



*two become one*

THOUGHTS FROM A  
NEW MARRIAGE

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**“Friendship is a deep oneness that develops when two people, speaking the truth in love to one another, journey together to the same horizon.”**

TIM KELLER

4	<i>Hemmed</i>
8	<i>The Strange Math of Marriage</i>
14	<i>Old Houses, Bach, and an Unfinished Marriage</i>
16	<i>Yours, Mine, His, Hers, Ours, All Y'all's</i>
19	<i>Three Sinful Things to Say in the Midst of Conflict</i>
23	<i>These Extraordinary Pains and the Ordinary Days</i>
26	<i>This is the One You'll Marry</i>
30	<i>Why Sex isn't the Best Thing Ever</i>
34	<i>Clear Dances Done in the Sight of Heaven</i>
38	<i>Two Becoming One</i>
43	<i>Marriage is as One Long Conversation</i>



## *h e m m e d*

We're not even a month in and last night I cried hot wet tears, my head in my pillow and my husband bent over me. It wasn't a disagreement or fight or argument or any of the things I continue to brace myself for in this thing called marriage, it was the death of me and he, and the newness of we. When we were barely engaged, preparing his house to be sold, it was a sweltering day, he was bent over a toilet, his hair wet with sweat and his hands deep in cleaning supplies. I stood in the bathroom door, cut-off jeans, dirty hands, a mop bucket of water just spilled in the living room and we laughed. What is there to do when you're doing so many of life's big things in such a short time? You laugh and then you just do the next thing. Life was a to-do list.

But then, suddenly, it's done.

The house is sold. The storage unit is packed. The wedding is over. The honeymoon is over. You're moved to a new state. You have a house under contract. You start a new job. You go to a new church. You're no longer two, but one. And then you cry hot, wet tears into your pillow on a Monday night because what happened to your life?

All of the good things, all at the same time.

I came home from Denver four months ago ripe with expectation. A dream job in a city I loved, with a church I admired, in full sight of the Rocky Mountains, in a green and lush state—what more could I ask for? I said as much to a friend at our coffeehouse that morning and what he said back to me began the whirlwind relationship that led to marriage. My husband (I still say that word with timidity, as if trying something for the first time—which I am) and I say to one another all the time, "God doesn't have to be this gracious to us and to display His faithfulness to us like this, and yet He has chosen to and we're so grateful." And we are.

We are.

But even an overwhelming avalanche of goodness is still an avalanche and can crush.

For so many years the lack of so much I desired felt like I was somehow out of bounds of God's goodness. There was a pasture where His faithful sheep prospered and I had somehow wandered too far from the fold. But it wasn't my faithfulness that garnered His, I found, it was His faithfulness that drew me back again and again. He hemmed me in, behind and before, and laid his hand on me when I needed it. I still cannot understand His reasons for withholding and now His reasons for giving in abundance, but David knew something of that:

"You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

Caedmon's Call has a lyric which says, "The problem with these mysteries is they're too mysterious," and this is how I feel about life right now. I cannot understand it and I cannot even try. It is too wonderful, too high, too mysterious, too good, and too hard.

It is enough that I am hemmed in, behind and before, with the hand of the good shepherd upon me for discipline and love, and sometimes both at the same time.



# *the strange math of marriage*

I am doing math in my head on a Sunday morning. The water beats hot against my back and I lean against the shower wall. I've been praying. My prayers are laundry lists and messy rooms and "Please God, thank yous" and things to pray for my husband these days. A father-friend asks me last week, "Have you been praying?" Nate asks me Friday as we drive through D.C. traffic for four hours, "Have you been praying?" I want to scream at them, "Yes! Yes I have been praying. The problem is I don't know what I'm praying for." Have you ever felt like a shell of yourself? I was quick to call it depression before and it is a form of it at least. The kind of depression that happens when you crush a caterpillar or smash a fly or squeeze a balloon until it pops, pressing your foot or your fingers or your hands deep into whatever it is you want to kill. That kind of depression. I think of Paul, "We are pressed but not crushed," and I wonder at the freedom to say that with confidence—they both feel the same in the process, it's just the end that's different.



Maybe compressed is a better word. That which makes cider or wine or those flattened pennies with the whole Declaration of Independence on them. Compressed and coming out a whole different thing.

I'm the child of divorce and am married to a man who was divorced so I did not come into marriage with illusions of perfection. I knew it would be work. I knew there would be dark days and delightful ones. I knew there would be death involved and it wouldn't always be pretty — not the Austenian sort at least, where all the foibles and fractures of humanity are embraced and loved and kept as endearing. Real life is not like that. A real marriage is not like that.

I came into marriage believing it takes two whole people to make it work, and I still believe this is true. But that belief has to die the moment you say "I do," and I did not know that. I thought, having worked so hard in my singleness to be a whole person, I would get to keep that whole person in marriage. I liked the whole person I was. I liked the time I had. I liked my financial flexibility. I liked my independence. I liked my autonomy. I liked my friends. I liked my personality. I liked me. I worked hard to be independent, secure, faithful, well-liked, a friend to many, thought-full, deep, and more. I *liked* that person. And I liked the person my husband was, a minister to many hurting men, faithful friend, financially secure, a home-owner, well-regarded in the city gates. Someone who stayed up with me way past our self-imposed curfew because we had so much to say. I liked us. Two whole people, come to one another in wholeness.

