more time during their courtship to get deeply acquainted with each other, they might have realized how different their interests were. They could have then made a rational choice and a plan of action. “Are our differences too great to get married, or do we have what it takes to make this marriage work? If so, what are we going to do if our relationship starts to deteriorate?”

THE DOMINANT/SUBMISSIVE MARRIAGE

We laugh about the husband being the head of the family and the wife being the neck that turns the head. We make fun of henpecked husbands. We tell jokes about weak men, like the day all the men who wanted to get into heaven were asked to line up behind two signs: one read, “Supreme head of the household,” and the other, “Attempted head of the household.” All the men lined up in front of the “Attempted head” sign except one man. The others were surprised to see the man in the “Supreme head” line, when they knew how important honesty was in order to get into heaven. Finally, one of the men got up nerve to go over to the man and ask him why he was standing in that line. “Oh,” replied the man, “my wife told me to stand here.”

In addition to jokes, research doesn’t have kind things to say about women who rule the house and treat their husbands in a demeaning way. Strong mothers and weak fathers have even been associated with children, especially sons, choosing the homosexual lifestyle.

While it is fairly plain to see that a dominant wife is not good in a marriage, what about a dominant husband? Here are some examples:

Elly had been married to Al for twelve years. The children were now in school, and she had a great desire to go back and finish her education. But Al

refused to let her. He felt it would be a strain on the family finances, and he didn't see the reason she needed to finish since he was willing to support the family.

Char read every marriage book that came along and took every family-related seminar. Her greatest desire was to be the best wife and mother in the world. She tried to share her findings with Bill, but he wouldn't listen. "That new-fangled psychology will just get you into trouble," was his response. Char began to feel that she was always the one who was molding to accommodate Bill's wants and wishes, while Bill had no interest in changing.

Dan kept a tight accounting of the finances, giving Bonnie a weekly allowance for food and supplies. At the end of the week Bonnie had to account for every penny. She couldn't even get herself a candy bar without reporting to Dan.

Missy wouldn't make any decision unless she asked Ted. Whenever the kids asked her for favors, Missy would automatically say, "Ask your father." Ted was the final authority in everything. Missy would always say to her friends, "I wanted to call you last night, but Ted said it was too late," or "I would love to attend your weekly Bible study, but Ted thinks I spend too much time away from the house as it is," or "I love chocolate, but Ted won't let me eat it."

Keith didn't want to be the supreme head of the family, but after Lynn attended a seminar on how to be a good Christian wife, she deferred all the household decisions to him. "Honey, I would like to hang a picture in the living room, but I want to make sure you approve." "Lacey is feeling a little sick today. Do you think I should keep her home?" "Is it OK if I buy some fabric to make myself a dress? Should I get blue or red?" "Do you want to sign Jeff's report card, or should I?" Before marriage Lynn seemed quite capable of making good decisions on her own—that's why Keith married her. Now her submissiveness was driving him up a wall.

Many Christian young people have been conditioned to think that husbands should be the head of the family, but no one would want to find themselves in any of these controlling situations. The ideal solution is to recognize God as the head of the family, and side-by-side the husband and wife lead in the family's daily affairs in areas where each is most competent.

Then what do you do with the biblical counsel in Ephesians 5 that says wives should submit to their husbands? Notice it follows the counsel in verse 21 that both husband and wife should submit to each other. This is God's

ideal. Occasionally, however, if a couple can't seem to agree on a solution, then God instructed wives to submit rather than fight. It's healthy advice. It keeps wives from becoming so dominant that to keep peace husbands have no choice but to give in. Women seldom respect weak men—or dominant ones! Instead of being other-oriented, which is the basis of a healthy marriage, dominance is self-oriented. It's selfish to want your way above the wishes or wants of your spouse. And it's certainly not God's ideal.

