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Throughout the book real people are used to illustrate real life. In many cases the names have been changed and circumstances disguised to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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## THE STAGES OF MARRIAGE

It was love at first sight. Steve and Pam met one warm fall day when their church's college and career group had a picnic to begin the school year.

As a college freshman, Pam was excited to be included in this group that contrasted so sharply with her friends and activities during the last two years of high school. Her high school friends had seemed so immature, the classes were boring, and her personal life was without direction.

Steve stood out as a natural leader in this group. People were attracted to him. His smile was warm as he said hello to Pam. She was impressed by his tall, muscular body and his legs, which were sinewy from years of competitive track.

Steve remembered that picnic well. He recalled that when he first saw Pam, he was overcome with an urge to stare. He kept glancing at her, hoping she wouldn't catch him looking. Every look excited him. He had to force himself to look in other directions. She was magnificent. Her light brown hair was golden in the sunlight, her skin looked so smooth, and her face radiated an enthusiasm for life.

During dinner Steve made sure he was part of the small group with which Pam was eating. He was aware that she was noticing him, and an easy friendship began to develop. After dinner the group sat around the campfire, singing and enjoying the evening. Pam's heart raced and her body felt flushed as Steve asked if he could sit next to her. Yes, they

were in a group of people, but she felt it was just the two of them in front of the crackling fire.

Pam remembered the warmth of his arm as he adjusted his body so that their upper arms touched each other. She wished he would put his arm around her to keep her warm in the evening chill, but she realized that was expecting too much since they barely knew each other. The two of them sat side by side, singing and enjoying the evening and wishing for more.

As the group broke up, Steve asked Pam if he could take her back to her dorm. Her eager response encouraged him so that when they arrived, he reached across the car seat, took her hand, and asked to see her again. She said yes as she got out of the car.

Steve kept pushing the persistent thought of her out of his mind, but it repeatedly crowded back in. He had only known Pam for a few hours, yet he longed to hold her close, to be with her, to know her. He kept saying to himself it wasn't possible, but he was in love with this woman whom he had just met.

## CLOUD NINE

Steve called Pam the next morning, and their date that evening was the beginning of a fast-moving romance filled with fun, sharing, and passion.

They were engaged the next spring, just eight months after they had met. Pam had finished her first year of college and Steve his third.

Their engagement year was a difficult one. Both sets of parents were in agreement with the couple's decision to marry, but they encouraged Steve to finish school before marriage. To Steve and Pam it seemed like a meaningless year. Why couldn't they be together?

Their physical attraction for each other was strong. They were both deeply committed to Christ, yet the hunger to

touch and fondle each other often overwhelmed them. The resulting guilt seemed to damage their spiritual relationship. They frequently talked of eloping, but societal pressures kept their actions in check.

Finally Steve graduated from college. Pam finished her second year. Their wedding was exhilarating with the affirmation of both families and their college friends. Everyone agreed that they were the perfect couple, so much in love and so much going for them.

Some might call Steve and Pam a storybook couple. Yet twenty years later, after the nitty-gritty experience of living together and raising a family, their marriage relationship had not only become dull—it was all but over.

Nearly every couple starts their marriage with high expectations but then runs into snags, which have caused almost half of recent marriages to break apart. In addition, many of the couples who haven't divorced are very unhappy.

David and Vera Mace, who have written extensively on marriage and the family, say, "Only a small portion of marriages come anywhere near to being really good. . . . The proportion of 'stable-satisfactory' marriages in the United States today does not exceed 5 to 10 percent."<sup>1</sup>

We are concerned about marriage—yours, ours, and others. Some people do have strong, healthy marriages. They've had hard times, but they've come through together. The snags didn't tear them apart. What made these couples different from the ones who divorced?

We want to share with you the success traits of the marriages that held together. But first, let's continue the account of Steve and Pam. We give you the details of their story because it will give you insight into how marriage changes in the different stages of life. You might even see yourself or a friend in their lives.

