

***To Christian Wives (and Their Husbands)
From a Christian Widow***

by
Marina Greenwood

I became a widow suddenly after 1/3 of a century of marriage. The six plus years since my husband's massive cerebral hemorrhage that caused him to slip quickly into unconsciousness and led to brain death the next day have been full of many challenges, as would be expected. I avoided any advice about how to deal with grief for most of the first year after his death, because I felt that my circumstances were unique enough to not fit into anyone's neat steps. I feared that any artificial list of so-called stages of grief would make it harder to just feel honestly whatever emotions would come. The few things I did try to read seemed full of platitudes and seemed to assume that the grief was solely caused by missing the one who died. Eventually I tried to search for resources that might be more helpful in my own circumstances, without success after not figuring out a phrase that worked in Google.

Then I stumbled upon a resource that proved to be exactly what I was looking for through an advertising link on an obituary, and I found the Grief Recovery Institute and their Grief Recovery Handbook. Their premise matched my need: I needed to find a way to bring my relationship with my late husband to completion emotionally in a way that was honest about everything—the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of our relationship. His sudden and unexpected departure with no opportunity to even say goodbye much less resolve chronic issues left me stunned and confused. His 92-year-old senile, shut-in, incontinent mother lived with us and I had a job that demanded overtime consistently, along with 2 large dogs and 5 cats to care for. Those responsibilities kept me moving, plugging away one day at a time doing what had to be done, which helped time pass. After six months, his mother got sick and needed to go to the hospital and then was moved to a nursing home, so that responsibility was relieved. Then the challenge of reducing my expenses to manage within my income alone hit, but worked out to be doable. So, by the time I discovered the Grief Recovery Handbook, I was ready and able to focus on the hard work of processing my emotions about my husband, my marriage, and my life since we met over 37 years before his death.

Why am I sharing this with Christian wives (and any husbands willing to read this also)? Because I believe that what I have experienced and what I have learned from it may offer some benefit to wives to encourage them to find ways to improve their own marriages while their husbands are still alive. And why do I think that? From my own experience and from what my friendships with other Christian wives have revealed, when one is in the day-to-day routine of whatever is normal married life, it's very hard to be able to think objectively or to trust one's own discernments or even to be honest with oneself, much less with one's husband, about the true state of the relationship when there are problems. In fact, my closest friendships in my congregation when he died were with one woman whose Christian former-minister husband left her with four small children for another woman many years ago, two women whose husbands separated from and then divorced them in the previous couple of years, and one who was in the middle of trying to rebuild her marriage after her husband's unfaithfulness. Each of the women went to church every Sunday with no one knowing their distress until it was too late. The last three I mentioned let me gradually into their lives but not until the marriage was near or at the point of no return.

When I pondered my marriage with the perspective of hindsight in my quest for the completion that the Grief Recovery Handbook advises, one of the hardest aspects was to give myself permission to be totally honest about every part of my marriage and our family dynamics. When he was alive, I stuffed down many feelings about several issues that seemed to be irresolvable. I believed I had tried every possibility I could think of to do my part to make progress, and when it didn't work in these areas, I felt confused and frustrated, compounded by my belief that as Christians, we had God's promises and guidance and the support available from other Christians that could have enabled us to experience the great marriage that God surely intended for us.

When he died, I realized that as long as he was alive, I had made it through by clinging to some small

hope that someday we might be able to deal with the issues, knowing that all I could do was continue to wait—for him to somehow become ready to work more together on our issues, or for God to somehow bring about change. And when he died, I realized that the change that God did bring about was the unexpected and abrupt end to my years of confusion and waiting. I don't view my husband's death as caused by God directly because I know he had health issues of his own making that led to his stroke, but I do believe that God certainly knew the number of his days and, as wedding vows put it, that "God, by death, [did] separate us." It was hard to accept that ending to my hopes, but the fact is unavoidable that they did end. But what also ended was the ongoing presence of the confusion and frustration, which added a dimension to my grief of needing to allow myself permission to accept and enjoy the relief which that brought, since the means to that relief was his departure which I didn't want.

