

Premarital Counseling Reflections

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### **Five Profound Points**

#### Introduction

This is Tiffany's version of the marriage story of Tom and Tiffany. She selected five points from Leslie and Les Parrot's book, Save Your Marriage Before it Starts, that most impacted her personally and professionally. Their marriage began at 3:00 pm on the sunny, humid afternoon of August 20, 1988. Tom and Tiffany were married at the United Methodist Church of Irwin, Pennsylvania. Thinking back to that day, their simple country wedding and the church's marquis indicating the church was "prayer conditioned" makes clear how God's hand and grace brought, led and has held them together the last 38 years. With many years of memories, it made choosing the most impactful points quite difficult. They did not receive premarital counseling following their engagement on Christmas Day in 1987, but they are grateful for prayers and gentle encouragement from Tiffany's Mom, Aunt and Paternal Grandparents and the Heavenly Father for His love, provision and guidance.

#### **Differences Between Men and Women**

Despite being born into Christian families, the feminist revolution of the 1970's began its work confusing us, and it seems, entire generations of women and men in the United States. My belief is it contributes significantly to the increases in divorce, cohabitation and decreases in marriages and nuclear families. It has chipped away at religious, moral and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Tom and I were not immune from the ideology of gender and role wars in work, marriage and family. What does not get talked about is the abyss of disagreements, friction, unrealistic expectations and the cost of it to marriages, children and families.

It is no surprise the Parrots' cite research and proof of the biological and neurological facts that men and women are created, and on purpose, to be different. We are made for different responsibilities and roles.

The 1980's began a wave of new definitions of what success looks like, defined by American culture. It impacted each of us and created a culture of competition, higher education, more expectations and less time for marriage, children and family. Tom and I fell for this, too.

Now is the time to make young people aware and encourage married couples to acknowledge and appreciate differences in one another and the roles of wives and men in marriage and family more intimacy and lasting commitment.

For Tom and me, we had grown out of touch with God's divine truth and design for men and women. I had returned part time to my career after our three sons began school. Soon, I was back to full-time. I was unfulfilled and wanted the fleeting time with our sons. I resigned and followed the nudges to shift to train and certify as an organizational leadership coach and the flexibility of private practice.

The Lord drew also drew us close to Him by leading us to deeper study of the Bible and involvement with our pastor and church.

I believe God guided us to see with new eyes and ears His truth about marriage and men and women in the passages in Genesis, Proverbs, Corinthians, Timothy and Titus. His design for marriage and family are clear, and the needs we fulfill for one another as husband and wife.

The Parrot's cited modern research which indicates the wife's most basic needs she has of her husband are to be cherished, known and respected.

Tom and I share a similar in focus on performance and relationships. But, our similar profiles in Myers Briggs and the Strengths Development Indicator do not mean we have the same needs, interchangeable roles in marriage and family nor use our gifts in the same way.

Like Leslie, I need from Tom: romance, emotional expression and time spent together. Whenever any of these areas are low, I feel it. One of the most difficult periods of our marriage occurred when Tom accepted the opportunity to be sponsored by his employer for a graduate degree in Business. We lived in Connecticut. The university was in Indiana. I still remember my sadness, frustration and tears driving him to the airport for his first two weeks, in-residence. My suggestion to consider another Program resulted in his deferment for a year. When our twin sons were 1 year old and our older son was 3 years old, he began that two year program. I worried he was doing too much because the program was in addition to him continuing his full-time career of 60 hour work-weeks and business travel.

In fairness to Tom, research shows every husband needs from his wife to be: admired, have autonomy and to enjoy shared activities. Tom wanted this second graduate degree. It was important to him, despite my misgivings. He needed autonomy to make his career decision. It was a difficult two years.

In the end, Tom made me feel cherished throughout those two years by calls and postcards and flowers, as best as he could. He also asked me to join him in Paris at the end of his final two weeks of his European in-residence. Those five days are some of the best memories of

our marriage, so far. We enjoyed activities like touring the Rodin Museum, Versailles, Montmatre and dancing in the Latin Quarter and enjoying tea in Parisian outdoor cafes.