## DELAYED DREAMS

After marriage, Pam dropped out of college, and both she and Steve went to work full-time—Steve for an electronics firm and Pam as a secretary. Their plan was to work in these positions about four years and save money. Steve would be gaining work experience, and then he would buy into the electronics firm as a junior partner.

However, their first child, Todd, came in a year and a half. They agreed that Pam should quit her job. They decided to stay in the apartment where they were, still trying to save some money and just pushing their dreams back a few years. After all, they had plenty of time, and the new baby was a joy.

About two and a half years later, Meg was born. By rearranging their small apartment, they were able to make room for this baby too. Life seemed richer and fuller. Pam was totally absorbed in the raising of these two children, homemaking, and being a supportive wife to Steve.

Steve was learning the electronics business. He was glad he hadn't tried to get into the company as a partner on his projected time schedule. Yet "someday" he would own his own firm. "Someday" they would have their own house. "Someday" there would be time and money to do everything they couldn't do now.

It's common for a young couple to be future-oriented, hoping that things will get better later. Frequently, they start to ignore each other, not realizing that their marriage needs encouraging. They'll have more time later, they think.

When Steve had his twenty-ninth birthday, Steve and Pam were still living in their cramped, two-bedroom apartment. They had very little cash in the bank. He was growing restless with his slow progress in the electronics business, and now Pam was pregnant again. A growing sense of urgency and anxiety gnawed inside Steve. He had easily ad-

justed to the first changes in his life's time schedule, but now he felt he was making no headway.

Pam had wanted this third baby at this time because she felt it was important for their children to be close in age. She also wanted a third child while she was young enough to have one safely, with adequate energy to raise him or her. She had argued that money was not the important thing; family was. "In the long run," she said, "we'll be happier with more children than with more financial success." Steve had agreed, but he really wanted to be farther along with his career goals before increasing their financial and parental responsibilities.

Without either of them realizing it, they had become very different people from when they first married. They each had different values now. Each thought the other's goals were wrong. They began to resent each other.

#### FORESHADOWING

The year following Steve's twenty-ninth birthday was one of deep turmoil. Joanna was born. They moved to a three-bedroom home with a high mortgage, and Steve placed his business plans on hold again.

At times Steve felt like running away. He saw his dreams repeatedly being set aside. Pam seemed totally preoccupied with the children, with little time or energy left for him. His mind frequently flashed back to the days before they were married when he could hardly restrain himself from touching her and holding her tightly; now there was coldness and distance.

Sometimes Steve felt as if he were a servant, providing everything that Pam and the children needed. Oh, it wasn't that he didn't love them, but what about those dreams of owning his own company?

For the next two years Steve battled silently with a feeling that life was slipping by. His goals were not being met.



He kept pushing the feeling aside, telling himself not to be selfish, that there was still time ahead. But many days he thought of starting over. For the first time, the thought of divorce crossed his mind. If he were single again, he could pursue his own dreams without the limitations and restraints of being a husband and father. These thoughts frightened Steve. He was afraid to tell Pam or any of his friends because they might not understand. If the ideas frightened him, they would terrify Pam.

This fear of sharing our real self with our mate is the start of a shifting in intimacy—like a tree root growing under a sidewalk that gradually raises the concrete until finally someone trips on the uneven surface.

#### DAYLIGHT IN THE TUNNEL

When Steve was thirty-two, one of the senior partners of the electronics firm formed a new company and asked Steve to come with him, the break he and Pam had been praying for. Steve's doubts and fears of the last few years faded away. He had more energy again. He enjoyed living.

Their marriage relationship seemed to improve. Pam was busy with the kids, but now that two of them were in grade school, she also had more time for Steve. Steve was really coming into his own as a good husband and father. He felt that life was finally on track.

The new job provided more money and prestige, but it also demanded more time away from home and more days on the road. Steve wanted to show the boss that it had been a wise decision to ask him to join the new firm. He also knew that good progress now would open the door for future success and ultimately his own company.