...

I used to believe that "the two shall become one flesh" was some sort of sneaky illusion to sex (wink, wink), that sex would seal the deal. A wedding itself wasn't enough and a marriage license helped, but sex, two bodies becoming as close as humanly possible—this was when one flesh happened. I was wrong.

Marriage is not  $one + one = two$

It isn't even  $one + one = one$

Marriage is  $(one - one) + (one - one) = one$

The math doesn't work like it's supposed to, or like a friend said, "I have always loved math. There are rules, and if you follow the rules you can *always* solve the problem (even though it can take some creativity). Marriage doesn't always seem so straightforward..."

Marriage, I am learning, is less about becoming more of who you are, or all of who you are, or your truest self, and more about becoming less of who you are. And that hurts.

It is the trendy thing in many circles today to abandon marriage when it gets too hard or when you feel like you're drowning or when you don't recognize the face you see in the mirror. I have been looking in the mirror for a year now, trying to find the self I used to be and she's gone. I cannot find her. She was full in a way I am depressed. She was in bloom in a way I am compressed. She was deep in the way I am shallow. She was whole in a way I am not. She was becoming more and I am becoming less.

I tell someone yesterday, "Sanctification in singleness is *hard*. It is in marriage too. But they're different kinds of sanctification. Pursuing wholeness in singleness

is sanctifying. And pursuing togetherness in marriage is sanctifying. Neither one is more or less difficult or rewarding. Both hard. Both good." It's because they're so different though, this is what makes marriage sanctifying for those who worked hard to be whole in their singleness, to not feel the need to legitimize their presence by the presence of a spouse, to not feel unseen or unheard in the Church.

There is no advice in this post, I have none to give. But maybe some encouragement for the newly married among us? When you look in the mirror and the vestiges of your singleness are gone, when financial flexibility feels far away, when late nights or early mornings or free schedules seem like a thing of history, when comparing calendars feels challenging, when your single friends are traipsing over Europe or crying over heartbreak or dreaming of what they want to do with their lives, when you touch that face in the mirror and try to remember what she felt like a year or two years ago: turn away, you will not find her there, and the harder you look, the less you will see.

You will need a new mirror and one before which you only stand with your new spouse, your one flesh. You are no longer two, but one. You are less whole today than you have ever been before and your spouse is not your completion any more today than the hope of them was a few years ago. What does that man or woman beside you need to flourish in the kingdom and church? Where do they need to see God more wholly or to love Him more deeply? What depressions are made in his body by yours? In which ways does her presence compress you into something wholly different than before? You are being taken from, yes, and you are giving

away. You are becoming less and will never again become more of who you are.

But you are also becoming one, together, with the one God has given you.

The math doesn't add up: become less until you become one, but this is kingdom math, see: "He must increase, but I must decrease." John 3:30

# old houses, bach, and an unfinished marriage

"Crosswicks is a typical New England farmhouse, built sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century, so it is well over two-hundred years old. Its square central section has been added to haphazardly over the years, white clapboard somehow tying it all together, so that the house rambles pleasantly and crookedly. A dropped ball will roll right to the central chimneys, and the bookcases we've build in are masterpieces of non-alignment." Madeleine L'Engle, *A Two-Part Invention: The Story of a Marriage*

Madeleine might as well have been talking about our house. One of the oldest Denver proper houses built here, a farm that shrunk and squished until the the past fifty years, when new bungalows and cottages grew as the new farmland crop. Our bookcases lean slightly awaiting the carpentry that will fit them snugly into the next hundred years, I hope. No floor is level, no window the same. But we, like Madeleine, make a home here, fitting ourselves into a thing never finished.

Marriage, too, is a thing unfinished. Brimming with unresolved beauty, always coming round corners to find pleasant surprises, or more corners, but never finished.

I have never deluded myself into thinking marriage would bring all the resolve I longed for or the culmination of all joy. I have been the product of a broken marriage and understand the fragility of two sinners in close quarters till death them do part. Marriage has always been seen as another long walk hand in hand in the same direction, same as any other holy thing. But it is the constant unfinishedness of marriage that surprises me. The same conversations with small changes. We grow, we mature, we lean in to one another, we learn, but we are not there.

Someone says to cut myself some slack, we're only two months in, but how many months in is it before you feel the creaks and groans of an unsettled house cease? Ten? Twenty five? Seven hundred?