My husband was a minister several times during our marriage, and he was an elder for the four years before his death. His being in such a visible leadership role added extra challenges to our marriage—and to my grieving process. The greatest complicating factor his public persona added was that I didn't feel free to be honest with anyone in our congregation about the reality of our marriage weaknesses. It wasn't so much a matter of "don't speak ill of the dead," but more from my hope that the good ways I saw God work to use him in the lives of others would not be unnecessarily undermined. I know that God uses weak and flawed people to accomplish his work and I was supportive of him being an elder because I knew he had much to give and I also believed that being in a role where he could feel productive and used by God would be encouraging to him, too. He was open publicly about his awareness that he was a sinner, as we all are, and his stated perspective was "one sinner to another." That endeared him to many, and the fact that his memorial service lasted two hours due to the many who wanted to speak was a testament to the good ways God used his life to have an impact on many in our congregation.

But, as he so openly confessed in a general way, he did have weaknesses, and some of them resulted in dynamics within our family that affected our marriage and his relationships with his daughters in ways that left me and them with some deep emotions to deal with when he was gone. That's the really hard part about grieving. I wish I could say, as everyone seems to assume, that my sorrow is because I miss him. But I've had to allow myself to be honest about the reality that my greatest sorrow is about our time together ending with several chronic issues left unresolved between us. And that is why it wasn't until over two years after his death that I felt ready to turn my focus toward the future while living in the present, feeling that I had sorted through my past with him honestly and thoroughly and that my relationship with him was completed. I know very consciously the lessons I needed to learn from it, and though I don't feel regret but rather thankfulness for God's patience, grace, and rescue, I do of course wish I'd known when he was alive what I know now.

And that is why I hope that what I've learned the hard way may help someone else take advantage of the time together they still have, to experience in marriage what God does provide for and intend for his children. My main appeal is to other Christians to be truly honest about the state of your marriage and to do whatever it takes to be happy together and to stay in love or even fall in love again with one another. I don't mean just that you love one another, but that you are *in love* with one another. I'm sure you know from experience the difference between them.

I loved my husband and I believe he loved me, but I knew that we were not in love with one another when he died—and hadn't been for many years. We loved, to whatever degree we did, from our commitment and our wills, but not truly from our emotions. As a Christian, I believed that separation or divorce was never an option, though I did contemplate separation at one point but couldn't figure out how to make it possible, and I didn't have confidence that it was the best choice. But because of that perspective, I see how we settled for companionable comfort, a level of friendship that kept things mostly pleasant but also mostly superficial on a day-to-day basis. We had settled for being house-mates rather than lovers, living mostly separate lives under one roof.

We did work on our communication off and on through the years, and I find comfort in knowing that I tried my best to be honest with him about what I felt and thought. He grew in his willingness and ability to hash through things together. Over twenty years ago we adopted a process of expressing things that bothered us, called the 4 Steps, a plan from a book called Telling Each Other the Truth by William Backus, which

helped tremendously. We scheduled weekly time to talk which helped a lot when we stuck with it, but our good intentions were frequently disrupted and I allowed it to fall by the wayside out of hope that if I waited long enough, he would initiate getting back to it. But instead, we would drift apart and live our own separate lives until enough built up between us that it was obvious we needed to once again hash through things. Every time we did that, we realized how much we assumed of the other and misinterpreted each other, and we felt foolish and regretted waiting so long to get back to talking more in depth. But eventually we'd get out of that habit again for a stretch of time. Even when communication was in a better phase, I can see in hindsight that that alone doesn't maintain or produce romantic love.

Seeing some progress through the years helped me try to stay patient and even hopeful that someday more progress might come. However, there were some issues that remained unresolved and about which I eventually gave up hope for change. I will not and don't need to divulge the specifics about them (though I finally did tell my elders about them over a year after he died), but I can share the lessons I learned about my part in allowing them to continue on and on.

Every couple's issues will be different, but every couple will have issues. How many couples in my congregation or yours put on a front of all being fine in their marriages and then depart from worshipping with their Christian family to go through the week in a marriage lacking in happiness and the romantic feeling of being in love that made them want to marry in the first place? How many go through their weeks believing the lie from Satan, the father of lies, that it's unrealistic to expect those feelings to continue?

The Bible makes clear that God's design and intention is for marriage to meet those needs he created in us, not only to entice us into marriage but to bless us and give us pleasure that Christians can freely enjoy more than those who are separated from the love and grace of God could hope for. Only Christians have the spiritual power and qualities God provides that are so necessary to marriage between two weak and sinful people. A happy and emotionally fulfilling relationship, one that is truly intimate in every way—spiritually and emotionally as well as physically—is intended by God to last a lifetime and to bring more happiness over time rather than less.

