

Marriage: The Great and Difficult Story

Running a marathon while getting a root canal is child's play compared to marriage. I believe that developing a mature, supportive, and loving adult relationship with your partner is the most difficult thing you will ever do. Why do so many fail at this, and why is it such a challenge? How can something that begins so reasonably, comfortably, passionately, and innocently become so unruly?

The teachings here will shine a light on both why relationships are so difficult, and why there is nothing more important than working on them. An eighty-year *Harvard* study recently stated, "The only thing that matters in life are your relationships." Therapists like me who have been living, breathing, laughing, crying, meditating, counseling, and studying relationships for over twenty years realize the same thing Valliant says in the study: "Finding a way of coping with life that does not push love away" is all that really matters in life. It is the key to health, happiness, and finding meaning in life, period.

Working on your marriage is important. Really important. Why? Because "a supportive relationship is the Number 1 predictive factor in having most positive outcomes in life." It is the healthiest thing you can do.

The work and commitment that you put into your relationship is the work of your life. I am going to show that this work will positively change the lives of your grandkids' grandkids. That is how big it is. It is time for you to pursue a relational life.

Marriage is Calling You. Simmer In It.

This is a book about how our relationships are asking and calling us to cross the gap between our powerful adult sensibilities that are impelled by logic and reason — and our even more dominant and ineluctable emotions stored in the ten-year-old children inside of us.

After twenty-three years of marriage, 7,000 hours of sitting quietly in meditation, fourteen years as a practicing therapist, and paying for five different marriage counselors myself, I know how marriages work, why they fail, and what it takes to succeed in them. You must carry your anger and frustration-filled reactions away from your spouse and into your cave, into your therapist's office, and to the chair where you sit alone. Your reactions store old wounds and misgivings. Your spouse just woke them up. If you are brave enough to own these reactions, your marriage will grow. If not, it will wither or languish at best.

The stories here have passed through my wife's scrutiny. When she read the pages of this book, she loved the vignettes about those crossroad moments, especially when she threw the plate at my head. Every marriage has four or five critical battles that help you to either turn inward to self-assess, or leave dents too big to undo. I am hunting for those moments with and for you.

If you are not willing to take the time and muster fortitude and courage to simmer in the feeling-experiences that arise in you in response to marital friction, you and marriage will not work. You will be a fifty percenter. Half of all marriages fail. Moreover, if you are not willing to sit quietly by yourself and allow your

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feelings to slowly rise up into your belly, heart, neck and forehead, over and over again, then this book is not for you.

One of Western civilization's greatest minds agrees that sitting alone will alter your life. Blaise Pascal, who in 1642 was not only one of the first inventors of the calculator, but who also has a law, theorem, and coefficient named after him, was adamant about why humans struggled and how to address our challenges. His advice and solution are unequivocal. They form the basis of this book and my life's work. He said, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

Relationships fail, according to less conscious observers, for reasons like trust, money, infidelity, and irreconcilability. Those are excuses, though— labels for an unwillingness to sit alone to know the roots of why you are so uncomfortable and unhappy. Your unhappiness is much older than your marriage. Lack of money and trust are symptoms, not reasons.

When you boil it down, there is one universal, ever-present, overriding reason why a marriage fails: you have not done any work on yourself. If you fail to know yourself, you have no clue what you are bringing to the altar of marriage. Even if you do not want to be in this relationship, it is worth doing this work. Like Pascal says, it will change everything. The work has nothing to do with the other person. It certainly looks and smells and tastes like the other, but it is you.

Relatus and Your Cave

Do you actually know what the word “relationship” means? Here we are, immersed every minute of the day engaging, interacting, aching, laughing and crying in and through all these exchanges with friends, family members, colleagues and strangers, in relationships with all of them, and we do not know what the word actually means. Until death do us part, and yet you probably never asked the question of what a relationship means or does.

Marriage is a verb. The word relationship comes from Latin *relatus*, which means “to carry or bring back.” Your deep-seated feeling-reactions, born in childhood and absorbed bio-electrically from your parents and theirs, all buried in your midbrain and heart, get kicked up and dislodged in the natural heat of marriage. Every day, living within the same walls with our spouse, currents of anguish and joy alight. We care about the other and our marriage, which means there is anger. A comment your spouse made about you is really a flashlight being pointed at a hurt inside your belly, a wound from comments your mom, dad, or town bully made when you were ten.

This is where marriage becomes a verb. Relatus means you take this awakened feeling of hurt today, at the altar and kitchen of your marriage, and bring it to your cave and simmer in it. Where is it from? What is this old hurt telling me of my current sense of self, my insecurities around money, self-image, or abilities to relate to others in general? Go find a quiet place, sit in your closet or bedroom, or outside by yourself. Then go

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to your therapist, find a good one. Both therapy and sitting alone are your cave.

Joseph Campbell said, “The cave your fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.” Let’s enter together.

Close your eyes with your back straight right now, please, while sitting in a chair, both feet firmly on the ground. We like to say, “Keep you back straight but soft, your shoulders square but relaxed.” Lightly stomp your feet on the floor a few times, just to remind you they are there.

This is it. This is the pole position. Anything else is fluff.

