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*Chapter 1*

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# THE IMPERFECT COUPLE

A man went into his vicar's office: "You've got to help me."

"What's the problem?" the minister asked.

"I have to get my marriage annulled!"

"You know I can't do that. Marriage is supposed to be forever, and I only did the service a few months ago! Don't you remember, you took her for better or for worse?"

"I know," the man replied, "but she's so much worse than I took her for!"

Standing in front of friends and family for the biggest day of their lives, nobody would want anything *less* than the very best—or why sign up at all? So why do some marriages flourish while others fail? Why are some worse and others better?

Most marriages don't end because people fall out of love but because they drift apart.<sup>1</sup> I've met many people who feel their marriage is deeply disappointing and unsatisfying. Since my late teens, when I had to pretend to be older and wiser as a cop, and then when I became a minister, I've sat with and counseled people with relational difficulties in order to resolve many a domestic crisis. I've prepared couples for marriage and led their wedding ceremonies. I've sat with them again when it all seemed to be coming apart. They often said they knew something was missing, but they

couldn't quantify it. From those many hard hours in tense rooms, I've learned people want the best, but they don't know how to get it.

For more than a decade, I've taught four easy-to-recall principles, based on the acronym BEST, which help people take responsibility to invest in their relationship—giving them the *best* possible marriage. I have also tried to live these principles in my own marriage. Many couples have candidly told me this is one four-letter word that has saved their marriages.

### ***The Perfect Couple?***

This is not one of those books written by someone who says, "Have a relationship like mine and it will be great." I don't write from the position of never having raised my voice, slammed a door, or broken a heart. Whenever I read soaring divorce statistics, I always think, *There, but for the grace of God, go I.*

You see, when I married Zoë, everyone said, "They look like the perfect couple!" We thought so too. But we soon learned we were far from it. There is no such thing as the perfect couple, because there is no such thing as the perfect person! Two imperfect people can be an experiment in what

## The **B.E.S.T.** Marriage

happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object! Our hang-ups and hurts have led to humdingers. We have needed to go into marriage counseling on more than one occasion to get us through some very serious issues. But we have had amazing times too! We love each other deeply and are committed to each other.

We have learned many lessons and have many still to learn. But the bottom line is that I've told Zoë, "If you ever walk out on me, I'm going with you!"

We actually had our first major row as a married couple within an hour of the vows, due to a mix up over who should be where for the photographs. That's okay, because the reality of a wedding day is better captured by a video than any posed photos—in the same way a marriage is made up of moving images rather than snapshots—even with a filter added.

The most important day of your marriage is not your wedding day. It's today. This is where you are. So let's get to work on that. For the *best* is yet to come.

**Marriage is a great  
institution, but I'm not  
ready for an institution.**

**—Mae West**

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## *Chapter 2*

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# THE PROBLEM

**Z**oë and I were married in our early twenties, as were our own three children, which by that time had become unusual, with most people waiting until they were over thirty. Many in our culture today are waiting longer to get married,<sup>1</sup> or choose to stay single.

Most Millennials are not married. A whole generation saw the marriages their parents have, or had, and decided they don't want one. Why are people giving up on marriage?

### ***What People Want***

The fact is most of us still hope for enduring, passionate, and intimate love. We ache for friendship and compassion—to love and be loved, to know and be known, to understand and be understood. Recently I watched a daytime television program where a couple discussed how living together was best for them. They talked about marriage as “just a piece of paper” until, in a surprise move, a boyfriend got down on one knee and proposed to his girlfriend who, in floods of tears, said, “I thought you'd never ask!”

Deep down, they both knew marriage offered something that cohabiting or remaining single didn't. No wonder. Statistically, couples who marry live longer. (What do you mean, “It feels like it!”?) They also tend to be healthier. And any children who come along receive those same benefits.