The Old Testament book, Song of Solomon, describes the intense love possible between a man and a woman, and not only possible but obviously planned by God as the goal to hope for and act on. And God makes clear that age should not diminish that love. Malachi 2:14-16 admonishes men to guard their hearts and remain faithful to the wife of their youth. Proverbs 5:15-19 urges men to "Rejoice in the wife of your youth.... May you always be captivated by her love." Proverbs 12:22 says, "The man who finds a wife finds a treasure, and he receives favor from the Lord." Psalm 128 promises, "How joyful are those who fear the Lord—all who follow his ways! You will enjoy the fruit of your labor. How joyful and prosperous you will be! Your wife will be like a fruitful grapevine, flourishing within your home. Your children will be like vigorous young olive trees as they sit around your table. That is the Lord's blessing for those who fear him."

God even gave instructions that seem extravagant by today's standards in Deuteronomy 24:5: "A newly married man must not be drafted into the army or be given any other official responsibilities. He must be free to spend one year at home, bringing happiness to the wife he has married." Does anyone think that after that first year, God's plan would be for that happiness to wane? If a man develops the good habit of seeking his wife's happiness for the first year, he'll be much more likely to continue it for the rest of his life! Is there any woman who would find it difficult to love a man whose goal is to seek her happiness?

Ephesians 5:28 points out the wise reality that "a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself" if he practices the admonition of the first part of the verse, "In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies." Ephesians 5:33 summarizes the ideal, "So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

1 Peter 3 also gives wives and husbands instructions that would ensure life-long love, with the woman cultivating inner beauty that a godly man will find truly attractive and the man treating her with honor and understanding that will win her heart every time. It's easy to see that when each spouse is focused on meeting the other's needs, happiness and love is enjoyed by both.

We see God's reason for designing marriage, creating for Adam "a helper who is just right for him" (Genesis 2:18) and we see his enthusiastic response (Genesis 2:23), "'At last!' the man exclaimed." And

we see that this is God's design for all time (Genesis 2:24), "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one."

Of course, we also see soon after Eve's creation that it doesn't take long for issues to arise in a marriage! When she gave in to the temptation to eat of the forbidden fruit, turned the temptation to Adam and he ate, and he blamed her to God for his own sin, we must all say, "Been there, done that," no matter which part we have played in a similar scenario in our own relationships. It can be discouraging to see that every human being is prone to the same weaknesses, or it can be encouraging to know that even with our failings and sins, God still intends for us to be able to enjoy a happy lifelong marriage.

One of the most interesting Scriptures about marriage is in Ecclesiastes 9:9. In the context of life's futility because we will all die someday and so much of life doesn't make sense, we find this nugget, "Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun. The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly toil." A happy marriage can be an island of joy in the storm-tossed seas of life, and it is possible for any couple.

But in order to experience what God intended for us, in marriage as in every other area of our lives, we need his instructions, forgiveness, and strength to live up to our desire to overcome our weaknesses. Marriage is full of temptations to take rather than give, to be self-focused and prideful and lazy, to handle conflicts in hurtful ways, and to give up when difficult circumstances or misunderstandings arise. Add to that the understandable ignorance that men have of women and women have of men, and it's not surprising at all that so many marriages disappoint or fail.

Unfortunately, most marriages start out with young, idealistic, and naïve spouses, who believe that their marriage will be different from others that have had problems or failed because they love each other more than anyone else has ever loved! They can't imagine ever losing their romantic feelings and they assume that problems will either not come or that their love will overcome them naturally. Rather than expecting problems and difficulties in communication and in understanding and having resources at the ready, they easily get shocked and discouraged and experience the gradual erosion of their loving feelings. And one day they realize that they're unhappy and disappointed that what they expected to experience in their marriage isn't happening.

My husband and I met on March 3, 1974, and by the next day we talked about marrying each other. We felt sure that God had put us together, and we were a couple from that day on. I remember being conscious of the need to get to know each other better over time and I knew that we'd go through tests and challenges, but my belief that we were somehow Providentially matched turned out to be both a help and a hindrance over the years. It helped me to stay committed to him and to keep hoping that we'd continue to grow and change because of my confidence that we did both believe that God was involved in our relationship. But I can now see that such a quick commitment to one another when we knew so little about each other brought with it a temptation to not see the need to be very proactive in working at our love. We were naïve, believing that just because we were both Christians our love would continue naturally.

