

September 2009

Dear Friends,

Just this morning Stasi and I were talking about marriages we know, and we came to a pretty sobering realization – we can't name one marriage that hasn't been through deep waters in the last three years. Not one. And we know a lot of people, and a lot of marriages. You'd think we'd be able to point to some couple who is trouble free. We can't find one. *Not one*. Every single marriage we know is either currently struggling, or they've just passed through some major struggle, or they've thrown in the towel. What's with *that*?

Is it just a bad time to be married, like the 90's were a bad time to live in Rwanda? Is it a bad time for marriage generally, like last fall was a bad time to be in the stock market? Or, maybe it's something else. Maybe there's something about marriage, something inherent to it, that we'd all do well to go ahead and admit, face head-on, come to terms with. Marriage is fabulously hard.

Everybody who's been married knows this. Though years into marriage it still catches us off guard, all of us. And newly married couples, when they discover how hard it is, they seem genuinely surprised. Shocked, and disheartened by the fact. *Are we doing something wrong? Did I marry the right person?* The sirens that lure us into marriage – romance, love, passion, sex, longing, companionship – they seem so far from the actual reality of married life we fear we've made a colossal mistake, caught the wrong bus, missed our flight. And so the hardness also comes as something of an embarrassment (don't you feel embarrassed to admit how hard your marriage is?). *Maybe it's just us*.

Nope. This is everyone. We might as well come out and say it.

The sooner we get the shame and confusion off our backs, the sooner we'll find our way through. Of course marriage is hard. For heaven's sake, bring together a man and a woman – two creatures who think, act and feel so differently you'd think they'd come from separate solar systems – and ask them to get along for the rest of their lives under the same roof. That's like taking Cinderella and Huck Finn, tossing them in a submarine and closing the hatch. What did you think would happen?

When it comes to high-level expeditions, one piece of advice that veterans unanimously urge is this: "Choose your tent mate carefully." For you are going to spend weeks to months on end shut-in by foul weather in the forced intimacy of a tiny fabric cocoon with this person. By the time it's over everything about them will drive you mad – the way they eat, the way they breathe, the way they hum show tunes or pick their nails. To keep yourselves from a Donnor party ending, you must start with people you are utterly compatible with.

God does the opposite – he *puts us* with our opposite. Our mutual brokenness plays off of each other so perfectly it's frightening. It's like throwing a dog and a cat in a dryer. Is he absolutely mad? Why would God do such a thing?

Because marriage is a divine conspiracy. It is a conspiracy divinely arranged and with divine intent. God lures us into marriage through love and sex and loneliness, or simply the fact that someone

finally paid attention – all those reasons that you got married in the first place. It doesn't really matter, he'll do whatever it takes. He lures us into marriage and then he uses it to *transform us*.

Come back to the fairy tales – in every one of those stories, the boy and the girl each carry a fatal flaw. If they refuse their transformation – which is essential to the plot of the story – they'll never make it. Evil will win, they will lose heart and split up, and there will be no happily ever after. Beauty and the Beast, The Horse and His Boy, The Golden Key – in every one of those stories, happily ever after waits upon a peculiar turn of events, at the center of which is their transformation.

We all have a style of relating, we have a way that we do life. Our carefully crafted approach colors the way we work, the way we love, the way we handle stress and the way we look for life. Our style is borne out of brokenness and sin, and it is *the number one thing* that gets in the way of real love and companionship, the shared adventure and all the beauty of marriage. It's really this simple – the number one thing that gets in the way is your way. And we have absolutely no intention of giving it up. Not even to love. So God creates an environment where we have to. It's called marriage.

Now listen carefully – God wants us to be happy. He really does. He simply knows that until we deal with our brokenness, our sin, and our style of relating, we aren't going to be happy. Nobody around us is going to be very happy, either. Most of what you've been experiencing in the last twelve months is God's attempt to get you to face your style of relating, and repent of it.

This is the old Christian understanding of the world, the understanding that happiness is the fruit of other things, chief among them our own holiness, and so we *must* undergo a transformation. Just like the fairy tales, we must share in God's holiness before the story is finished. This flies in the face of the more popular view of the world that's crept in recently – the happiness view. This is the idea that frames most people's expectations of marriage (and everything else) – the view that we're here for our happiness and so you'd better make me happy. It comes as quite a disruption when we begin to realize that God might have other things in mind!

But once we *accept* the plot of the conspiracy – our transformation – then we can get on with cooperating with God, and that opens the door to all sorts of good things.

This is an excerpt from the book Stasi and I just finished on marriage, entitled *Love and War*. It comes out at the end of the year. But we thought we might begin sharing some of it with you now. We think everyone – married and single – will find the themes true and helpful.

Thanks for all your love, prayers and support!! We couldn't do this without you!



John