Married couples also earn more money and usually pay less tax. They are less likely to cheat and be cheated on. As a result, they experience better mental and emotional health with less depression and anxiety, and men are half as much at risk of suicide. Married couples are less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs. And being married reduces the possibility and frequency of domestic violence.<sup>2</sup>

The single best predictor of human happiness is social relationship quality, and if you're married, you are twice as likely to report that you have a happy life. If you divorce "to be happier," you'll most likely not be, as few divorced people report being happier having done so. You'll also have better sex, a lot more often. These benefits do not apply to cohabitation.<sup>3</sup>

Reading that list, all backed by data, you may feel discouraged by where your relationship is right now. I have not discovered the magic formula for relational remedy if a couple has decided to go in opposite directions. But in our socially distant world, people are realizing they need each other more, not less. A great marriage can provide a place of refuge, an oasis with good memories from the past connecting us with hope to a bright future. If children are born, rearing that next generation can help us find even more purpose and satisfaction.

**When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.**

**—George Bernard Shaw, *Getting Married***

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### ***What People Think***

When I was in primary school, a classmate, John, announced he'd changed his surname and that now he was John Fisher. Nobody understood how that could happen. He explained that it was because his parents had divorced and his mother was remarrying. That I remember this so vividly indicates that in the late seventies, divorce and

remarriage were pretty much unheard of. The parents of everyone I knew got married and stayed married.

The place of marriage in the Western world has undergone a sea of change so that all those benefits, which marriage affords, are now less available for the least advantaged in society who would benefit most from them.<sup>4</sup> The transformation, driven by changing expectations in the roles of men and women, has led to a fundamental revision and revolution in how people view the concept of “family life.” For the first time in centuries, not only is marriage a choice with no societal expectation on it, but the decision to remain married if things get difficult is also a voluntary issue. If you don’t like it, you really don’t have to lump it—just leave it.

Everybody knows this, including the children. That’s why at various stages, all three of my children have expressed concerns about whether their mommy and daddy will stay married, because they saw their friends’ parents divorce. In one of my daughter’s classes, she was the only child still living with her original married parents.

This is, of course, a tender subject, and we have too often shot the wounded, but there used to be only three ways out of marriage: abandonment, adultery, or a hearse. Now all that needs happen is for one partner to say, “I want out,” and it’s a done (or rather an undone) deal. Except that

is not usually the end of the pain. Because even if you get half the house, you also take at least half of the problem—that person you see in the mirror each morning—with you wherever you go.

### ***Till Debts Do Us Part?***

According to the American Psychological Association, 40 to 50 percent of American marriages end in divorce, and the attrition rate for subsequent marriage is even higher, compounding the suffering for all involved, especially children.<sup>5</sup> In Europe, the good news is divorce rates are falling, with the UK leading the way.<sup>6</sup> That said, UK government figures show there are presently two marriages for every divorce,<sup>7</sup> and that there were peaks in divorces in the early 1980s, 1990s, 2000, and 2010. Those of us who lived through those times remember they coincided with economic recessions.<sup>8</sup> What effect will the recent global Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent downturns have?

I am aware how awful a bad marriage can be. I have always been clear in my counsel that nobody should tolerate abuse. Marriages drift or are torn apart as hearts are broken and are hardened<sup>9</sup> such that they decide to divorce. I'm equally sure that it is sometimes a decision made too lightly. If you are considering that particular path, I urge you

## The Problem

to tread slowly and carefully. Divorce may not lead to the rosy future it seems to promise.

The increased divorce accessibility and alarmingly high statistics go through many couples' minds as they prepare for marriage. Some worry whether their marriage will go the distance. When I spoke recently with one such couple, they admitted their joy was tinged with fear, which makes it even more courageous to walk down the aisle with a smile.

Marriage is acted upon by centripetal forces (which pull inward) and centrifugal forces (which pull outward). There once was a day when the centripetal forces, such as tradition, family, parental influence, the law, and peer pressure were much greater at pushing people together in marriage than those forces acting to pull a marriage apart—even such things as infidelity, financial problems, or unfulfilled expectations. Now those centripetal forces have been stripped away so that the balance has changed, and people are not strong enough to keep those forces at bay that would, unchecked, tear the union apart.