God did not create Adam to be Eve's superior, or Eve to be Adam's. He created them to be different, each to enhance the other for perfect fulfillment, but equal in value. If God created Eve from a piece of Adam's brain or from his foot, we might conclude that superiority was a part of God's plan. But God didn't do that. Instead, God used Adam's rib. How symbolic of the fact that husband and wife should stand together side by side as equally valuable partners in a lifelong commitment to each other.

What kind of a marriage do you want? When it comes to practical daily living and marriage satisfaction, most lovers want a marriage in which both love and respect each other so much that dominance is not an issue.

THE CONFLICT-FILLED MARRIAGE

A conflict-dominated marriage occurs when each partner is convinced of his or her infallibility and becomes rigid and defensive. Neither one sees a need to learn the art of negotiation. The prevailing attitude is, Why compromise when your opinion is right?

Before marriage, because each is trying so hard to please the other, it is sometimes difficult to determine just how prone a couple might be to experience a conflict-filled marriage someday. Ideally, this wanting-to-please-each-other behavior should continue throughout marriage, but sometimes it doesn't. Instead, after marriage, each feels freer to express an opinion without regard for how it might make the other person feel. In a good marriage, where each respects the other, the free expression of personal opinions is healthy. But where there isn't much respect, too often the conflict results in hostility. When this happens, the time the couple could spend enjoying the other is eaten away in senseless battles.

Why don't these couples get a divorce? As one woman said, "If we get a divorce, who would we have to argue with?" One husband commented, "I would never let myself become involved in this type of arguing in any other

relationship, but it just seems the thing to do with my wife.”

God designed the marriage institution to provide a safe climate for growth and change. Marriage is meant to be an ideal relationship in which each partner is nurtured and supported in such a way as to increase both individual and couple potential. The effect of living in a conflict-filled marriage is exactly the opposite: it stifles growth and improvement. It breaks the other down instead of building him or her up. In addition, hostile words dishonor God (Matthew 5:21, 22). As long as the devil can keep a couple arguing, their marriage will be a state of terrible torment, regardless of whether or not they consider divorce.

How can you determine if your relationship is heading toward a conflict-filled marriage? Watch for signs of nagging, bossiness, or any other behavior you find irritating. It's possible to be so infatuated that you overlook negative behavior patterns or think that these will be overcome with love. Unfortunately, after marriage, when the relationship is secure and the realization begins to dawn that this undesirable behavior is increasing instead of decreasing, the previously docile partner is likely to begin standing up for his or her rights. The result? More conflict.

Danielle was a born leader. She was outgoing, talkative, decisive, and quick to point out what needed to be done in order to solve a problem. She respected people who were experts in their fields and often criticized those who weren't. She married Travis. He thought carefully before speaking, took his time to get things done, and would never think of pushing others or himself. He may have appeared on the outside to be fairly compliant because of his quiet ways, but he had a strong mind of his own.

Things went well until the faucet started leaking and the house needed painting. “Travis, do you know how many gallons of water we are wasting with that leaky faucet?” Danielle asked. “It's got to be fixed this weekend.”

But Travis was in the middle of a book and read the weekend away.

“Travis, I can't stand this peeling paint.” Danielle complained. “Either you get this house scraped and painted, or I'll use our vacation money and have a professional painter do it.”

Travis calmly stated, “I'll do it.” And he was going to, but he wasn't about to miss a finance seminar that was going on that week. Two months later the faucet still leaked and the paint on the house was still peeling.

Danielle grew more disturbed. Why couldn't Travis be more like her father,

who was interested in keeping things in good repair around the home? Travis was so clumsy when it came to practical things like fixing the toaster or putting up wallpaper. (She hadn't noticed this before marriage.) The more she criticized him, the more her respect for him dropped—and the more biting her tongue became.

For seven years Travis calmly took this abuse, and then one day he stood up to her. His pent-up hostility caused him to say hurtful, mean things in front of the children. He had lost respect for his wife and treated her accordingly.