Madeleine writes of practicing piano: "I was working on...the Bach Two-Part Inventions. One is never through with the Two-Part Inventions; they are the essential practice needed for the Well-Tempered Clavier." And I understand her a bit better than I did when last I read her memoir. One is never through with the Two-Part Inventions, the marriage, the leaning in, and leaning toward. It is beautiful thing, but it is a thing unfinished.



yours, mine, his, hers,  
ours, all y'all's

We're shelving books, no longer two, but one. We sit at the same table every night and morning. Our dishes, his pottery and my vintage, married on the kitchen shelves. We've bought a house. With every action there is a recurring subconscious question accompanying them all: *Who will get this when we divvy things up?*

Until last night I didn't give the thought enough space to analyze. We sat on our patio and worked through the instructions (His idea, not mine, I never think to look at instructions.) for our patio furniture and the thought crept up again, I stared it right in the face and asked where it came from. Fear of divorce? Both our lives have been shattered by that reality once, it would be natural to fear it in some way. Fear of death? I suppose there is always that. But no, deep down, I realize, it comes from fourteen years of living with roommates. Fourteen years of divvying things up.



I wouldn't trade a single one of those roommates. I have lived with crazy, kind, cruel, caring, clean, and chaotic, and I have been all of those things back; still I wouldn't trade a single girl. Those girls taught me to deal with my monsters, to respond with kindness when met with cruelty, to laugh a lot more than my nature would, to not listen to a fool in her folly, and to not be a fool in her folly. There has been no more sanctifying agent than the dozens of roommates I've had while I waited and hoped for marriage. Each year, in many ways, more difficult than the last because we learned to confront sin and to be confronted in our sin. We learned to serve and not be served. We learned to outdo one another in honor. We learned to navigate really tricky situations with no happy outcome for anyone. We learned to die.

I have not yet learned to die and this is clear in my marriage, even though my husband rarely asks it of me. As we meld our books and cups and plates and pitchers, I think about dying and I think about divvying. There has always been an end date on my housemates. A lease. A cap. But with him, there is no end date, no divvying up, no dividing, no chore charts, no questions on who is responsible for what. There is a cyclical kind of service, he serves me and I serve him, but sometimes the cycle breaks and one of us is short and one of us is absentminded (three guesses who on the latter, first two don't count). It takes a hard restart, but not the kind where we go our own way and make up when we feel like it. It takes one of us coming to the other and saying, "I'm sorry, I'm owning my stuff here, but realizing all our stuff is shared and I affect you, whether I want to or not."

I have heard it said marriage is the most sanctifying gift to his people, but I think that is hyperbole. I think people are the most sanctifying gift to his people.

And fourteen years of roommates have taught me many things, some things I have to unlearn in marriage (there is no divvying up of stuff because there is no end date on this covenant). And some things I am grateful to have learned alongside roommates. I have sometimes felt like all the right things have to happen while we're under the same roof, because once I am gone, or they are gone, nothing good can ever come. That God cannot continue to sanctify roommates once we are apart.

That's the hyperbole of it all. That God is limited to doing exactly what needs to be done to sanctify his people inside of marriage or outside. He completes the work — whether we are 35 and single or married at 21. The sanctification looks different, but it is completed.

I'm sitting on our new patio furniture, drinking my coffee, and writing. The operative word there is, "our." It's the new sanctifying agent in my life, that this is all *ours*, together, stewarded to us by God for the season of our marriage covenant. It's a new feeling, one I don't know how to wear well yet, but I am learning; by God's grace we are learning.

*three sinful things to say  
in the midst of conflict*

It is the work of providence, I suppose, that I have been reading about conflict in the church at Philippi these last few weeks and Nate is reading *The Peacemaker*. I somehow always imagined marriage to be ripe with conflict, but the truth is that ours hasn't been, or if it has, we're delightfully oblivious (that is not to say we have not had conflict, just that we do not stink of it every day). But for all the lack of conflict within our marriage, our entire relationship has been surrounded by conflict among those we love. Which, if you know either of us, is a grand cosmic joke between the Trinity: "Let's put these two passive, peace-loving, conflict-adverse people together for the rest of all time, okay?!"

"Yeah! And let's put them in ministry where they'll be surrounded by conflict all the time!"

"Grand idea!"

It was an exclamation mark fest, I just know it.

For all our natural passivity, though, the conflict swirling around us has been a blessing of sorts. Oh, we don't like it, don't mishear me, but it has been a "severe mercy." Through it we see God's mercy, our sinfulness, and the persistent unfinishedness of the Church—so in this, it has been a blessing.

One thing I am consistently surprised about, though, is the pervasiveness of modern psychology in the midst of conflict between Christians. Phrases like, "You've broken my trust in you/him/her/it," "I was wrong, but...," and "You shouldn't have waited until I'd sinned five times in this way before coming to me." It makes me wonder, truly, how broken is our theology if these are the words coming out of our mouths?

**You've broken my trust.** One of the best men I know is a biblical counselor across the street from my Texas church family. He told me once, "The bible never says we ought to have faith in another person, it only says we should place it in God." To displace my faith from another person is actually a good thing—it points me toward a God who cannot and will not fail. When our "trust has been broken" in another human, be encouraged, it was never meant to rest on them. Trust God.

