

## WAKING UP MARRIAGE

coming to consciousness without pain.”

But my marriage flourishes. It has been intense. We have survived and found a camaraderie because I realized early on that not only was I the problem and the solution, but much more importantly, the friction of marriage was kicking up an ancient well of imbedded emotions living just below my thoughts.

### **Marriage Full of Kitchen**

“Stand in the fire of my own feelings” became my motto. It became my life’s mission, especially after an exchange with my wife in the shadow of GM Betty.

So often our most intense marital arguments occur in the middle of the kitchen. Maybe the laws of the hearth are different than those of other rooms. Perhaps it is the food, one of our basic mammalian needs, that throws everything off. I am not sure this makes sense, but I have seen dogs and kids bathing in the same kitchen sink that hours before held a soaking, day-old oatmeal pot. The sacred marital altar is within the kitchen walls.

In-laws are excellent at burning toast and then mindlessly stuffing clean forks in the napkin drawer. Boyfriends’ advances are continually rebuffed the next morning in front of the coffee machine, and teenagers and husbands continually glance at over-stuffed garbage bins but never take them out. Glasses and cups break, dogs urinate, and knives slice fingers all in the reflection of smeared counter tops and refrigerator doors. It is like the high seas of yore in kitchens everywhere, without the scurvy.

As the father of three teenage daughters, I have seen

pouting, shirts ripped, and morale battered all for the last piece of French toast. It seems logic and reason need not apply when it comes to this hallowed ground of bread, butter, and broken hearts and glasses. How do these rational discussions so quickly devolve, and why are they always about the same three or four topics? John Gottman says in *Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work* that research supports this cycling of relational disputes, with 69% of couples fighting over the exact same topic every time they battle.

It is impossible to know what is going to unfold over time in either of you as the relationship travels further in time and into each other's hearts, taking on more and more, heading upstream. The energies, awareness, and behavior involved in getting into a relationship are completely different than those used to sustain a relationship. What happens in year one of your marriage is nothing like what happens in year eight.

On the brighter side, kitchen hugs are the best, especially when you come home and get to share great news immediately. So often your partner is in there. You got a raise, or your mother-in-law decided to cancel her trip in the spring. Those congratulatory kisses seem even sweeter when they are in front of the steaming, overstuffed dishwasher. So many of the pleasures and battles of relationships start, end, or are transported over these cluttered countertops.

I am fixated on the kitchen because it is where the idea and theme of this book emerged. When my wife punctuated one of our early marital discussions with a plate thrown at my head, demanding that I call the divorce lawyer in London, poor GM Betty caught some

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cheap Chinese plate porcelain in her grill. Betty was big but not very quick. To this day my wife remembers the fight but not the throw. I remember the throw but am unsure sure how I ducked. Keanu Reeves in his final scene of the *Matrix* had nothing on me that morning as I avoided that plate.

Right here is where it all begins, where all the work on relationship starts. Stand in the fire of your marriage. You are being called to celebrate and dance and cry and laugh in and through everything that occurs between you and your partner. Duck, yes, but do not run from the plates. They do not need to hit you for you to feel them, but you need to stand in the fire of the feelings that arise in response to every emotion, every plate that flies, throughout the unfolding story of your marriage. The work of relationship is in you, catalyzed by the other.

The energy, the hate, longings, and love that caused my wife to release that plate had been simmering and boiling years. Turns out that her relationship with me, and mine with her, started when we were eight years old. Crazy, right? Those feelings in her at that moment had been brewing for twenty-six years. I had known her for two.

### **Feelings Started Decades Ago**

How can that be? It makes no sense. If I told you that the story of that plate at my head in Nineties suburbia started in 1970 at a kitchen table 2,600 miles away, would you close this book?

In the following chapters I am going to take you even further upstream, further in time before 1970 to where

and when all our marriage stories began. In *A General Theory of Love*, the authors Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon write that “early emotional experiences knit long lasting patterns into the very fabric of brains neural networks.” The experiences behind the emotions that incited my wife’s Roger Clemens-like throw occurred decades earlier.

