



Marriage Coaching

Heart, Hope & Skills
for a Great Relationship

Jeff & Jill Williams

Foreword by Tony Stoltzfus

Chapter 1: Ninety Minutes to a Better Marriage

*“Perseverance wins the race” – (Aesop; from *The Tortoise and The Hare*)
“Let us **not** become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do **not give up**.” (Galatians 6:9)*

A few weeks prior to moving our family from Ohio to Maryland in 2005, I agreed to see a couple for one ninety-minute counseling session. Knowing my time in the area was short, my best judgment said to refer the couple to a colleague who could meet with them as many times as necessary to resolve their issues. I only had time in my schedule to see them once, but they didn't want to be referred. My expectations of what could be accomplished in just one session were low, but I was willing to give it my best. They consented to the one session, paid their fee, and proceeded to tell me their story.

“We've been married about 20 years. We are people of faith, who have never considered divorce as an option. We even envisioned helping other couples as a ministry at some point, but that's all changed. A few years ago we adopted a girl who seemed normal, but later we discovered she had attachment disorder. That translates to a lot of conflict and stress with her, and between us. Somehow, she has effectively pitted us against each other in such a bad way that now we are seriously considering divorce. In fact, that's why we insisted on seeing you. We saw another counselor who said that we should separate immediately and file papers for divorce because they didn't see our situation ever getting better. We want a second opinion.”

Talk about having a gun to your head! How could I help them in ninety minutes? After a few more questions about their current circumstance I asked one of the most important questions that a people-helper can ask, “*What do you want?*”

“We want to stay together. We want better ways to communicate and deal with our conflict. We don't want to separate. We want to restore what's been lost, and maybe even somehow, someday realize our dream of having a marriage good enough that we can inspire and help other couples that get to a desperate place like this. Do you think that's possible?”

“Well,” I replied, “I definitely think that this is a God-sized dream, and it's going to take some work, but yes, I think it is possible. The great thing is that you both want more and better for your marriage, and that you have a glimmer of hope that it is possible. The bad thing is that you obviously don't yet have the tools that you need to do the job. But that is something we can begin to correct immediately. Let's take the rest of the session for me to teach you some of these, and see how far they get you.”

Over the next hour and a half I learned a lot about what is effective for couples that want to improve their marriage. As I began, I took a deep breath, said a silent prayer and summoned my courage. With no time to waste, I quickly shared what I knew to be the best of the best, hoping that

it might get them started, but at the same time believing it would probably not be sufficient. It wasn't enough time.

I taught the couple a few simple exercises to develop skills they could use to ask about and listen to each other's honest thoughts, feelings and desires. What I didn't know then was that that impromptu teaching would become a full-fledged system for helping multitudes of couples to help themselves and to help others. What I taught this desperate couple was to become the core of this book; the heart and skill of ***effective listening, effective asking, effective goal-setting and key principles for supporting growth and change.***

This couple was highly motivated. They executed the exercises with sincerity and precision, took notes and asked questions. When our allotted time was finished I took another deep breath, prayed for them, wished them well, provided names and numbers for a few local colleagues who could meet with them in the future, and welcomed them to contact me by phone if they had any questions about how to use the skills or do the exercises.

Two weeks later they called. I held my breath as I answered, *"This is Jeff."*

It was the husband, *"We just wanted to share how helpful we've found what you gave us a couple of weeks ago. We've been able to talk about some hard things and really hear each other. We've negotiated some solutions to parenting issues that had been stuck for a while, and ... we've even been able to be intimate again (It had been six months)."*

I was stunned. *"How in the world did you accomplish all of that?"* I asked.

He continued excitedly, *"It's just like you said. These tools work if you work them with good-will toward the relationship. We didn't have any other options so we've both given our best to the process you recommended and it's been working. We've not been able to talk like this for a long time. We're not completely out of the woods, but we're definitely on our way. You've got to know that this process works. If there's more where you got it from, we want it."*

Wow! This was definitely an exceptional situation ... or was it?