It took seven years of marriage for me to consciously realize that I didn't understand my husband and he didn't understand me, and that the communication that we thought was our strength hadn't continued to flow freely as it did when we met. I found the beginnings of help in a chance (I believe Providential) discovery of an article in a magazine in a doctor's waiting room about the differences between men and women that affect marriage. I'm glad to know that nowadays there are more well-known resources such as John Gray's Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus so that young couples may be less naïve than we were.

In addition to understandable ignorance of the opposite sex, we all also each bring our own unique "baggage" from our childhoods into our marriages, which can be hard to discern. So not only do we not understand our spouses, we really don't even understand ourselves! Most people haven't done much self-examination to look for their weaknesses or even to try to understand how their childhood experiences and family dynamics shaped them growing up. This was the greatest challenge between my husband and me. It took us a long time just to arrive at the point where it was clear to both of us that we couldn't figure the other out, that we'd have to avoid making assumptions of what the other meant or why he or I did what we did. I see now how much more proactively we should have sought to understand ourselves and each other,

but I also know that that's the lifelong challenge for all people. We all tend to be clueless and resist facing our weaknesses, even when we know God's desire and plan is for us to be able to grow and overcome them with his help and the help of other Christians.

We eventually did realize that we were assuming things of the other based on what it would mean if we said or acted in the same way. We realized that we'd need to refine our understanding of the Golden Rule. Rather than thinking in terms of treating the other the way we'd want to be treated, we added the disclaimer phrase, "if I were him or her." I didn't want to be treated the way he did in some areas and vice versa, so we learned we'd have to go the extra step of trying to learn what the other preferred, which is easier said than done, especially to do consistently over time.

My mindset through the years was a quest to understand what it means to be the helper suitable for, or as the New Living Translation says, "just right for" my husband that Genesis 2 describes about Eve when she was created for Adam. I believed that my role required me to apply that principle specifically to my relationship with my own husband, that I could and should tailor my role as his wife to accommodate his personality and temperament and not merely be a generic woman to his generic man.

After he was gone, I could see ways that I took that too far in some ways and not far enough in others. I ended up accommodating his weaknesses in some ways that I shouldn't have. In my fear of becoming the nagging wife described in Proverbs, I held back too much. I also gave in to discouragement over the same issues continuing to go unresolved, especially when it seemed things were changing but then they'd revert back to old patterns. In my discouragement, I settled for less than I knew was possible because my view of my role was warped and one-sided, thinking I was to adapt to him but not understanding that my needs were just as important and that I should help him learn how to meet them, too.

And that is the main lesson I learned in my ponderings after he died. That is the lesson that I now believe is so important for all wives to learn. A wife is not to abdicate or settle. Honesty is not disrespectful to a husband. And if a husband reacts against that honesty communicated with love and respect, then the solution is not to back down but to continue to be honest and go through the conflict until it is resolved. And if it doesn't stay resolved, then a wife must continue to be honest about that.

My own baggage that I brought into our marriage included insecurity about asking anyone for anything. I've always had a deep aversion to the possibility of being a bother to someone. So it wasn't easy or natural for me to think that it would not only be okay but right for me to express my feelings and needs. My default was to not initiate unless and until I felt confident that my husband really wanted to know them. In fact, I tend to go to the extreme of not even knowing what I feel or what I need unless I proactively set out to ponder about it. I've taken retreat days occasionally to have open-ended time to sort through my mind and heart, and even then I have to really dig, usually by just writing whatever comes to mind in a journal or rambling in a conversation with God, letting the words form themselves and reveal to me what I've stuffed down for awhile. Once I've "prayed through" after several hours of this, I feel ready to get back into life with more of a sense of honesty and awareness.

Over time, I did grow in my ability to articulate my honest feelings. I hoped that if he knew what I felt, particularly about those few issues that were left hanging, that he would be willing to work together proactively to overcome them and grow in our love. But one of the dynamics that I hit up against over and over was that my husband was reactive and self-protective and I felt like I was walking on eggshells trying to avoid arousing a strong reaction to what I said. I'd have to brace myself to handle it if he did react. But I eventually gave up asking to hash through anything more and just took whatever attention he gave me without asking or hoping for more. The last year, the first year in our new house together, I don't remember any deep conversations or conflicts, because by then I had resigned myself to accepting my circumstances and I had grown in consciously casting my anxiety on God and trusting that he really does care for me, as 1 Peter 5:7 urges. I felt the evidence of God's care through the amazing, clearly Providential way we were able to buy the house and leave the house we rented that had become unsuitable for our needs.

