



**by Janet Chester Bly**

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Justin and Jessica seem the ideal couple.

Jessica's an ex-cheerleader. A former student body president. And now's a marine biologist. Justin graduated from the Air Force academy. Served his time. Now works as an executive for an airplane manufacturer.

They had a lovely wedding. All the little girls in their church announced, "I want to find a husband like Justin and have a wedding like Jessica's."

But the two of them felt the need for pastoral counseling six months later. "No big problem," Jessica assured their pastor. "Just a lot of little things that don't seem quite right. It hasn't been what we thought it would be," she added.

"Yeah," Justin agreed, "are we doing something wrong?"

Pastor Kim assured them they were quite normal.

What Justin and Jessica now face is the long, joyful process of learning to be each other's best friend.

Then there's Abby's story.

She did everything perfect. She stayed chaste until marriage. She chose Ryan who had the same politics, accent and faith. They plotted in detail their first years—how much money they'd earn, who would work where, when the children would come and how many. All Abby's expectations had been met.

But just before their tenth anniversary, Ryan changed. He wanted a different career. He talked about living in another part of the country. He grew a straggly beard and got tattooed on his behind. Abby's perfect life shook something terrible. She wonders who's that stranger in her bed. She waits. She hopes. She tries to understand. And she prays Ryan will return to how he was. When that appears promising, something else pops up to alarm her. Like he wants to buy

a Harley and take her with him on a cross-country road trip.

Abby's had to start all over to figure Ryan out. Little irritations cause her to fear their marriage is over, that she can never love him again. Problem is, she's never had to be flexible before. She's never had to adjust to changes in their relationship. Now she feels so lost, so alone, so . . .unmarried.

What would you say to Abby? What would you do if you were in her place?

## STAGES & SEASONS

Relationships in growing spurts can feel like a roller coaster ride. Couples 'growing up' can be done together, apart, or not at all. It's about bumpy transitions, dizzy changes and the tilt of seasons. Stages and seasons have to do with how long you've been together, how old

you were when you got together, and your age now. It's about how much different stuff you've been through.

There's all sorts of seasons. There's a sundry of stages. The honeymoon . . . the periods of pregnancy . . . the various phases of the kids . . . the empty nest syndrome . . . the midlife syndrome . . . retirement bridges. Add to that job switches, going back to school, moves, facing illness or depression, dealing with loss, adjusting to libido cycles. Each decade provides its own surprises, its own grounds for conflict resolutions, its own shuffles to get used to. Cold winter passages. Stressful summer deadlines. Aging autumn impasses. As well as amazing spring renewals which you welcome to intrude any season. Life's rarely static.

Be forewarned that where you begin can alter, fluctuate, twist. change. All marriages should come with signs that read: Possible Detours Ahead. All carefully crafted plans are Subject to Change, with little advance notice. Flexibility essential. Compromise necessary.

The authors of the book *The Dance-Away Lover* claim there's three cycles in most lifetime relationships: 1) falling in love, 2) falling out of love, 3) falling back in love. The last cycle may be one of the most ambitious restoration projects known to mankind. A high level of difficulty in the doing, but assures precious rewards. Like a mountain spring that gushes forth fresh, sparkling water. Like spiritual renewal. The rediscovered awe of first love, only better, deeper. No delusions left.

But it doesn't just happen, like the initial time around. This venture demands motivated effort and patience, concentrated time and honesty, pleas for understanding and heartfelt prayer. God will give you love for your partner if you seek Him. Heaven's got to intervene and convert the hardened human heart. That's when you get a born-again marriage. A peace-full house. A safe haven home.