When we do not share emotional intimacy, women most feel out of sync with their husbands. There needs to be time for sharing secrets, talking things over, cuddling and just feeling respected and in the presence and attention of our husbands.

When we do not do recreational activities together, husbands feel disconnected from their wives. It is important to keep searching for a shared activity both husband and wife enjoy together. My sisters' in-laws enjoyed a loving marriage for 50+ years being masterful woodcarvers. Maybe it is tennis, films, daily walks, book discussions or travel? I would encourage couples to avoid an activity that separates them too much.

From a professional perspective, I feel it is important to have couples consider the truth about what creates harmony, unity, peace and love.

When working with Christians, I intend to use the Prepare/Enrich Biblical assessment and workbooks. When we pay attention to God's design and divine truth, we see thousands of years of research and data and our family tree. It hardly seems rational that anyone needs to be convinced of God's truth. I am eager to support premarital and married husbands and wives with this research and assessments and to equip and share with them new knowledge, self-discovery and understanding through Symbis and Prepare/Enrich.

### **Habit of Happiness**

The Parrot's quote from a pilot, "The trick is to get the right attitude in spite of atmospheric conditions" truly hit what I believe may be the undergirding for marriage and life.

The wisdom of “happy people create happy marriages,” and “the most important characteristic of a marriageable person is the habit of happiness” cannot be overemphasized!

Whom you marry creates the attitude and disposition of marital happiness. How do we sustain it throughout the trials and tribulations of life? Even the most idealistic, optimistic dreamer sometimes has difficult desert times.

Developing happy programming of the mind is possible. In 2020, the pandemic caused me to move from fear to information overload and into a high mode to protect and inform my family and friends and neighbors of how to stay healthy. As months went on, I began to shift to disbelief and frustration of all that began to be taken away while the lawlessness increased. Tom, one evening in July 2020, asked me when I planned to run for public office. I was so angry at how he rebuked me, especially in front of two of our sons. But, after I cooled down, and he explained that my attitude was becoming fixated in a situation where I had no power to change it. I understood he was giving me authentic, honest feedback. I stopped my newspaper subscriptions, listening to the radio and watching the local news. It made all the difference in shifting my attitude, time and focus to the Bible, prayer and worship in person at a church that opened that month.

While Viktor Frankl and other Experientialists tell us we own our attitude, we also need to remember we own what we consume, what we read, hear, say, see and believe and how we react, act, think and behave as a result of it.

Couples help one another by recognizing the power of mirroring to one another exactly how we are being - and interpreting and reacting to external events beyond our control. It may

sting at first, but this valuable gift of feedback from someone who loves you more than most people on the planet is done out of love.

I look forward to sharing with couples the saboteurs of a happy marriage: self-pity, blame, resentment, and how to gently help each other out of those dark pits. Feeling a sense of control and feeling something good happened because you helped cause it to happen, has everything to do with having a long, happy marriage, and I would add, friendship.

### **Say What you Feel and Mean and Understand What you Heard**

Guarding against too little, too superficial and too infrequent communications is one of the most important indicators to whether a marriage sinks or swims, according to research cited by the Parrots. When couples stop confiding in one another, a wall comes up. They stop listening and cannot speak without blaming, and an emotional divorce where they are together, but miles away will ensue.

Couples need to guard against placating, blaming, computing and distracting. Instead, they need to seek communication warmth, overlooking the blemishes, particularly unconditional warmth when there is no condemnation regardless of the facts, genuineness and empathy.

Making “I” statements and naming emotions, reflective listening, authentic apology, turning off devices, communicating through touch and eye contact, are so important.

In 2013, Tom and I were having a great deal of marriage conflict with our oldest son in his senior year of high school, and Tom wishing I would return to my full-time career in Human Resources, which I left in 2009. He worried about money to pay for college for our three sons. Miraculously, after one really hearted and hurtful argument, I googled from my basement office

support for marriage and God's SEO brought up Retrouvaille, a French Canadian Marriage Program.