The night before the day of my husband's cerebral hemorrhage, I stopped on my way to bed and looked out the bay window to the back yard and told God, as I often did that year, how thankful I was for our home. I had become aware awhile back that I felt a chronic sense of dread of the next hard thing I'd have to face. Even when circumstances were stable, I didn't feel free to enjoy them because of that awareness that they

wouldn't last. But that night, I was consciously aware of having grown in peacefulness from trusting more that God would help me through whatever hard things would come, and I talked to him about that as well before heading to bed. I knew of a couple of difficult circumstances that were looming and would have to be faced soon, and I knew God would help me make it through them somehow. So, when the next hard thing did hit me the next day, as well as the other circumstances hitting six months later, I realized looking back on them that God did help me through them in many tangible and intangible ways.

The only person with whom I shared completely honestly about what I was having to sort through in my grieving process was my best friend from childhood who still lives in my hometown in Minnesota. We have kept up through the years, more at some times than others, and she knew that while my husband was alive I had held back a lot of what I experienced and felt about my marriage. As I shared more honestly with her after he died, she told me that her discernment was that what I experienced should be characterized as abusive treatment by Him. I rejected that vehemently at first, but as I continued to allow myself to be more and more honest about the dynamics of our marriage and how I had felt when I was experiencing them, I eventually did come to understand how I had allowed my husband's temperament and his rules for our family to hurt me. I don't believe he intended to be controlling and manipulating, but that was his self-protective default that I could understand as arising from his own baggage that he was controlled by yet largely unaware of. He had never reached the point of being able to proactively examine himself in order to see his own baggage from the dysfunctional dynamics of his own upbringing. He reacted against and pushed away anyone who tried to be honest with him about what they saw but that he couldn't—or wouldn't—see. Facing the fact of having endured and allowed such hurtful dynamics to continue in my marriage and family was hard to do, but I now appreciate my friend being loving and brave enough to speak honestly to me about what she could deduce even from afar.

Now I see that in trying to be a good wife, I allowed my husband to continually avoid having to face things that he needed to see and change. I did let him treat me in ways that were not only not what a godly husband is instructed by God to do, but in ways that hurt me and hurt our relationship. I see that the ways I tried to apply the concept of being a "helper suitable" for him were faulty. It's not being a good wife and truly loving a husband if mistreatment is tolerated and endured in silence. I can only conclude now in hindsight that he was truly unaware of how deeply hurt I was by him in the areas that seemed impossible to resolve. Even though I had tried through the years to be honest with him, I still essentially wimped out whenever he reacted to what I said and allowed him to continue to rationalize away what I said without taking to heart that something was wrong or missing or needed to be changed to improve our marriage. And when he did agree to make some changes but didn't follow through, I didn't continue to be honest about that. I let him think falsely that our marriage was okay when it wasn't.

He didn't like when I had negative emotions and didn't want to hear how I honestly felt. The unspoken rule that he projected was that if I had negative emotions, he didn't want to know about it, while at the same time he teased and criticized me for being less expressive of my emotions than he wanted me to be. He only wanted to hear of my positive emotions, and so we were at an impasse and I coped by enduring one day at a time feeling that my husband didn't really want to know and didn't really like the real me and didn't feel in love with me. What made it even more painful was enduring the public persona he cultivated by calling me his "sweet thang," telling others about how much he loved me, and making a show of public displays of affection that gave the impression that he was a loving husband. His love was in word much more than in deed, but I couldn't be honest with anyone about how false the image he projected was. So, yes, I have had to agree with my friend that what I experienced could be characterized as emotionally abusive even if it wasn't malicious. It sprang from his own insecurities and unfaced baggage. I feel compassion for him and have forgiven him, but at the same time I am thankful to be finished with the dysfunctional life I shared with him.

What I have learned is that, bottom line, the ideal is that both spouses would initiate working at the relationship, but if the other doesn't, then you must. Better to have conflict arise with hope for resolution and growth than to stagnate and drift apart and settle for less than God's intention and promise. Fight to have a happy marriage and stay in love! Get it back if you've lost it. Don't fake it, don't give a false front, and cultivate close enough friendships where honesty about your marriage is possible and you can get the

objective input and encouragement you need so you can do your part to work at the marriage.