## MARRIAGE—The Ultimate Invasion of Privacy

Matrimony. . .launches a fierce and unrelenting attack upon the fortress



**If something's off track in your relationship, be as honest with yourself and him as you can about where you are. Make sure you're rested, that your mind's clear, before you approach him. Start there, wherever that is. Seek any help available. Apply any adjustments you can, from your side.**



### **Fissure Forming Test**

**The following statements are common symptoms of a relationship that's shifting, that needs an attitude adjustment. Which ones sound most like yours?**

**-- My best friend's got a great husband and mine is nothing like hers (Comparison)**

**-- We used to be much closer. Now we seem to be going our separate ways (Stagnation)**

**-- We can never agree on what I deem important—like disciplining the kids, spending money, sex, religious commitment (Disunity)**

**-- I shouldn't have to put up with his constant putdowns (Disrespect)**

**-- I have needs that aren't being met. I feel unfulfilled (Frustration)**

**In what other ways does your relationship center around comparison, stagnation, disunity, disrespect, or frustration?**

of the ego, upon that place in a person which craves privacy, independence, self-sufficiency, lack of interference.

Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, pg.17

Despite the mass influx of those who eschew legal, social and moral niceties and just pack it in and live together, most romancers still do licensed marriage. Though the original intent by the Master Designer has been marred, as Al Janssen puts it in *The Marriage Masterpiece*, "by modern deviations and unauthorized revisions," it's still the Grand Adventure for those willing to test love to its limits, to give sacrifice and unselfishness a chance to glow to a high sheen.

Marriage itself is a fluid relationship: "two lives being played out against one another in a covenant of loving cooperation" (Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, pg.19). Growing, changing, it's a breathing entity, an "interaction between a man and woman who are seeking the warmth and richness of the shared life" (David and Vera Mace).

Marriage has too often been portrayed as two people frozen together side by side, as immobile as marble statues. . .it is the intricate and graceful cooperation of two dancers who through long practice have learned to match each other's movements and moods in response to the music of the spheres. David and Vera Mace, *We Can Have Better Marriages If We Really Want Them*, p.9

All the married folks we know either have a good growing friendship and keep diligent to continue to build it. . .or they have a lousy friendship and know something must happen soon or they're finished. Whether you've been married five years or fifty, friendship's essential to make marriage work. But some couples don't stay friends. Why is it?

## **Reasons Friendships With Lovers Fail**

### **You confuse proximity with friendship**

Living together doesn't guarantee fraternity. That's like planting a hubcap and hoping to grow a Corvette. Or expecting that all siblings will like each other. Or that all roommates will be best buds.

Tony and Natalie spent ten years with a counselor. They never seemed to get past their long series of complaints. "He doesn't care about anyone but himself." "She is always too critical of me." "I can't take it anymore." "I shouldn't have to put up with this."

After the kids grew up and moved out, after twenty-eight years of bickering, they decided to call it quits. They realized they didn't like being around each other. They had little in

common. Not only did they not consider themselves friends, they deemed the other their worst enemy. All those years living in the same house, eating at the same table, sleeping in the same bed, crying over the same problems, they never became friends.

### **You undervalue friendship with your mate**

In describing the perfect marriage, these priorities make the lists: finances, sexual compatibility, life-styles, cultural and social similarities. Some will go as far as to say, "Friendship in marriage? That's no big deal. You can develop a friendship with most anyone."

Jerry was a fire captain in Phoenix. At forty-six years old, he succumbed to the fashionable trauma of having a mid-life crisis. Faster cars, younger women, and freedom convinced him to abandon his wife, Sarah, and the kids. Jerry settled on a silver Dodge Viper, condo in Scottsdale, and gold chains around his neck. He dyed his graying hair and sported brightly colored surfing shirts. He also invited a young thing to move in with him. "She's nothing like Sarah," he told us.

He was right about that. Sarah had borne him four children, one whom died at six months. She'd gained thirty pounds. Her three teens kept her very busy, especially now that she raised them alone. She was intelligent and attractive. But she admitted to being too demanding at times.

Jerry's twenty-three year old gal looked great in a bikini. She thought Jerry "rocked." She liked driving an open T-top, taking trips to Las Vegas, and wearing slinky gowns. She clung to Jerry's arm wherever they went. "She's so different than Sarah," Jerry repeats.

Eleven days after the divorce, Jerry re-married. Five months later, he called us to announce it was all over. He couldn't live with his new wife anymore. "I'm on disability from the fire department. I took the crew to a wrong address on an emergency call. I got so flustered, I forgot what to do next." Then he began to describe the relationship with his new wife and how much he missed Sarah. "We have nothing in common. There's nothing to talk about."