For years Jill and I had prayed for more effective ways to help couples. On an informal basis couples from church had sought us to help them, and more often I counseled couples in my role as a counselor, but I didn't feel very successful in marriage therapy. My conclusion was that either I wasn't trained properly to help them or that the state of the art wasn't that good. Or maybe it was because couples came seeking help so late in the process, after there was a lot of turbulent water already under the bridge. At any rate, the norm for us with marriage counseling was hitting a wall. Our failures as counselors and my personal passion—fueled from being a child of divorce—to sustain a healthy and pleasurable marriage spurred my search, and prayers for wisdom and a better way to work with married couples.

Looking back at my failures, I recognize that I didn't know what I didn't know. But I know now! In fact, Jill and I both know because we've learned it together and that's why we're sharing it with you. Here's the well-kept secret:

The state of the art in relationship skills is much better than most couples are aware of. There are proven skills and exercises that can help any couple who wants to grow or change, to prevent misunderstandings, to build closeness, to resolve conflict in a way that builds rather than hurts the

relationship, to develop emotional literacy (the ability to identify and express feelings), to build and sustain healthy and pleasurable intimacy, and so much more!

And, specifically, the coaching approach is a robust skill-based process to help couples envision the ideal future of their relationship and to make their dreams a reality by setting goals and executing action-steps they develop and choose!

We would never claim that this book is the only book you need to build and sustain a great marriage. The fact is that there are a plethora of models and approaches that our colleagues have developed. But we are confident about the effectiveness of this approach, because of the foundational principles and tools it presents, and because it has worked in our marriage, and hundreds of others.

The fact is that the story about the couple in this chapter is not an uncommon story for couples who avail themselves of state of the art concepts and skills to apply to their relationship. And since this approach worked for a couple in an extremely challenging and painful situation, maybe it will work for you.

What do YOU Want?

What do you want for your marriage? Why did you pick up this book? Do you want more and better for your marriage? We do. Why? Because our marriage has been to hell and back; we didn't like hell and we don't want to go back. We never expected things to take a turn for the worse in our relationship. It isn't what we thought about on our wedding day. No one does. But our story is a common story.

When Jill and I fell in love, we decided we would be happier together than apart, so we tied the knot. We were young, and we were dumb. Well, at the very least we were ignorant about what it would take to build and sustain a pleasurable and purposeful marriage. We were what you would call "unconsciously incompetent," or in laymen terms: we didn't know what we didn't know. But, both providence and necessity have combined to equip us with helpful knowledge and experience. As Jill says, *"We've grown up together."*

Two kids, who at ages 20 and 21 naively tied the knot 25 years ago, are now in their mid-forties with plenty of battle scars to prove that we've failed our way forward, persisting on the journey that began with love and continued with stubbornness. We refused to be a statistic of divorce and always wanted more than a mediocre marriage.

While we've enjoyed a lot of pleasure, we've also had pain. Often it has been self-inflicted, and many times we've stayed in painful places longer than necessary. Had we known how to coach ourselves earlier in our marriage I think we would have been more efficient at resolving pain and sustaining pleasure. We hope that this book catches some of you near the start of your marriage so that you can navigate your journey better equipped than we were.

At one point in our marriage life conspired to put us in a pit for a season. During that time we learned how to get out of the pit and how to avoid going there again. Perhaps you are not in the pit, but are looking for a way to maximize the potential of your marriage. Maybe it's good, but you think it could be better. Or maybe it's not so great: there is some pain from the past nagging at you that you don't know how to talk about, or ongoing conflict. Perhaps some of your needs aren't being met. Or, perhaps you are one of the rare couples that are simply motivated to proactively protect your marriage.

Maybe you've tried counseling or marriage seminars and you're burned out. They were good, as far as they went, but you want something fresh, and you want something you can use right away that will make a difference. The reality for some couples is that they can't find anyone willing or competent to help. If that's your circumstance, then we hope this book will begin to provide some hope and practical help for at least part of your journey.

From the experience of Jill and me, it is clear that marriage can be heaven or it can be hell, and sometimes it changes on a moment's notice! As they say about the weather in some places, "If you don't like it, wait an hour. It will change." Couples in marriages of any length probably agree that at the minimum, marriage can be bland, monotonous and boring. At its worst it is very painful. But it **can be** very fulfilling, exciting and meaningful. How is it for you? Where are you in your marriage? And what do you want? The concepts and skills in this book have helped us to make our good marriage better, but it has also helped us through horrid periods of crisis and pain. Regardless of where you find yourselves in marriage, this can help you do the same in your marriage.