Here are the fundamentals of sitting, what I call Listening by Yourself (LBY):

- As you sit in this simple position, back straight and eyes closed, please now take your attention, take your closed eyes and lower their focus onto and into your heart and chest
- This is where all the action is
- Imagine right now that instead of using your head and brain to think your thoughts and ruminate on your plans, regrets and pangs of resentment, that you now do all this thinking inside your chest and heart
- In other words, imagine your brain is actually in your chest for the next few minutes
- So, here you are, just sitting quietly with your eyes closed. Well done. If you did just this for the next fifteen minutes, you would have done a lot
- But let’s do a bit more

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- Now that your brain is quietly sitting in your chest next to your heart, see and imagine that all your thoughts are rubbing against and being heard and felt by your heart. It is as if your thoughts are being poured and filtered by your heart
- Now imagine that each time you take a normal breath in through your nose, this inhaled air now travels into your chest, heart, and brain, filling them to capacity with air
- It is as if your heart and brain, bedfellows right now, are balloons and with each inhale they expand, and as you exhale through the mouth, they contract
- Keep inhaling into the nose slow and steadily, holding the breath at the top of the inhale, and then blow out the breath through the mouth upon exhalation. Long breath out like blowing out a candle, as long as possible
- You could count these breaths and do ten to fifteen, or not count them. Does not matter
- After a minute or two simply forget about your breath, let it go. You found it, now let it go
- Now, with the breath left behind, just keep sitting and do one more thing: Simply listen to your heart and the back of your neck
- Sounds weird I know, but simply keep listening to the front and back of your heart, and the front and back of your neck
- Imagine you took speakers from your car or computer and attached them to the front of your heart and back of your neck.

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- This will help you listen better. Just listen for as long as you can

This is the oldest exercise known to man. No need to clear the mind, escape or avoid thoughts, chant, focus on breath or a mantra, become one, find or look for a divinity. Just listen and wait. Wait for what? Just keep going, you'll find out.

This is all there is to it. I wish it was more complicated. What you are doing is putting your adult attention into the warehouse of your original, child-world created emotions. This ancient exercise, the adult returning to the child, creates a profound bio-electromagnetic, neuro-chemical, psychological, and emotional shift in the body. This is how you leave the great unconscious, the active, rational, adult-thoughts world and enter the kingdom of your intuition and your deepest longings, regrets and joys.

These regrets and fears will eventually reveal themselves as much older uncomfortable experiences that existed long before your marriage, long before you knew your partner. Your parents are the key players at the base of these old joys and pockets of anger, but again are just players in your inner-life soliloquy. Insights and understanding will awaken from your sitting. You will intuit the ancientness of these feelings and know that your partner's behavior is the catalyst for all this stuff you thought was everyone else's.

After you sit, you carry this wisdom about yourself back to your wife, boss, and children. Relatus is at work. Carry back a more uncovered and self-revealed you. Your thirty-year-old feelings of sadness about your father's

indifference and your stepmother's insensitivity, buried in your stomach, can now counsel your adult, rational perspective.

You start to take ownership of your anger, which allows you to bring a much more composed dialogue with your partner. Relatus is the action of marriage, you knowing yourself better and sharing these revealed parts with your spouse. So many of us are not willing to take all this action. Waves of sadness and glee of the ten-year-old inside, cascading from events that seem like someone else's life, arise. Twenty-two years into my own marriage, I now understand. Everything will change when you take this action.

"And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves."

—Joseph Campbell

To Love is to Destroy

How can something so commonplace like a marriage, a thing that begins so reasonably, comfortably, passionately, and innocently, become so unruly and disruptive? What did we miss early on that could have prevented it from unraveling? Nothing. You had no way of knowing. That is one of the key points of this book. It is impossible to know.

The muscles of your marriage are supposed to break so that they can build back up. That is how we gain insight and emotional intelligence, uprooting everything that lives inside. The discourse of relating with another creates raw vulnerability that reveals all your latent, immature perceptions and reactions.

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Novelist Cassandra Clare said in her book *City of Bones*, “To love is to destroy, and that to be loved is to be the one destroyed.” Carl Jung agreed when he said, “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.” A relationship is the most beautiful destructive force in nature, not designed to be rational and sensible.

I have wished for an easier way to work on marriage besides opening myself up. But marriage, and the work we do on it, always comes back to self. “There’s no coming to consciousness without pain,” Jung said. And even if the priest or person who conducted your wedding told you that your marriage was designed to break you open and undo your sense of self, you would not have understood.

Through the exercise of marriage, our feelings are supposed to unravel, unfortunately often within the belittling and disagreeing stare of our partner. But at some point, we realize that our marriage will evolve because the dynamics and our feelings towards it will change. We will learn what it means to embrace, celebrate, and exercise the behaviors and the forces around us that create change and growth.

The secret to a successful, healthy relationship is not a secret. It is messy hard work. It is the understanding and accepting of every emotion that is unearthed in you in the friction of marriage, and then re-engaging (relating) with your spouse with a new perspective.

You and your marriage are in the universe, a basic fact. What we forget is that because we are things in the world, we and our marriage are subject to all the same forces that press against every other object in the universe, “both violent and creative, destructive and

cooperative,” Swimme writes in *The Universe Story*. We are going to learn about your spouse and the Second Law of Thermodynamics in the next few chapters. Just remember, though, the sinews of your marriage, like the universe, the weather, the birthing process, and old tree limbs, are supposed to break, be undone, to create anew into time.

The vessel called relationship seeks and is designed, just like all universal forces, to break each person down in order to teach them. All the painful reactions within you and your spouse are part of the path and process of being in union. Things break in order to grow. Swimme further explains that these challenges are just part of living, that “these obstacles, these boundaries, these limitations are essential for the journey of the universe itself.” Everything must undergo this process.

How serious are you? It will not be easy. It is OK not to be ready, though, not to be serious. You can come back to the work later, in another lifetime or marriage. Not my recommendation, but I want to give you an out.

At some point, whether we believe it or not, this lifetime or another one, we will have to jump into the fire of our inner world. Why do so many marriages fail? It is because this leap is so difficult. So many would rather avoid it. Leaping in means owning everything that is yours in the relationship, everything that we have said, done, not done, forgot and are afraid to do.

All You Can Do is Your 50%

Every relationship is 50/50. Whether you want to or not, you must learn how to own all of your 50% of your