The next five years were peaceful and fulfilling for Steve and Pam. Yes, there were struggles, but they were good struggles: keeping clothes on happy, growing children; lit-

ters of puppies; new bicycles; piano lessons; summer camps; family vacations; and even broken bones.

### “MIDOLESCENCE” AND ADOLESCENCE

When Steve was thirty-seven, Pam was thirty-five, and their oldest child, Todd, was thirteen and a half. These three family members would each experience major changes over the next years that none of them were prepared to handle. Steve and Pam would soon be facing midlife crisis and acting almost like teenagers (“midolence”), while Todd was responding to his own adolescent development of establishing his independence and identity.

The late thirties and early forties are dangerous years, filled with stress for both men and women. Our studies show that about 75 percent of men and women will experience a moderate to severe midlife crisis. The crisis affects a cross section of people of all educational, economic, and religious backgrounds.

Midlife crisis will disrupt the normal daily flow of life and can spell disaster for the marriage. (Some of our previous books talk in depth about the problems of both men and women at midlife. These books—*Men in Midlife Crisis*, *Your Husband's Midlife Crisis*, and *Women in Midlife Crisis*—share how the individual can work through midlife crisis and how the mate can understand and help.)<sup>2</sup>

Steve and Pam entered those dangerous midlife years. Steve felt he had accomplished about all he could in his current job and wanted to throw off the leadership of other men and launch his own company. Steve and Pam had saved some money, but they still went deeply in debt to start Steve's own electronics firm.

Pam felt she was the glue holding everything together. She tried to be an understanding wife to her husband as he started his own business and a patient mother to her teenage son and the two daughters in grade school. Sometimes

she felt she was expected to be everything to everyone, a task she knew was impossible.

## NEW WORLDS

Then Steve asked even more of Pam. Would she go back to work for just a couple of years until his new company got on its feet?

Pam took a job as a secretary again. But now, fourteen years later, she entered a strange world of the Internet, computers, E-mail, high-speed modems, and scanners. She felt like an old woman next to the young secretaries who seemed to know what was happening. But Pam was an intelligent person, so she soon caught on and was able to carry her end of the workload.

In many ways this family was achieving what they wanted, yet without realizing it, they were being pulled apart. Steve was totally preoccupied with his career. Todd many times seemed embarrassed that Steve and Pam were his parents. He was moving away from the family toward his own peer group. Pam was overly busy as a full-time secretary and a full-time homemaker.

Steve, Pam, and Todd were each deeply involved in what they felt they needed to do, yet their busy preoccupations were moving them into separate worlds with little or no contact with each other.

Two years later, when Steve was thirty-nine, his company had grown significantly. Yet that wasn't enough for Steve. His goal was to make his company the major electronics firm in their city.

He felt he only had a few prime years left. His energy and creativity were at their peak now. He poured himself into his work with long hours, extensive traveling, and very little emotional reserve for his marriage and family.

## UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Pam began to experience new anxieties. She felt as if she had been replaced by a mistress—Steve’s business. It was all-consuming. There was never any time or emotion for the two of them. With both of them working long hours, they were always too tired for intimacy.

Pam began to ask herself, *Why is life like this? I’m working at a job I don’t like for a business that’s taking my husband away and for children who are embarrassed to be around me.*

Pam was delighted to see her children growing, but she was also afraid. Meg, their middle child, was now a teenager of thirteen and a half but looked as if she were nineteen. Pam asked herself, *Who am I, and what will I be when they’re gone? What will be left?*

At times when she saw Meg’s young, firm body, Pam was all too aware of the changes she could see in her own body. *Maybe I’m not attractive to Steve anymore. Maybe his tiredness is not the business but another woman. Who really loves me? Who really needs me?*

These were hard years for Pam as she wrestled with these questions and still tried to be the support that held the family together. She was haunted by the question, *Who am I without these people?*

Steve’s business had prospered so that Pam’s income was nice but unnecessary. This reinforced her expendability. Some days she felt compelled to drive far out into the country to think. She asked the same questions a thousand times. *Who am I? What is life all about? What will I do with the years I have left? Where is God in all of this?*

Out of this questioning, Pam decided it was time for her to become a person in her own right. As a high school student, she had had a flickering dream of becoming a lawyer. Now was the time to pursue that dream.