**I'm sorry, but...** The most beautiful thing about repentance is there is no "but..." after the brokenness. To add a "but you..." or "but they..." after our admission of guilt (no matter how justified we may feel in our counter-accusation), takes away the weight we're *meant* to feel in our mourning over sin and the staggering beauty of a God before whom we stand fully approved and full loved as his children. One of my favorite passages on our response to sin is when Paul says to the Corinthians, "Ought you not rather mourn?!" So often we apologize and run quickly to a counter attack or run quickly to a false sense of security. Brothers and

sisters, there is no security in coming out on top. Do not consider equality as something to be grasped, become obedient to death. He raises to life.

**You should have told me sooner.** There are two sorts of people in conflict that I'm observing: the first tends toward quick righteousness and the second tends toward prolonged grace. In the midst of conflict, the latter typically will overlook a matter (to God's glory) four, five, six times before finally coming to the brothers or sister and entreating them to righteousness. The former who desires quick righteousness typically responds, "Why didn't you come to me sooner!?" and so excuses their sin. Friends, overlook a matter, as much as it depends on you, extend grace, pursue peace, forgive seventy times seven *without saying a word*. The modern concept is that if we bottle up our feelings we're somehow doing ourselves a disservice and betraying our hearts. I have good news for you: God holds every one of your tears in his capable hands, He knows them and cares for them and has paid for every one of your sins—even the ones five times back. When you cover a multitude of sins with the love of God, you are not doing a disservice to yourself or to the accused. It is kindness that draws us to the throne and love that keeps us there.

Make no mistake, Christian, our theology is on display in the midst of conflict. Our belief in the gospel and its permeation in our lives comes through in those confrontations, apologies, stalemates, and arguments. God, the ultimate reconciler, though, has given us clear directives for the ministry of reconciliation. Conflict does not surprise or bewilder Him, He has made a way and set an ultimate example of humility, obedience, and persistence through His Son. Trust Him. Believe Him. We will always be disappointed by people but never by Christ.

**“Because it is the nature of love to create, a marriage itself is something which has to be created, so that, together we become a new creature.”**

**MADELEINE L'ENGLE**

*these extraordinary pains  
and the ordinary days*

G.K. Chesterton said, “The most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man and an ordinary woman and their ordinary children,” but we don't much like that do we? It's been a weekend where I've been laying low for multiple reasons, the principle of which is I miscarried again and the secondary of which is I slipped on black ice and have a swollen scraped knee to prove it. I was meant to be at my brother from another mother's wedding this weekend in New York, but canceled my flight at the last moment because the church family here had a week for the books. It's really been seven months for the books—my books at least—but this was the culmination of it, and when your job is to shepherd, you don't abdicate when the storms howl around the flock.

Nate still can't find full-time work.

I came home from the member meeting at church yesterday and fell into bed and cried the sort of tears we reserve for death of a loved one or agony of the

deepest kind. The sort where you hyperventilate and your husband can't fix anything so he just lies beside you and rubs small circles into your back. I mostly cried but said words too, words I probably didn't mean and some words I probably did.

Half our friends say the first year of marriage is the hardest, but we think marriage is a breeze, it's all the other things that are the hardest.

He read the Chesterton quote aloud to me a few weeks ago and we've come around and around to it, in these horrible ordinary days. Both of us have believed the lie that if you work hard things will go well for you, if you honor those around you, you will be honored, if you pursue your passions, you will do your passions. We are unafraid of hard work, honoring those ahead of us, and the pursuit of passions. But what we have found is vanity of vanities, it's all vanities. These things themselves are not useless pastimes, but they certainly aren't the guarantee of extraordinary lives. My pastor in Texas said once, "You can't put God in your debt," and also we can't put life in our debt either.

Circumstances are not what we planned, nothing about this year has been what we hoped for or thought we'd gain. Here we have been small and faithful people with secreted hopes for greatness. But that is not the Kingdom is it? The backwards upside down kingdom.

Tonight we lit candles and ate pizza from a box, and joked about how this might be our last meal and when we should put the house on the market. I have emailed a realtor on the east coast and Nate has put in months of 60 hour weeks applying and interviewing. There is nothing glamorous in these ordinary days. They are beautiful



because they are life, but they are painful, disastrous even, and not at all what we thought they would be.

Earlier this year in the three month whirlwind, where everything good was happening and as quickly as it possibly could, I remember saying to the Lord, "It is so good to feel your love so tangibly these days, but I hope I remember it when everything good isn't happening." I think a lot about Job these days. I have walked through many painful months and years before, but never saw myself as kin to him, but now I do. The difference is I trust God in these pains, and though he slay me, still I will trust him. And it makes all the difference.

For the ordinary people in the painful ordinary days, trusting Him—and not our plan—is the extraordinary difference.

*this is the one you'll  
marry*

I was 20, driving down the roads with the windows open with two of my closest friends. It was summer, maybe fall, maybe mid-afternoon, maybe midnight. We sang along with the Dixie Chicks, lyrics about being taken away, flying as high as the wild blue, "closer to heaven and closer to you." We all dreamed in our particular ways of that someday cowboy. He didn't look like a cowboy for any of us, but the dream of the man was there. Romance, high heights, wide open spaces — we were well versed in dreams. Both of my friends married within five years of then, neither of them to cowboys, but both to good men, faithful men, men who work hard, own their own businesses, men who have fathered their growing broods of children. It was 15 years for me, but the dream was never too far off. I knew he wouldn't be a cowboy, but I still wanted to be taken away, treasured, and cherished in some alternate view of what was real and tangible and difficult right in front of me.