The obvious question then is how to accomplish that? The answer is to use resources that are available, especially those from Dr. Willard Harley (MarriageBuilders.com). His resources are best in my opinion because of his assumptions and his practicality. He wrote his classic His Needs, Her Needs many years ago and has since written many more books to help couples stay in love. He's the only marriage guru I've found who promises that staying in love is an achievable goal, as he and his wife have for over fifty years so far! That is the greatest hope yet greatest challenge in marriage, and most marriages lose that along the way unless it is guarded and cultivated proactively. In fact, he wrote a book, Fall in Love, Stay in Love, which expands on the His Needs, Her Needs concepts and gives practical guidance. He was my psychology professor in college many years ago in the early days of his marriage therapy work and I remember him telling us about his basically behavioral approach to marriage counseling and how it was proving to be effective even with couples on the verge of divorce.

Dr. Harley helps couples learn how to do exactly what they hoped would come naturally in marriage, that each spouse would have his or her needs met by the other. God designed marriage for our happiness when that is true, but most people discover that even when they want to meet their spouse's needs, they don't know how to do it. So he helps couples learn what to do and what not to do in very practical ways, which consistently leads to happiness and therefore being in love with the one who is so giving and caring and willing to try new ways of relating. He teaches how to love in deed in ways that the other needs and not just in words—a very biblical approach.

He is up-front about his view of marriage being exchange-based, that each person should expect to give and each person rightfully can expect to receive. He debunks two myths that are especially damaging in any marriage and are common in Christian marriages: (1) That "unconditional love" is the goal, because it is NOT the biblical dynamic for marriage and it so often results in one person being the giver and the other justifying being a taker by expecting or even abusively demanding unconditional love no matter how he or she treats the other, and (2) that submission is one-way and that a husband is entitled to it, along with respect, rather than being mutual. Submission and respect are never demanded in the Bible, rather, they are encouraged to be voluntarily given. Jesus specifically prohibits "lording over" others, and calls those who would lead others to follow his example of servanthood (Luke 22:25-27).

His advice boils down to meeting one another's most important needs self-identified with the help of his questionnaire, making deposits in each other's "love bank," avoiding making withdrawals from it by committing the "love busters" which he describes clearly, and using his principles for communication and negotiation. He goes so far as to prescribe a certain amount of time to be spent together each week, and he confidently promises that following his plan will improve, revive, or even rescue any marriage where both partners devote themselves to making the effort. Please check out his website to see for yourself the value of his guidance.

In 2006, I requested of my husband that we try following Dr. Harley's advice. He was reluctant but did agree to complete the needs questionnaires. However, when we discussed them together I could tell he was not really willing to try anything more than that, and that was the end of it. Now I know that I should have been more honest with him and hashed through all the emotions raised in both him and me at that crucial point. I felt very vulnerable in asking for his participation and very hurt at his lack of willingness, much less enthusiasm. Instead, I gave up hoping for real improvement and I never was completely honest with him again about my unhappiness and how hurt I felt.

Several years before that I had asked to have an honest talk about our relationship when we had the opportunity to get away together to someone's condo at the beach. I had learned that it was best to give him fair warning that I needed to talk about serious, and he knew negative, things bothering me. When I did tell him as honestly as I knew how to that I didn't feel loved by him, he blew up at me and berated me for saying such a thing and ranted that a wife should never ever tell a husband that he doesn't love her and that it's very hurtful and wrong of me to do so! I was shocked and even more discouraged from hoping that he would ever try to understand and care about what I felt. The frequent pattern once again was followed where I was to blame for the problem and that I was wrong to feel as I did. So asking him to use Dr. Harley's advice a few years later took a lot of courage, and his response was the final blow to my hope for our

marriage to become happy and to feel in love with one another again.

In light of all that I've sorted through and learned from my relationship with my late husband, understandably my thoughts have turned to my future and the possibility of having the opportunity to develop another relationship with a man that could lead to marriage again. What would I want to be aware of and do differently based on my experiences? I'm thankful for God's patience with me as I stumbled through the past 44 years since I met the man I chose to marry in my youth and thankful that I may have some years left to experience the fruit of my hard-learned lessons.

If I ever do feel attraction to another man, I will want to build a strong friendship before allowing it to come near the subject of romance or marriage. If I feel in love with someone or if I know someone feels in love with me, there are several reassurances that I would need before I could be certain of the relationship's potential for lifelong happiness. After experiencing a marriage where I not only lost my feelings of being in love, but where I didn't feel loved and was hurt emotionally, I honestly don't feel much hope that there is a man out there to whom I could want to open my heart. I would have to be convinced over time that a man truly cares about and wants to know the whole me and doesn't like me only for what he receives from me.