Chances are Danielle and Travis never understood the practical meaning of *respect*. If you respect another person, you will not nag or boss, even if your natural self feels like it. You will check your words, making sure they uplift and instruct rather than tear down.

If Danielle and Travis hadn't rushed into marriage, these obnoxious, conflict-causing traits probably would have surfaced before their wedding date, and they would have made a more informed choice.

If you want to avoid a conflict-filled marriage, give yourselves the time you need to analyze carefully every noticeable trait about each other—especially the negative ones. Ask yourself, “Can I learn to love and respect a spouse with that trait?” Even though you feel it's negative, could it be viewed as positive because it would encourage your own personal growth? Take time to discuss the behavior that bothers you. There's a lot more motivation for changing traits before marriage than after! For those traits where change is highly unlikely, discuss how these might affect your marriage. While it's impossible to anticipate everything that might surface in your marriage, the more potential problems you recognize and deal with before the wedding date, the fewer the heartbreaking surprises afterward.

THE UNIQUELY COMPLEMENTARY MARRIAGE

You've just read about some less-than-ideal marriage models, and ideally you've made a strong decision that you don't want any of those. Now it's time to set your sights on what God wants for you to experience in this most wonderful relationship that He has created. I call this type of marriage “uniquely complementary.”

Men and women are different. That's the way God created them. The deepest need for a man is to be masculine and for a woman, to be feminine. Not only are their bodies different, but the core longings of their souls are different.

Men and women may have the same careers, face the same challenges in their families, and develop the same skills and abilities, but they find meaning and fulfillment in different ways.

Carol Gilligan's research, reported in her book *In a Different Voice*,¹ found that a man sees himself as competent and mature when he can move into his world as a complete and separate individual. He feels successful when he is free to make his own decisions and feel a sense of security within himself. In contrast, a woman finds meaning and fulfillment in nurturing and experiencing close and warm relationships with people, especially her family and friends. This doesn't mean that she doesn't enjoy having a fulfilling career. It just means that career is not usually of ultimate importance to a woman's sense of being.

Here's the good news: God created man to meet his wife's deepest yearning for relationship. And at the same time, God created woman to meet her husband's deepest yearning for affirmation as he moves purposefully into his world. That's why the apostle Paul spent eleven verses in Ephesians 5 (verses 23–33) telling men how to love their wives, and two verses (verses 24 and 33) telling wives how to respect their husbands. If a man, as spiritual head or leader of the family, will meet his wife's relational and emotional needs (similar to how Christ meets our needs), it follows that she will respect and admire him.

It was God's design that a husband and a wife would fit together perfectly, both physically as well as emotionally. Each was made to supply the needs of the other. They were created to be complementary. They were made to "serve one another in love," as the apostle Paul admonishes us to do in Galatians 5:13, NIV.

In a way, there is no such thing as a marriage model that neatly fits every couple. It's impossible to say, "If men would just be breadwinners and women bread-makers, all marital difficulties would be solved." Marital bliss has little to do with the fulfillment of specific tasks or roles. It has everything to do with the fulfillment of each other's emotional needs.

Because each individual is unique, *each couple has a unique fit that is suitable only for them*. Larry Crabb, author of *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference*,² says that God gives each couple the happy task of discovering and delighting in this unique fit.

So the question remains, *What do you want out of marriage?* If you want a dynamic uniquely complementary marriage with your love for each other growing stronger and more intimate each passing year, then it becomes absolutely

essential that throughout your courtship you continually assess whether you are dating the right mate—and whether you are the right mate for the person you are dating.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT . . .

- What do you want out of marriage? Take some time to write down your answer.
- If you are seriously dating someone, discuss your expectations of marriage with each other.
 - In what ways do you agree?
 - How do you disagree?
 - Are your disagreements signaling potential problem areas? If so, what?
 - Discuss what you can do now to solve problems rather than wait until they negatively impact your relationship.

1. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 159–163.

2. Larry Crabb, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991).