Around the same time we were listening to Dixie Chicks on the country roads, all three of us were also reading Elisabeth Elliot's [Let Me Be a Woman](#). I didn't retain all the content from the book, but there were four chapters I have never forgotten, and I wish every woman — single or married — would read those four chapters.

Elisabeth, the woman who had not one but three husbands, had to have been somewhat of an authority on these things and yet, the very recognition of them shows her understanding of her own humanity. She tells her readers that if they marry, to remember four things about the person they marry:

**1. If you marry, you marry a sinner.** You cannot escape the sheer fact that your spouse will sin against you and in front of you. He or she will fail you time and time again in certain areas. You will feel acutely the weight of their sin by the fact that covenant have made you one. The comfort in this is that you are also a sinner and you can approach the throne of grace together.

**2. If you marry, you marry a man/woman.** You marry someone who is perfectly designed to be just that. Ill-equipped, very literally, to be anything but what they are created to be. And that means that he may not understand why you fuss with makeup, but will probably appreciate it. And you may not understand why he keeps ratty t-shirts from high-school, but you'll appreciate it too. He won't want to share every detail of his day and you won't understand his primal urges. That's okay. You're not supposed to be the same. You're intrinsically and uniquely different.

**3. If you marry, you'll be married to a husband/wife.** This means, simply, wives, you submit to your husband, not to every man who has leadership gifts. And husbands, you're called to love and cherish your wife, not every girl who looks at you with need. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't want to join together in helping your single sisters and brothers out, but you weren't meant to do that with every man or woman. Just one.

**4. If you marry, you marry a person.** A real, live, living, breathing, thinking human being. With feelings. And needs. Some as simple as eating three times a day, some as complicated as being heard thoroughly and fully. But it's a person. Just that. A person. Simple.

It's fun to dream—even secretly—about the spouse you may someday have or the spouse you wish your spouse would be, but at the end of the day, he or she is just a man or woman, they are just a sinner, they will simply be a husband or a wife, and they will be just human. They're spectacularly special, but they're not epitome of your dreams, the likeness of lyrics, or the fairy tale you've always



dreamed of. They're yours and they're God's—and you will walk through heartbreak, lost dreams, dirty laundry, broken glasses, and burnt dinners. I thought I wanted a cowboy to take me away, but at the end of it, what I found was a man who works hard, is faithful to God, leads me gently, and always comes home at the end of the day. He is a sinner, a man, a person, and a husband, nothing more, nothing less.

**“He who finds  
a wife finds a  
good thing and  
obtains favor  
from the  
Lord.”**

PROVERBS 18:22

*why sex isn't the best  
thing ever*

One of the best blessings to me in my singleness were friends who did not make marriage an ultimate thing in my eyes by only telling me the beautiful parts of their marriage, but who told me the difficulties of it as well. They also prayed for me actively to someday have the gift of marriage. I hope I am doing the same for my still single friends who desire the gift. I want them to know its not all romance and intimacy and good feelings and great conversation. But I also want them to experience the gift themselves so they can both see it and minister out of it. One thing it is very easy to believe during the long fast from sexual intimacy that is godward singleness, is the *option* to have sex will make things better. Most of us wouldn't be so foolish to say having sex makes things better, but it's darn easy to believe the option and permission to will make it better.

But sex doesn't make things better.

Not in the way you think it will.

Sex is good, God created it, he blessed it. He made it the integral piece in the procreation of humanity—science thwarts it and succeeds it but even science admits the masterful design of two humans making more humans. Sex is great, but it does not make all the angsts of longing for intimacy before marriage go away. All those angsts still exist within marriage, they just take different forms.

I know it's easy for the married person to say this, you protest, because at the end of the day I can still have sex. But what I wish I could tell every unmarried person I know is until we realize our issues are much deeper and more profound than a sexual itch for satisfaction, we will still find our desires unmet. Within marriage and without.

The blessing of sex between a husband and wife is not to relieve stress, to make me feel desirable, or to make my husband feel strong and manly. It is not even to conceive and bear children. These are all benefits, but none of them are guarantees. God doesn't owe us relief from stress apart from him, the guarantee I will always feel desirable (I don't), my husband will feel capable and sufficient (he doesn't), or children will be borne. God doesn't even owe us sex within marriage. None of the things we think sex will accomplish (and indeed try to chase inside and outside marriage), are guarantees.

When I hear those who are not married say "But at least you get to have sex! And live with your best friend!" Well, first, I'd warn against saying at least in regard to much. But second I want to say your words betray a much, much deeper need and the fact that you think sex or living with your best friend fixes it tells me you don't see your need as clearly as you think. If you think I'm just saying this

because I'm married, trust me, I've been *saying things like this for years and years as a single*.