What he missed most was Sarah's friendship—all the history they shared and related to, the daily give-and-take of common interests and simple understandings. "I need to start over and get back with Sarah," he moaned. But it was too late.

### **You neglect spiritual wisdom**

God instituted marriage. It was His idea. He knows how to make it work.

Tony and Natalie, Jerry and Sarah each claim to be Christians. But they've rejected seeking guidance for their relationships in the Bible. Such as, understanding the roles of a husband and wife. Realizing how important marriage is in the whole scheme. Studying the principles and practical tips for how to make and keep friendships.

Here's a sampling of scriptural suggestions for how to treat your best friend.

### **Be your mate's helper.**

"And the Lord God said, 'It isn't good for man to be alone; I will make a companion for him, a helper suited to his needs'" (Genesis 2:18 TLB).

A friend to a lonely man. To walk alongside him. In a way that's helpful to him.

One summer we decided to put up lots of wallpaper. It was Steve's job to clean the walls, cut and soak the paper, balance on the chair, get the paper stuck to the walls, roll out the air bubbles, brush and sponge down the paper, make sure it was properly aligned with the previous section, and keep the excess paste from dripping on the carpet.

My job? To pick out the paper at the store, then sit on a stool and watch Steve hang it. Not much help? In that specific job, in our particular home, that is exactly the kind of help he needed. When Steve flies through a room with wallpaper, he needs someone to talk to—and no

one in his way. A helper suitable for him.

### **Let him lead.**

“Wives, be subject—adapt yourselves—to your own husbands as [a service] to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22 MSG)

Adapt—adjust, figure out what’s suitable, modify some words and actions, accommodate his quests and queries and even his quirks. Volunteer some of your own rights. Offer your opinions, but respect his. Be his confidant and counselor. Express every bit of wisdom you know. His leadership skills will improve with your input. Then give your full support.

### **Respect him.**

“Let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:33 NKJV)

Show him honor in public. Esteem him in private. That may take a lot of alertness and practice, depending on your habits. With girlfriends. At work. In chat rooms. When everyone else is putting down theirs.

### **Keep learning to love him more.**

“They should be examples of the good life, so that the younger women may learn to love their husbands and their children” (Titus 2:4 Phillips)

In the early years, I learned I can’t get the traveling blood out of a wilderness man. Steve’s been known to pack a dufflebag, toss in his truck an old jeans jacket and sleeping bag and get lost. He thrives on long days in mountains and prairies without a person in sight. He’s spent days in the Arizona desert, the Rocky Mountains, or the canyons of Idaho and comes back home refreshed and raring to write. But it took me some discussions and revelations to not feel rejected or abandoned.

In the later years, I discovered that when he’s let loose to golf, he’ll go gungho--heading to the links every extra moment he finds, planning vacations around available courses, putting a larger shell on the pickup so the clubs will fit, building a practice green in the garage.

The marriage vow is a formal affirmation that you love your mate now and promise to learn to love him better as the years go by. You probably knew little about yourself or him when you made that commitment. That’s why there’s plenty more to learn. The complexities of his thoughts, wants and needs. Adapting your responses to what you gain in knowledge and

understanding. Expressing your love in the same way you did five, ten, twenty years may not be sufficient. Plumbing deeper as friends takes time, going through lots of tandem, tough stuff.



**Gifts you can give him: Plan a surprise outing. Listen to every word. Buy a toy for his favorite hobby. Talk about his topics. Ask him what he needs from you and do it. Learn how to give him a massage. Remain faithful, no matter what. Let him be your hero. Tell him something he did right today. Give him a special touch. A loving word. Take on one of his 'to do' tasks. Rev up the sex. If your libido's out of sync, seek medical help or counseling.**

### **The Look of Loyalty**

Loyalty trudges off into occupations, neighborhoods, ideas, hobbies, projects, organizations, and parenthood, not knowing where it all will lead, together as much as you can, developing individual pursuits when they don't tear the two of you apart.