For the past several years, after reaching completion in my relationship with my late husband (which took over three years), I have felt ready to form a new relationship with a man and have had many experiences that have helped me learn and grow and, I hope, become even more ready to love and appreciate the kind of man to whom I could entrust my heart. I have asked, "What if?" about several men who have crossed my path and who I have put myself in the path of via an online dating service. I've felt one extreme of being attracted to a man who had no interest in dating or marriage to the other extreme of being the object of attraction of men who eventually proved to be capable only of lust but not love. Other men have been objects of my curiosity, seeming to be logical prospects but not arousing any depth of mutual attraction.

I've grown in my determination to be patient and to not settle for less than a man who wants to know what I've come to think of as "the whole me." I've become more integrated in ways I've needed, from both good and bad experiences helping me see how I haven't been so my whole life. Each experience with a man has been helpful for me to understand that I need (as does each human being) intimacy in all of these areas, which are heart (emotions), mind (pursuit of knowledge and truth), spirit (relationship with God expressed in one's lifestyle), and body (affection before and sexual intimacy after marrying).

I do hope someday to find someone like this. I have learned these lessons the hard way and wish I had known the importance of them when I was 19 instead of 63. But I'm thankful—truly thankful—to be able to hope that I may yet have the opportunity to experience a relationship with a man who I can like, respect, and gladly respond to—to be in love with. I would rather remain single for the rest of my life than settle for anyone less than this. I don't look for perfection, just for someone who is clearly growing and giving. But I'm content to leave up to God whether I meet such a man and remarry.

To women (and men) who are married, I urge you to spend some time pondering the state of your marriage and to remember your own dreams and hopes for what you wanted when you decided to marry your spouse. Though some hopes may have been unrealistic or unfair to expect of your spouse—and most people discover things that may be surprising or disappointing that they didn't see before the wedding—I'm talking about the big picture. What needs did you assume would be met by your spouse? What is the state of your needs being met and of you meeting his needs in ways he confirms are important to him? Have you settled for loving but not being in love? Is there any issue between you that is off-limits or uncomfortable to talk about? Do you have true intimacy and happiness that is growing rather than diminishing?

I don't have any way of knowing the statistics of how many marriages in my congregation or yours are truly loving, happy, and intimate in all the ways God designed marriage to be for his children, but my suspicion is that the number of marriages not experiencing what God intended is much higher than most people would suspect. Just from my own relationships with other women in my congregation, I question how many wives have settled for less than they hoped and less than is possible with the right resources when put to use.

Please be both cautioned and encouraged by my personal story and experiences to pay attention to any

of your own frustrations, confusions, or disappointments. I would only urge this if there were solutions, and there are. I want very badly for others to experience the benefit of the practical help that Dr. Harley has made available to put into practice the biblical principles for staying in love that marriage requires. I want Christians to not miss out on having the great marriages that God makes possible and that would have such a powerful impact on the world (and that would arouse the bittersweet grief of loss that one hopes would be true when death brings an end to it, rather than just bitter regret). A happy marriage is such a testimony to the power of God to help us overcome our sin and weaknesses and is surely good news that one would want to share with so many in the world who need hope for their struggling marriages. To God be glory in every happy Christian marriage and family!



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Postscripts

Someone posted this on Facebook when I was first starting to question whether my husband had been emotionally abusive. It summarized well the symptoms I experienced which, when I let myself admit their presence in my marriage in hindsight as I worked through my grief, helped me to understand what dysfunctional dynamics I had tolerated. I hope if they are true for anyone else that they won't be tolerated and that whatever needs to happen to bring about change, growth, and healing will be pursued while there is still time to enjoy the relationship again.

5 Signs of an Emotionally Abusive Relationship:

1. You walk on eggshells to avoid upsetting your partner.
2. Your feelings and opinions are rarely validated.
3. Your partner is mistrustful of you for no reason.
4. You feel like you are unable to discuss problems in the relationship.
5. You feel "stuck" or confused most of the time.

My favorite quote, by Dinah Craik:

"But oh! the blessing it is to have a friend to whom one can speak fearlessly on any subject; with whom one's deepest as well as one's most foolish thoughts come out simply and safely. Oh, the comfort – the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person – having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."