Pam quit her job and enrolled in the nearby university part-time. At first, the family ignored Mom’s return to school

to finish her college education and go on to law school, but soon they noticed that their built-in housemaid was not serving them as they were accustomed. Finally, when a major blowup occurred, the family was forced to rethink the homemaking responsibilities. Pam still carried the major load, but the children and Steve took on some of the tasks. Expectations were scaled down so that meals and housekeeping were not so elaborate.

During the first year of university classes, Pam continued to ask herself the same old questions. She was still troubled by her dull marriage and felt overwhelmed by her teenagers' rapid development. She had been a confident woman all her life, so sure of herself, her relationship to God, and her commitment to her husband. But now she began to spend a couple afternoons a week drinking coffee in a quiet restaurant with Tom, a fellow student.

It wasn't an affair. It was a friendship. He was interested in her dreams to be a lawyer. He didn't put her down as Steve often subtly did. He was older and seemed so much more settled and less tense about life.

Pam became frightened when she realized she was looking forward to seeing Tom each time she went to class. It became a spiritual battle, and she was glad when the semester ended so she wouldn't easily see him again.

This experience caused her to realize how vulnerable she was to a man's caring and affection. She craved love. She wanted it from Steve, but he was so preoccupied and exhausted.

During this shaky point in their marriage, Pam recommitted her life to God and determined not to get involved in any affair. At the same time, she firmly committed herself to finish college.

#### CLOUD NINE AGAIN?

It was a big year. Steve was forty-two, Pam forty. Todd was graduating from high school, and Pam was graduating from

college. In the fall Pam would enter law school, and Todd would start college. The business was successful, and from all the external appearances, the family was succeeding.

Steve and Pam, like many midlife couples, had come to accept the fact that they were very busy and had little time for each other. They both decided that it was normal for marital love to cool off in the middle years, and they were willing to allow their marriage fire to slowly die. After all, they had other glowing successes that compensated for their cold, boring marriage.

Everything went along successfully in this "all-American" family until Steve was forty-six. His firm was the most successful in the city. Steve and his family had moved to a larger house, which demonstrated the achievement of his goals. Pam had finished law school, had passed the bar examination, and was practicing in a small law firm. She was immersed in her newfound career. Todd had finished college and was entering graduate school. Meg was starting her junior year in college, and Joanna was a high school senior.

## DARK CLOUDS

Now Steve began to ask the questions. *All right, I've made it big. My company is successful. I have a big house with a three-car garage, two nice cars, a boat, and a cottage on the lake. I'm respected by people in town and in my church. But what's the purpose of it all? I'm too busy with my job to enjoy any of it. Pam is busy with her work, and the kids are all leaving. What is life all about? I feel empty inside. I don't want to live the next thirty to thirty-five years with this emptiness.*

Steve had a special relationship with his two daughters, who reminded him so much of Pam when she was younger, when she was carefree and not endlessly involved with kids, school, or career. But now he was seeing the end of those close relationships with his daughters. Meg was engaged. Joanna would be at home only one more year before

college, and then he would be left with a big, empty house, a wife who was always gone pleading other people's cases, and a successful business that no longer held any challenge for him.

Steve found himself reflecting on his earlier life, wishing he had made some changes. Sometimes he wished he had never started the business. The business had put them in debt, it had sent Pam back to work, and everyone had become consumed with survival. What for? For this big, hollow house?

Many people flattered him and congratulated him on his success. Yes, it was fun to hear their appreciation, but most of the time they wanted something from him. Very few people could just accept him as he was.