Visalia. Ivanhoe. Sacramento. Coalinga. Pasadena. Los Angeles. Woodlake. Fillmore. Winchester. What do these places have in common? We've lived in every one of them. Twenty different moves, nine cities, two states. I married a wandering man. However, it looks like we finally settled down. Quite a few Christmases spent in this one house. The look of loyalty sometimes means saying *sayonara* to friends, going off into the unknown, and dragging your furniture with you.

Loyalty sticks with him through foolish actions. . .grows old together. . .builds lasting, lifetime friendship. Every act of trueness on behalf of a mate reinforces that "I am not alone." There's always someone to talk to. You've got someone to rush home to. You care about his crazy ideas. You include him in your thoughts and plans. You're on his side, ready to listen, encourage, and advise.

You become one. No longer do you think your plans versus his plans, your career versus his career, your money versus his money. It's "our plans," "our careers," and "our money." You seek to solve differences quickly and resolve irritations daily.

Sure, there's time you miss the freedom, the independence of singleness. But the strengths your companion brings to the partnership enhance your own usefulness. You share successes, as well as defeats. You're in this morass called life together.

God's loyalty to you can be your guide. What a grace that your mate's spared from seeing your every thought. You can filter out the worst before you speak. But God knows the most unworthy reaction, the vilest motive. He sees it all, better and deeper than we do. In spite of it, He promises to forgive. . .and forget. He appreciates loyalty in return. In part, you do that by faithfulness to your God-given man. Marriage becomes a three-way bond.

For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,  
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.  
Hosea 6:6 NAS

## **An L.Q. (Loyalty Quotient) Self-Test**

1. When your mate says, "Hey, Babe, I read something in a magazine today that is going to change our lives!" you . . .
  - a. shout, "Oh no, not another hair-brained scheme!"
  - b. turn up the volume on the TV.
  - c. head for the frig for something to eat.
  - d. listen with full attention to the whole proposal.
2. When your mate's invention for drying the kids' tennis shoes in the microwave explodes, you tell the firemen . . .
  - a. "I said over and over it wouldn't work."
  - b. "Please don't ask questions. I don't want to talk about it."
  - c. "I'm the only one in this family with any brains."
  - d. "Well, we certainly learned our lesson on this one."
3. When your mate trips on a radish at the salad bar and untosses a bowl full of greens and dressing into the lap of a large lady in a white pantsuit, you . . .
  - a. decide that it's a good time for you to take a potty break.
  - b. stare out the window at the parking lot, pretending you didn't see anything.
  - c. burst out laughing, pointing out the incident to others in the restaurant who might have missed it.

- d. offer your sincere apology to the lady in white and quickly help your mate clean up and regain some composure.
4. When your mate's emergency hospital bill eats up all the savings for that special anniversary trip, you say . . .
- "If only you had waited to get sick until after June eighth!"
  - "I just knew this trip was too good to be true."
  - "Well, at least we still have enough money for one of us to go to Hawaii."
  - "You know, this might be a good year to go camping after all."
5. When your mate isn't meeting your every need, you . . .
- Tell your co-workers.
  - Confide in your friends.
  - Look to someone else to provide.
  - Ask him what you can do for him and let him know what he can do for you.

If you answered anything but *d* to the questions above, you might want to consider a loyalty-strengthening project or two. Loyalty respects him. Shows honor and esteem. Doesn't put him down over the essence of who he is, such as his job or salary. Loyalty makes points for him in private, in front of the children, and in public. Loyalty never calls him 'stupid,' even in jest.

You may know a gal like Monica. She seemed to relish parading her husband's weaknesses at gab fests with her friends, until they realized her real motive: to emphasize the display of her own virtues of patience and longsuffering as she put up with this obvious jerk.



- \*\* Make "It's You and Me" cards. Take a stack of 3"x5" cards and write on each, "I'm on your side! How can I help?" Keep your supplies handy in the car, in the kitchen, in your pocket. Whenever you notice your mate's hassled, smile, and hand him a card.**
- \*\* Disregard your sacred "To Do" List when your mate's facing a stressful situation. Toss the calendar, cancel appointments, farm out the kids, and be there. Sit up front in the audience, hold his hand in the waiting room, or take off for an overnighiter.**
- \*\* Be alert to showing more kindness than usual. Hold the biting edge teasing. Constant sarcasm demeans and can destroy affection.**
- \*\* Let his extra pounds or wrinkles remind you to be thankful. Let the creases and bulges remind you of all the years you've put in together and how great it is to grow older with the one you're still learning to love.**

## THE LOVE ANGLE

Married love's got a *physical* dynamic. He makes you feel sexy. Your bodies vibrate, ignite. Touching excites you. The right caresses make a bad day good and a good day thrilling.