This probably does not make sense, but it will. If you learn to sit quietly and do therapy, you will change generations to come, because the nature and reality of an emotion is stored as an electronic charge within the body of your midbrain and heart. These electromagnetic particles are swirling electrical currents, as measured by an electroencephalogram. They dusted and filled the seemingly empty space of your kitchen, your Frosted Flakes, and your grandparents’ hallways during the seventies. The electricity of your emotions and those of your ancestors are consuming your kids. That is why knowing, accepting, and altering the curvature of your anger and doubt will travel down generations, changing the lives of great grandkids you might never meet. But those youngsters will smile because of the inner work you do.

## **Kitchen Table Massacre**

Maybe my wife, with her sacrificial plate release on that fateful evening, was not ready to settle into the suburban life and let go of the city environment we had recently left. Maybe she did not love me, or love where she was at that moment in time, saddled with a newborn, a husband, a dented, five-year-old minivan, and lousy local

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Chinese food. I am sure I had made some callous, presumptuous comment that put a finishing touch on her deep-seated frustration.

All the questions and subsequent answers to why she threw the plate and the emotions that led to that action are important. Those questions are where all of her own psycho-emotional growth and understanding begins. But for me, for the partner on the other side of the allegorical plate, I need to stand in the fire of *my* emotions and reactions and experience in those moments, not hers.

On that night when that plate flew, while dining with my wife and two young daughters, my perception of the reality of marriage changed forever. I would never look at a relationship the same way. During that meal at the chipped wooden table that had survived two basement floods, my quest began to learn and understand how a marriage works and succeeds. In front of Betty as my wife erupted in reaction to how I was correcting my daughter's table manners, my experience of and respect for marriage, and how I responded and worked at being a husband, changed forever.

I felt like the physicists Planck and Einstein when they were probing the elusive atom. Einstein expressed his awe at the mystery of how matter and the universe behave when he said, "All my attempts to adapt the theoretical foundation of physics to this new knowledge failed. It was as if the ground had been pulled out with no firm foundation." He went on to say, "Whenever the essential nature of things is analyzed by the intellect, it must seem absurd or paradoxical."

In that moment twenty years ago, and in the couples counseling that followed, I saw why relationships fail. I

could see, like Planck, that when your rational mind watches how you and your spouse behave vehemently to each other, it does not add up. “When we are rational, using abstractions, we cannot take all features into account,” said Fritjof Capra in *The Tao of Physics*. “We have to elect a few. We construct a map of reality which is linear.” To the logical part of us, the math of marriage is off.

“A kind of sub war between left and right brainers has been going on for centuries. The right brain has not changed for thousands of years. It has not evolved,” writes Robert Monroe, in *Ultimate Journey*. It is like two different dimensions side by side, never speaking to each other except maybe when dreaming.

## **Post-Plate Couples Counseling: Where it all Began**

Within a week of that great porcelain launch, we went to counseling. Within fifteen-minutes of the start of our session, my wife expressed the feelings that incited her reaction at the table that night. As she was describing her frustration toward me while I was correcting my daughter’s table manners, my wife started to close her eyes. As she sat on the couch, talking through her heart about her anger, her shoulders were relaxing and opening, so that suddenly there was what I call a hole in her neck for her head and thoughts to drop into. Her rational, adult attention softened and entered into her feelings via that hole.

As if returning into a dreamscape, she slowed her words as the counselor and I just watched and listened.

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There was a hush. She held the space silently, and I remember hearing the desk clock hum. Almost startled, she opened her eyes and said, “He used to come to the table a little drunk. He was so grouchy, telling me what I should be doing in gymnastics. I hated that; I was nine years old for God’s sake. What an asshole!”

My autocratic tone with our daughter that night awoke the stored anger and frustration with her father’s behavior thirty years earlier. It was the exact same setting. She was almost the same age as our oldest. Eureka! My presence, actions, and especially my reactions, the ones I imbibed and learned unconsciously from my home, woke up her nine-year-old’s hurt. That is how and why our marriage to each other started when we were both in fourth grade.

Every single unruly reaction in marriage has roots that go far back to who and how our parents and grandparents were and felt. This is why it is impossible to know if your marriage will work and what will emerge. It is impossible to comprehend because we both did not know the reactionary sets living in us. Only in the discourse of your relationship and the replaying in therapy do these old, forgotten, and somehow displaced parts of us show up.