I've heard the illustration of the gift of sex for a man and woman in marriage like this: it's glue holding you together. But in my limited view sex is more like a reminder: I am not my own anymore, I am part of someone and sex is a tether to remind, seal, and strengthen the binding. Outside of marriage there would actually be no reason or benefit for sex because union with this specific person—my husband—*doesn't exist*. What I mean is, until he was my husband, he wasn't my husband and sex wasn't necessary (*1 Corinthians 7:2*).

I know this sounds very pragmatic but I want to be a bit pragmatic if I can. Our view of sex has been so colored by films and imaginations and images, and in many ways I want to sit down and say: sex just isn't as great as you think it is, and we don't need it like we think we do. It's greatness is not in how it makes us feel or how it destresses us or how awesome our orgasm is. It is only truly *good* in relation to the person with whom our body is intended by God to be joined with. Can sex outside of marriage feel good? Yup. Can masturbation curb the itch? Yup. But do either of them express worship of God with the gift He's given in the right context of covenant? No. Therefore, outside marriage it is not good. And inside marriage it is only good if it points to our incompleteness apart from God.

Unmarried friends, the sex you desire and think will satisfy your longing will not. Married friends, you still feel unsatisfied? Like your longing for *something* is never fully realized? All of this emptiness points to a greater need and a greater longing. Sex within marriage, if anything, makes the lack of complete culmination even more profound because no matter how perfect it is, it still isn't enough to still



the longing in our hearts for God. Fasting from intimacy outside of marriage is preparation for how even within marriage we are still apart from our Groom until the culmination of all things.

My need is for Christ. In marriage and out. Sex is a gift from God but it isn't the ultimate gift and it certainly doesn't come without baggage of its own. We live in a broken world, my friend. If it doesn't feel perfect it's because it's not, and it's okay. Christ, our perfection, knows our longings and knows we are dust.

And that's better than sex.

*clear dances done in the  
sight of heaven*

I have dreamed of doing laundry for a long time. I dreamed of a washing machine near my kitchen, the table piled high with his and hers and theirs, the backyard with a line strung through it, billowing sheets and hand-towels and discreet underthings with the sun bleaching everything to near new. I dreamed of what that laundry meant and how it would be proof that life had settled and moved into a rhythm, not an easy one, but a known one. The poet, Richard Wilbur, says, "Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry / Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam / And clear dances done in the sight of heaven," so I cannot help myself for romanticizing it. Since I first read this poem I knew that if Love ever called me to the things of this world, this was the thing I wanted to be called to: nothing on earth but laundry, his and hers and theirs.

I think of this today and every day now because we live in a rental house where the laundry is tucked in a narrow closet in a small back room upstairs, where the

doors aren't level and never stay opened or closed, depending on what I want them to do. And where the washer, and the dryer above it, are barely large enough for a single load of hand-towels. The dryer finishes with a buzz so loud you can hear it on our back porch and front porch too. And the floors aren't level and so for 45 minutes while the washer cleans, it also shakes our home near to falling apart. Every day I wonder, "Will this be the day it comes crashing through to the kitchen below?" This is not the laundry I imagined doing with my life.

I cried hard today on the phone with my husband. I knew I would before he called, I knew if he mentioned a certain string of words he is prone to mentioning these days in a certain order that all the things inside of me would break and be nudged out of their crevices and I would cry.

Richard Wilbur wrote also "The soul shrinks / From all that it is about to remember, / From the punctual rape of every blessed day," and I used to think I knew what that meant. Before the laundry of my life—and not my dreams—became reality. I imagine rows of people lining up to say in my general direction, but not to me, "I told her so." I falter. I fall.

This is not the laundry I imagined once: the sort billowing on clotheslines in the backyards of cabins or farmhouses or small bungalows; the sort worn by people who knew a hard day's work, but knew how to rest too; the sort where the lights and the darks never landed in the same heap in the corner of the closet, and where they always landed in baskets and not heaps in the corners of the closet to begin with.

This laundry is loud and hard and long and mixed and never ending. It is everywhere and always and all the time. It is folded and put away and then

**“Sometimes our life reminds me  
of a forest in which there is a graceful clearing  
and in that opening a house,  
an orchard and garden,  
comfortable shades, and flowers  
red and yellow in the sun, a pattern  
made in the light for the light to return to.  
The forest is mostly dark, its ways  
to be made anew day after day, the dark  
richer than the light and more blessed,  
provided we stay brave  
enough to keep on going in.”**

**WENDELL BERRY**

tomorrow it is in need of wash again. It never ends. It is the "punctual rape of every blessed day" and today I break with it. The washer is pounding itself into the wall again and the dog is barking downstairs and the door won't stay open long enough for me to hold a basket and go out of it. There is work to be done for others and work to be done for myself and I am still wearing the shorts I pulled on at 5:47 this morning. I have not brushed my teeth. I have had three cups of coffee and three wide mouth Mason jars of water and the dog won't stop whining and my husband and I are disagreeing in a frustratingly agreeable way and now the dryer is buzzing three times at me and I crumble because this is not the laundry I imagined.