Committed love's also *mental* assent. Your active will says, "I choose to love you." Your free will directs who you love. You're allowed to direct your devotion toward God. Or withhold it. You're permitted to steer your affections toward the man of your choosing. To love. . .or not.

Passionate love's got *emotional* sparks. His eyes, his touch stir butterflies up your spine. If he hurts, you cry. If he's happy, you dance.

Forever love's got *spiritual* depth. The union's designed by God. The oneness is His wedding present. Beneath the feelings and the conscious mind, the spiritual bond provides love's firm foundation.

Full, flowering friendship in marriage doesn't stagnate. It keeps love fresh when it's been neglected. And revived when it wilts. The strengths blend. The weaknesses complement.



Try "*first strike*" for a whole week. Every time you see your mate after a time of separation, say, "I love you." When you first wake up, "I love you." When you get home from work, "I love you." When he spends twice too much for his golf balls, "I love you." When he's through playing catch with Junior, "I love you." When he forgets to turn off all the lights, "I love you."



++ How many "*free mistakes*" do you allow your mate in a day? A free mistake is when he obviously errs, but you refuse to bring it up to him, tell others what he has done, or sit around thinking about it. On the other hand, how many free mistakes would you like to receive from him each day? If you're really feeling generous, grant him double that amount.

++ Ask this question of the people with whom you spend the most time: "Do you think I'm a little slow to forgive, about average in forgiving, or quick to forgive?" What conclusion do you draw from their answers?

## Spiritual Friendships

When was the last time you two had a serious spiritual discussion? Whatever your answer, it's okay.

So he may not be like your neighbor who teaches Sunday School, leads the Tuesday night youth club recreation, takes the junior highers backpacking every summer, is the star pitcher on the church softball team, and fills in for the pastor's vacation time. Let him be himself. Build a spiritual friendship that's uniquely your own, unlike anyone else's. Don't compare to other husbands. Start where you both are with acceptance, grace, and encouragement. Support him where he's at.

"What do you know about the Holy Spirit?" I asked.

"The what?"

"Not what, who."

"Who what?"

Steve thought he was caught in the middle of an Abbott and Costello routine. We had been Christians a total of six months when I started reading about the power of God's Spirit in the lives of believers. Then we studied together. We discovered this Spirit lived in us. We learned lots about His work in us and through us and in spite of us. But simultaneous growth isn't always the case.

For three years Steve attended seminary. Every day uncovered spiritual truth. His confidence grew. His abilities blossomed. His talents emerged. I spent those years working in an office. There were kids to raise, bills to pay—I couldn't spend my days in study. My attentions focused in different areas.

"I'll never get through Augustine," Steve moaned.

"And I'll be lucky to get through August," I countered.

There's disparities to work through when your spiritual friendship seems in conflict.

"I think God wants us to move to rural northern Idaho," Steve announced one day.

"Funny," I shot back, "I was talking to Him just this morning—He didn't say a thing about it to me."

You grow at different paces—sometimes slow, other times fast, sometimes together, and maybe alone. Leave it to God to direct. Try to be your mate's number one booster for achieving his spiritual goals, if any. Love him when he's spiritually fit. Or totally out of it. God will teach you through him, no matter what.

In 1974, Steve sent me off on a bus to a writer's conference. I was gone six days during Easter week. He had charge of a ten- and seven-year-old, as well as pastoring a church. I heard the food wasn't as tasty. The boys' hair didn't get washed as well. The house was messier, the hugs not as tender, but I needed that time away.

I didn't write anything that year, but Steve sent me off the next two years to the same conference. Then together, we began to write an article here, a story there, and a few poems. In 1981, a book emerged. By 1989, we had published four hundred articles, plays, poems, short stories, and radio scripts, not to mention—nineteen books. Soon, we ventured into full-time writing and a speaking ministry.