But it's Too Late, We Are out of Time!

Can you identify with our story, or at least parts of it? Whatever your reasons are for picking up this book, our promise to you is to get down to the nitty-gritty of the essential ingredients that Jill and I have personally used to save, strengthen and protect our own marriage, and to help hundreds of other couples to build and sustain abundant marriages for themselves and others.

Some of you might be thinking it's too late; that too much water has passed under the bridge and that somehow parts, or the whole, of your marriage are irrecoverable. To that we say, "Phooey!" Today is the first day of the rest of your marriage. As you learn to coach your own marriage you might join the ranks of others who have been very pleasantly surprised to find themselves capable and willing to revisit and bring closure to past challenging issues and build new communication skills.

It's not too late, and you are not out of time—but you will need to invest some time going forward. Any couple that has ever sought help for their marriage, even for a simple refresher or tune-up weekend has faced some harsh realities about the limitations of the event, their mentors, counselors or coaches; **they didn't go home with them.** The best and most attentive and involved marriage therapists, coaches, mentors and pastors only spend a fraction of life with a couple. On average, it's 1/168th of a week; only one of the 168 hours in a week. At best, couples who attend marriage intensives get 30 hours/week for two weeks from therapists, but still they too eventually have to leave the safety net of the retreat, or the "neutral ground" of an appointment with those that are helping them to communicate better.

We tell our clients that even if we meet with them on a regular basis for the rest of their marriage that we will not be able to cover all of the content that encompasses their relationship. There are so many nuanced thoughts, feelings and desires that couples experience in their day-to-day life that it is impossible to cover even a small part of them in the span of an hour or 90 minute weekly session.

So, where's the hope in a little book? And, what's the 90 minute promise that the title of this chapter inferred? **The hope is in the process, and the great thing is that once you learn it, it can be used with any content.** What do we mean? Check out a conversation we had with some clients recently.

"Before we get started we need to be clear about what we mean about the difference between process and content. Because we are aiming to work ourselves out of a job by giving you a lot of help

as quickly as possible, we are going to intentionally focus more on the process of your communication, conflict resolution, and handling of emotionally charged issues than the actual content. It's not that we aren't interested or don't care about the content, but the reality is that we will never be able to hear all the content of your relationship in the time that we spend together in Marriage Coaching sessions. But you can, and you will have to on your own time if you are going to get and keep a great marriage."

"What's realistic is for you to expect to learn a process you can use to communicate about all of the unique content issues of your marriage (e.g., finances, schedule, intimacy, children) in a way that strengthens the bond between you by using skills and exercises designed to get to the heart of your heart in a way that respects and protects your relationship. Does this make sense?"

"Many couples come to us with the assumption that we need to hear all of their issues in detail before we will be able to help them. We don't. We simply need to understand the basic improvements that a couple would like to make in order to decide where to begin teaching concepts and modeling skills and exercises for them to use at home."

"When you have a process in hand to successfully negotiate the content of your relationship, you can continue to use that process to address other challenges you face in the future. Of course there might be specific information helpful in such situations, for instance, if one of you were to experience chronic illness, or financial difficulties, empty nest syndrome, etc., but still, the process to communicate your honest thoughts and feelings with each other, to resolve conflict, to handle strong emotions, to set and work on relationship goals remains constant, regardless of the new content."

"Let us illustrate. In the U.S.A., baseball is the national pastime. Every major league game is played by the same process; nine innings, home team bats last, three outs per inning, and if the game is tied at the end of nine innings, extra innings are played until one team is ahead at the end of an inning. But, the content of every major league game is different. The players, team names, duration of games, and the cities in which they are played are all different. The content of every game is different, but the process is the same."

It's not too late for your marriage, if you'll invest a few hours in reading AND using the skills and exercises outlined in this book you will be well on your way to effectively coaching your own marriage and will be pleasantly surprised at the results!

Chapter One Reflection Questions:

1. How did you decide to read *Marriage Coaching*?
2. What do you want to get from this book that will allow you to say that it was worth your time to read it?
3. What do you want for your marriage? What does your spouse want from your marriage?
4. What questions do you have at this point?