I bring the basket of clean clothes into our closet and pull the necks of shirts over the cedar hangers. I catch a scent different than detergent. The scent of my husband. His dress shirts hanging above with a new rule instated by me: wear your shirts more than once because I cannot make laundry my whole life. I gather them in my hands and pull them close and inhale. The smell of work and soap and laundry and him, my love, my thing of this world.

Love does call us to the things of this world and it looks more like "clear dances done in the sight of heaven" than I thought it would. Quiet faithfulness, echoing silence, long days, little praise, the presence of God and a puppy and not much else. This was not the laundry I imagined, but it may be the laundry I needed.

## *two becoming one*

I've already written [on this one pretty extensively](#), but I want to delve a bit more in the practicality of it today. A short recap though: marriage is not  $1+1=1$ , as we're led to believe. It's messier math than we'd like, more like  $(1-1)+(1-1)=1$ . We empty ourselves, pouring our lives out for one another, and only through sacrificial love and overarching servant-heartedness, are we able to become one with our spouse. It is not so glorious—or sexual—as I envisioned before marriage, when I thought becoming one was some sort of allusion to consummation. It is, but it's a whole lot more of becoming a whole lot less. The good news is that, hopefully, someday the one flesh unit you've become is a solid and impenetrable one. We're not there yet, but we're learning, day by day. Yesterday I wrote about schedules and how our schedule is to serve the other's schedule, but on a deeper, heart level, what does that mean? It means entering into conflict without entering into competition.

I came into marriage with very real fears that every conflict would be loud, heated, and harsh, because this was the example I had growing up. Nate came into

marriage determined to not repeat his sins from before, conflict was nonexistent until it was impossible to ignore, he never spoke up about anything, and was passive in his leadership. I feared conflict and he feared the lack of it. God, in His sovereignty though, has given us plenty of it in the first 17 months of our marriage. I remarked to him the other day that what we've walked through in the past year is more than what most people married for fifteen years walk through. It's like God is playing catch-up with our marriage, bringing us to the place most of our peers are in. (That's a joke. Kind of.)

How do two whole people, with whole opinions and histories and beliefs and visions, dissipate and become one whole unit?

To be honest, I have no idea. Really. No idea. I think it's a mystery. But here are two things I have to remember often:

### **Conflict is good**

I've realized that most of the *bad* conflict or lack of it, that we've experienced is mostly in the way the words are said, not in the words themselves. It is good and right to say, "I don't like this," or "I prefer this," or "I've had a really hard day." But it is not good or right to say those things in order to wound, to assert rights, or to compete with one another. I have not learned this well, but it actually serves my husband when I say, "I do have a preference and this is what it is," otherwise he's flying blind. In a new marriage this can be really scary because it's all heart eye emojis and inside jokes until it isn't. As soon as you say you have a preference, and especially if you know his preference is different, you've entered conflict. But heart eye emojis and inside jokes cannot a marriage grow. We need good, healthy, measured conflict. Nate and I have made some Really Big, Really Hard, Really

Deep mistakes this year because we didn't know how to speak the language of conflict good, so instead, we just kept quiet. Learning the language of conflict is one of the best things we can do in a new marriage. We do that two ways: watching those who do it well and doing it ourselves.

**Con means *against*, but also *with***

I've been learning that the more I am against Nate in something, and by against, I mean our two opinions pressed up against one another, the more of me gets shaved off. This is what the Bible calls "iron sharpening iron." By allowing the againstness of conflict chip off the parts of me that keep us from being one flesh, I become less and less of my former unmarried self. Don't let anyone tell you, newly married person, that the process isn't painful. It is just as painful as becoming the healthy, whole, vibrant person you were before you got married. Just as painful. Sanctification in marriage isn't harder than singleness, but it is different, mainly in that you're starting over in a lot of ways.

I envision it like this and maybe this will help you: We are two whole little wooden figurines before marriage and then we come together and the process of conflict shaves off pieces of us, which fall to the ground. We have always thought of ourselves as whole as the figurines, so it doesn't occur to us to look at the shavings below and think of them as any consequence, but what is actually happening is at the end of this process, the shavings below are imperceptible from one another. They—with all their pieces of conflict, hurt, joy, preference, and desire—are the new unit, the little wooden figurines are no more. That's the process of sanctification in marriage, the two becoming one. The analogy breaks down of



course, but while it works, it works. And it helps me to not look at those scraps on the floor as wasted.

I think of John Piper's words,

*"Not only is all your affliction momentary, not only is all your affliction light in comparison to eternity and the glory there. But all of it is totally meaningful. Every millisecond of your pain, from the fallen nature or fallen man, every millisecond of your misery in the path of obedience is producing a peculiar glory you will get because of that.*

*I don't care if it was cancer or criticism. I don't care if it was slander or sickness. It wasn't meaningless. It's doing something! It's not meaningless. Of course you can't see what it's doing. Don't look to what is seen.*

*When your mom dies, when your kid dies, when you've got cancer at 40, when a car careens into the sidewalk and takes her out, don't say, "That's meaningless!" It's not. It's working for you an eternal weight of glory.*

*Therefore, therefore, do not lose heart. But take these truths and day by day focus on them. Preach them to yourself every morning. Get alone with God and preach his word into your mind until your heart sings with confidence that you are new and cared for."*

...