It all started with a couple who became spiritual friends, who understood the importance of each other's developing of interests and possible gifts.



***"Pray about it" is not a wimpy response. It's great advice. Pray for yourself, for your mate, for the couple you're becoming. Prayer does change people and alter circumstances. But to keep your talks with God from turning into constant gripe sessions, for every problem or negative trait of your mate's you bring up, offer gratitude for a positive trait as well. Thank God for every bit of progress, no matter how small, in your relationship.***



How's your prayer life for your mate? Check the descriptions that apply to you.

- = not something he deserves
- = a vital part of my everyday life
- = something I activate during emergencies
- = a normal segment of my daily routine
- = something I seldom think of
- = something I've grown weary of because I never see any changes
- = other:

## A SEASON APART

Lifetime couples become very familiar with each other. They sense distance or displeasure with their eyes closed. They can describe every blemish and repeat every boast. They hold umpteen shared memories that no one else knows.

With all that invasive intimacy, stretches of separation can be healthy, even enlightening. To provide some space. To experience that pining for his voice and yearning for the scent of him again.

One summer I decided to head to our house in Idaho with our 6-year-old, Aaron. Our renters had moved out and I thought what an opportunity for some peace and quiet away from the noisy hustle of southern California. I'd take my typewriter and write a book. Steve could join us for his vacation time in August. That meant seven weeks of being apart.

We realized there'd be some strain, but we weren't newlyweds. We felt we had enough confidence and security to survive the hiatus.

It worked out just fine. . .sort of. I had time to write, relax, and spend concentrated time with Aaron. Steve had no household confusion as he pushed on with a busy pastoral schedule at the church. We were able to tolerate the lack of physical affection (just barely). It was a good season for personal maturity and enhancement. . .or so we thought.

That logic impressed us so well that we tried another bout the following summer. Steve again drove me and Aaron north. Once again we made it through without any damage to our relationship.

But sometime into that second summer, the foolishness of it all hit us. Sure, we could pump up our mental, physical, and spiritual strength to persevere. We could get along without another adult in the house. Steve could change the sheets and the tires without my help. I could part-time parent and patch up plumbing without his input. But we resolved never to do this again, unless we had to. Why?

Because seven weeks without your lover is a piece of cake compared to being without your best friend.

Steve had conflicts with a neighbor, but there was no one to talk with.

I witnessed a fantastic meteorite shower, but it was flat with no one around to share it.

Steve had a great book idea, but he lost it somewhere between Wednesday and

Sunday.

I panicked when Aaron ripped open his knee and missed having Steve to drive us to the doctor.

Steve finally had time to just sit at home and relax. But the empty house bored him to tears.

I had weeks to write, but no creative partner for brainstorming characters and plots.

Steve had to decide his fall schedule with no one to consult.

I had little motivation to fix any better meals than Spam and macaroni and cheese.

No person, no activity, no technology takes the place of having your best friend by your side.

That's the goal for every marriage.

You can be your mate's best friend.



**Hiding is not what marriage is about. . . Marriage is about nakedness, exposure, defenselessness, and the very extremities of intimacy. It is about simple and unadorned truth between two human beings, truth at all levels and at all costs, and it does not care what pain or inconvenience have to be endured in order for the habit of truth to take root, to be watered, and to grow into maturity. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*, pg.84**

\*\*\*\*\*THE END\*\*\*\*\*

This article adapted and expanded from *Be Your Mate's Best Friend*, by Stephen and Janet Bly (Moody Press, 1989) and *When Your Marriage Disappoints You*, by Janet Chester Bly (CrisisPoints For Women Series, finalist, ECPA Gold Medallion Award, NavPress, 1990)

If you have a turning-point story of how you and your mate became best friends, I'd love to hear from you. Let me know if you'd be willing to share your account for my website. I'll use only your first name or a pseudonym, if you prefer. Send to [janet@blybooks.com](mailto:janet@blybooks.com) and put "Becoming Your Mate's Best Friend" in the subject line.

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