#### LOVE THE REAL ME

Maybe that's why Steve enjoyed extra moments around the office talking to Marianne. She was never overawed by his success. She always seemed to be able to tease him out of his depression. When she found him crying in the office one time, she didn't make him feel less of a man. She told him it was okay to cry.

Marianne was ten years younger than Steve. She was struggling with her own marriage and her own questions about life. She was reaching out for a man who could give meaning to her life, and Steve was reaching out for a woman who could provide warmth.

Their relationship was under control until Steve's younger daughter left for college. As he and Pam drove home from taking Joanna to school in a nearby town, he realized how empty their marriage really was. He didn't want to be with this woman. She was a stranger. He longed to be with Marianne, but he was obligated to live in the same house with Pam.

The next Monday Steve went into Joanna's room after

Pam had gone to work. He remembered the times he would wake Joanna for school. She'd pull the covers over her head and scream, but it was a game they both enjoyed. Now the shrieks of "Oh, Dad!" were gone. The bed was perfectly made, and no clothes lay scattered on the floor.

Steve got into his Mercedes and thought, *Even this eighty-thousand-dollar car doesn't really satisfy me.* He drove to work, parked in the space marked President, walked into his office, sat down behind his huge walnut desk—and began to cry.

Marianne sensed something was wrong and came into his office. He got up from his chair, and for the first time he put his arms around her. He sobbed as he held her close. He shared with her the emptiness he felt with his children gone and the dryness of his marriage. Before they even realized what was happening, Steve and Marianne were involved in more than a friendship or a work relationship.

Steve felt a passion that he had not known for many years. The affair, at first secret, became obvious around the office and soon was noised around town and the church. Finally Pam confronted Steve, and he packed a suitcase and left the house.

#### HEALING RETREAT

A few weeks after Steve left home, he went to a retreat center where he spent a great deal of time in quietness, reflecting on the questions he had been asking himself over the past year and a half. He realized he needed intimacy, but it should come from Pam. He needed the love and care they had given each other at the beginning of their married life. He decided to go back and talk with her.

What Steve needed was what Pam really wanted as well. At the end of that first hesitant conversation, they committed themselves to continue talking, to do some reading, and to see a counselor. Their marriage, they decided, would now take precedence over all else.



As the months went by, they found themselves increasingly attracted to each other, and they could sense some of that old spark returning. They had many ups and downs, but gradually they were able to be hopeful that their marriage would not only survive but be better than ever.

They would be together to see their children choose their mates and have their children. Side by side they would get to enjoy those precious grandchildren. They'd be with each other as Pam went through menopause and as they both entered a more mellow era.

Later they could support each other as they faced the adjustments of retirement. One or both might have some major illness, but they'd both be there to face it together.

As their aging continued, they would have the satisfaction of a long marriage and warm companionship. They'd be best friends and have a love known only by those who have successfully crossed a number of life's hurdles together.

Did you see yourself or someone you know in Steve and Pam's situation? What were your feelings as you watched their marriage come to the brink of failure? Steve and Pam took several important steps to save their marriage, which may give you an example of how to strengthen yours or prevent trouble before it starts.

For many years we have been working with people whose marriages are breaking or have broken. But we've also seen many successful marriages. In our own marriage we've had some scary tests and almost flunked some of them, but we've learned some important things that have strengthened the bonds between us.

This book is based on a national survey of 186 couples who shared with us their ingredients for a lasting marriage. We have also drawn on our other research and the experiences of the many couples we have counseled, as well as our own marriage.

The object of this book is to tell you about the glue that

can hold your marriage together. We'll share with you the ten common traits that our survey couples said enabled them not only to survive but to have stronger marriages.

At the end of the book, we'll look at how we can make a marriage effective and satisfying. We'll consider how to face the most troublesome problems and the steps for strengthening a good marriage or reconstructing a troubled one.

We believe that *your marriage can be a healthy marriage*. We've worked with hundreds of couples who have struggled with serious problems and yet have learned how to have an intimate and satisfying marriage. No matter how bad your marriage relationship has become or how great your marriage seems now, *you can enrich your marriage*.