It was here that we learned about their Dialogue Framework, naming emotions and using "I" statements. Through letter writing to each other separately, the couple learns to slow down and to try to get in touch with their own feelings of hurt they had experienced in marriage and had not healed. The hand of God I truly believed helped our marriage, and encouraged us to continue learning and growing together.

I look forward to sharing with couples the Parrots research and inclusion of the nonverbal communication that comes along with their framework to increase emotional intimacy through effective communication between the couple, in real time.

### **Fight the Good Fight**

This chapter of the Parrot's book had the most impact on me. Tom and I are the oldest children in our families of origin. We grew up with two younger siblings. His next sibling is 5 years younger than him. My next sibling is 18 months younger than me. At 15 years of marriage, a textbook about birth order I was reading for fun indicated the marriage of two oldest children is often a power battle, rife with conflict, and a difficult one. Over 34 years of marriage, I confess I resemble these descriptions and we are known for debate and argument. I am not proud of this, and the Prepare/Enrich 10 Steps to Conflict is helping us.

The Parrot's cite the Gottmans' research of unhappy couples, noted by the couples' frequency and use of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. This fascinated me. This scared me. I recognize these tactics in myself, and in Tom.

The pandemic put strain on our marriage. For more than three decades, Tom's work hours and business travel created a lot of time apart, and I had gotten used to it. The pandemic's effect on Tom's work hours and stress meant he and two of our sons were home everyday. He and I saw each other less than prior to the pandemic, despite working from home, because his career and employer were directly impacted by it.

I spoke with Tom about our course and this book, and we did the Love Languages Quiz. I shared this research with Tom, and we agreed our approach to conflict and communication are not working.

Although Tom and I do not usually run from strife, we do have the capacity to increase our marriage happiness by agreeing to choose our battles carefully, define the issue clearly, rate the intensity of feelings, give up put-downs, and not dwell on downers. These new habits and ways of interacting and communicating are critical to work through conflict.

### **Finding God in Your Marriage**

Couples, marriages, families and people I believe cannot survive without God's truth, faithful love and guidance. As the Holy Spirit has protected and provided for us throughout our marriage, reflecting on all the grace and blessing and people and ideas the Lord has given us makes me overflow with gratitude.

As we the Lord led us to Retrouvaille, it was the first time we were told about the power of praying together. It felt awkward at first, and as the weekend went on, and then the follow up 6 weeks on Friday nights, we became more comfortable with each other and praying aloud. I still remember the discussion about the woven cord with three stands of the husband, wife and the

Holy Trinity binding the husband and wife together in marriage. I thank God often for bringing us to that Retreat, and for the couples who volunteer for decades to be in support of one another. Although we are not Catholic, they welcome anyone to their weekends.

While we are still inconsistent with our daily prayers, we do experience the spiritual intimacy the Parrot's share in their book. There is peace and comfort when Tom and I connect and pray aloud with our Heavenly Father and each other.

We do as often as we can if we do not pray together, we alternate nights reading aloud from a devotional book called Mr. & Mrs. published by a couple in western Michigan. We have also given this as gifts to people we know as they get married.

Reflecting on our marriage of 34 years, Tom and I have been talking about the blessings the Lord has provided us. And, amongst those blessings are God's mature Christians and Pastors who have shepherded us and helped us deepen our faith, and my surrender to the Lord, more and more.

As the Parrot's describe marriage reveals the need in us for the deepest level of humility and highest level of forgiveness. And, for these lessons from God, I am most grateful.

### Conclusion

If the Lord can use me to help even one couple avoid some of the growing pains and disagreements as a marriage and family therapist, I pray to be of use for Him and His Kingdom. By seeking a greater connection and relationship with God in prayer, Bible Study and sharing faith with others, and His truth, we can make a difference in bringing the good news of Jesus to couples, marriages and families. I will share what I have learned in this book, and the others, as well as gift SYMBS and Prepare/Enrich to several young couples in our church for Valentine's

Day. given to authors, scientists, clergy and me, then I will be grateful for the purpose He's given me to help fulfill my service to Him and others.

## References

Parrot, Les and Leslie (2015). Saving your Marriage Before it Starts. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.