This initial session set off a series of tectonic breaks and openings in our marriage. No fairy tale stuff, just us getting much better at watching what was lurking emotionally inside ourselves when we started to collide and the debates fired up. As life started showing up, as in-laws judged our choices of furniture and friends bought bigger houses, we tried to feel the pits in our own stomachs about our ancient regrets before lashing out at each other.

Does this sound dramatic? Am I bating you to read a few more pages because the magic pill of marital joy is there? One image of a kitchen table long ago, and everything just changes like that? If you have the courage to stay with it, to keep going back to this deep well of the inner life, then yes, your life will become your own personal “greatest story ever told.”

*“Truth is no match for emotions.”*

—Einstein

## **My First Therapy Session**

A year and a half before I got married, pre-plate launch, I skeptically and begrudgingly scheduled time with a therapist. I was single and living in London. It went something like this:

After twenty minutes of her questions and my answers, Dr. Moore sat up, took her glasses off in a classic therapeutic if not autocratic pose, and asked, “Have you ever seen that Harrison Ford movie, the one where he’s standing on the edge of a cliff leaning out, looking into the abyss?”

*“Raiders of the Lost Ark, one of those... yes.”*

She took a long, well-timed clinical pause. “Well, that is where you are right now. In the third movie he ends up stepping into the abyss and when he does, something appears, catching him, a beam of light. That is where you are right now with these bigger life questions you’re asking.”

Nothing like a casual, Tuesday afternoon chat about

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the abyss and my personal void. Sounded like my love life at the time.

If I knew in that moment what was about to unfold over the coming weeks and months, as I sat in that overpriced psychologist's office in Chelsea, weighed down by a gray and gnawing wistfulness and discontent, I think I would have frozen time and walked out.

It was not the words in my conversation; it was the lumps of feelings stirring. This was the first time in my adult life that I had slowed down enough to just sit and try talking about my life. It was the first time that I had tried putting words to the dull ache: a kind of billowy sadness, not too heavy, that had followed me for years, underneath my affableness, the pleasantries, and the buoyant, often boyish exuberance. I had run out of room in my life, though, the one understood and crafted by my rational brain, the one that quells memories, tries to still the ache in the knees, shoulders, and belly with work, sex, drink or exercise.

### **Surprised by Empty**

Writing these words now, twenty-two years later, it is easy to feel my way back into that chair in front of her desk. That thirty-one-year-old me had a heavy heart. It seemed like it was about to spill. It was not heavy or broken from anything I could touch or explain.

I was living a young man's life coded with material ease, working hard during the day but fluid with travel, dinners, ski trips, and general first world facility. It was my next ex-girlfriend, after the one with the visa issues, who had urged me to go see a therapist. "You are insecure

and defensive, and still tied to your mother,” was one of her most poignant refrains. How hard did I resist that one?

“No, I’m not. You’re insecure,” was one of my favorite replies. Pretty original and mature, right? Little boys do not like being critiqued or told the truth, especially by the feminine. It makes me, I mean them, feel small. So often they just want to show mom, the feminine, how good and powerful they are, to be that hero-to-the-death boy-man, and to assert their independence from their need for mom’s approval. I guess I ended up believing her. I was insecure, even though I was not really sure what that meant. But there I was in that chair within weeks after she dropped me like a hot rock.

It was quiet when Dr. Moore took notes. I guess she was expecting me to come back. My shoulders were heavy as I slumped in the chair, cradled in that stately Victorian-era office, surrounded by those rows of wood-paneled bookshelves. Like in the movies, the office had the dusty, weathered green and burgundy hardcovers. It was like she had put the dust back on them to make me feel even more forlorn and distant from all that was familiar, established, secure, and historically right.

The office had three walls lined with those books, those great accounts of deaths and even bigger rebirths, staring down at us. I was just a thirty-something kid from New Jersey, a part of me thinking, *How the @#%! did I get here?*

## **Been Here Before**

I heard an echo as she spoke, a hollowness that I had felt back in third grade. I had moved across town in the middle