I hope that encourages us today, newly married sisters, as we look at the scraps of life falling below us. He's doing something with them. All this conflict is working in us a better marriage, a more whole one. Even if our marriages are without a lot of conflict and are peaceful havens, the world is coming at us a thousand miles a second, and the enemy crouches at our door waiting to rule over

us. In the infancy of this union, friend, let's be sisters who are gentle with our words, faithful with our words, and honest with our words. Our husbands will thank us and it will be a sweet fragrance to our God.



*m a r r i a g e   i s   a s   o n e   l o n g  
c o n v e r s a t i o n*

The old philosopher said, "Marriage is as one long conversation. When marrying you should ask yourself this question: do you believe you are going to enjoy talking with this woman into your old age? Everything else in a marriage is transitory, but most of the time you're together will be devoted to conversation." The old philosopher was right, but as with all bits of rightness, it ought to be understood in its place.

I have always known marriage was not an easy conversation. I am of Scotch-Irish descent; men in my family love their beer and asserting opinions, and as for the women, there's a demure outside but on the inside it's all fire and spit. Most conversations were spent seeing who could talk the loudest the longest without throwing the first punch—even if the punch was merely metaphorical.

When I began to grow outside the incubator of family alone, I saw the long conversation of marriage through a different lens. These marriages were built on

the scaffolding of details: who is supposed to be where and when and how, who needs to be picked up, what's for dinner, what should we do about this child or that one. There was an ordinariness to the conversations of marriage, unaccompanied by emotive, defensive jabs at the other. It seemed simplistic. I know now it's because I was not in the middle of those marriages as I was in the middle of the marriages in my family, and when we are in the middle of something all our own, we see all its inconsistencies and broken-places.

As I stepped into adulthood and was able to see my skewed perspective of childhood and adolescence both, I began to see marriage *was* a long conversation, but the tone of voice could change it from a pleasant one to a violent one. Armed with this newfound knowledge of tone, intention, nuance, and even love, I began to assume all the long conversations of marriage could be blissful. A constant sharing of ideas and delights and hurts and confusions, a true partnership. Whenever I thought of being married it was the long conversation I looked forward to most.

Marriage has been that for me and Nate. The cusp of our friendship was on deep conversation, leading to dates full of long, easy talks, quiet pauses, intentional listening, and slow responses. *This* was the long conversation of marriage I wanted, I could see that clearly from our first date.

The long conversations become subject to the tyranny of the urgent, though, as most things can. A few weeks ago there were twelve decisions that needed to be made and seven of them required quick conversations but the other five required depth, time, focus, and charity. We were short on all of that, though, and so if the conversations were going to be had, they were going to be had on the surface,

quickly, while we multi-tasked, and were short with one another. As with most conversations built on bedrocks like that, we needed to repent later to one another.

The urgent doesn't let up, though, does it? There is always someone who needs an answer or *thinks* they need an answer, or wants one. There is always something that must be signed up for or paid or responded to or agreed upon. There is always something left unfinished, unsaid, unsealed. I have learned to say to others, "I want to talk to Nate about that first," but the *when* of talking sometimes comes slowly or is mingled among the other conversations, never finished.

Nate and I practice (and by practice, I mean we are very unproficient at this and must practice) the discipline of saying "No," to ourselves, our minds, our friends, and the tyranny of the urgent. If, in saying no, we find ourselves disappointed or others disappointed by our lack of a quick answer—this is the discipline of the practice. This is the sacrifice, the hurt, the pain. This is where we admit to ourselves and to others that we are not God, as much as we sometimes think we would like to be.

I think about Jesus in John 16. He says to his disciples and friends, "*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you.*" I think about how often we fill conversation simply because we do not want to feel the lack of the incarnate Christ and we do not want to wait for the Holy Spirit to do what only he can do. We are uncomfortable with the long silences, afraid the Spirit will not do what He does: move.

Yesterday morning, in the early hours of our day of rest, Nate mentioned some conversations we've left unfinished this week, answers others expect. And then he said this: I want to pray about these things, ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom,

humility, and a direction, even more than we simply talk about them. And then, for the rest of the day, we didn't talk about things we could not solve on that day. We left space for the Spirit to enter in, give peace or withhold it.

Marriage is one long conversation, but it is not, primarily, a conversation between two, but three. If we find the conversation to be focused on just two, it may go the brawling way of my family, or it may go the stoic way of my checklisting friends. But, I think, if we move ourselves away from one another for a moment, stop talking and begin listening, not primarily to one another but to the Holy Spirit, we may find that conversation more robust, full, and gentle than we could have imagined before. We may leave more things unfinished, more things unsaid, more events unattended, and more lists unchecked, but I do not think we will leave less full.



**LORE FERGUSON WILBERT IS WALKING  
A SLOW, IMPERFECT JOURNEY OF**

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