faith tango

a liberating approach to spiritual growth *in* marriage

CAROLYN & CRAIG WILLIFORD

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WATERBROOK
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To our parents
Bob and Freda Wolfe

and

George and Lou Williford
for your examples of loving, committed marriages
of over fifty years each.

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We love you!

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We sent out questionnaires to more than fifty couples; those who responded gave us not only the gift of their valuable time but also an incredible resource of vulnerable and honest insights into their successes and struggles with spiritual growth in marriage. *Thank you, friends and family, for sharing your hearts and lives with us—and with all the readers who will benefit from your generous gift.*

Over twenty years ago, we attended a Marriage Encounter weekend. There we learned communication skills that not only changed us profoundly as a couple but also as individuals: how we relate to our children, family, friends, coworkers, those we minister to, and most of all, our God. Therefore, many Marriage Encounter concepts that we use and have adapted to fit our needs are filtered throughout this book. *We sincerely acknowledge and thank that organization for the godly principles that continue to guide our lives to this very day, and if you're an M.E. alum, CYH!*

And finally, our deepest thanks to Ron, Don, Laura, and all our friends at WaterBrook Press who have encouraged, pushed, guided, and prodded us to do whatever was necessary to produce the best book for you, the reader. *Thank you for putting up with us, guys; we love and appreciate you!*

interested in a tango to a new model?

We began our married life like most newlywed Christian couples: With great determination, we vowed to meet the challenge of growing closer to God in our individual lives and also as a couple. We had visions of spending every evening together poring over God's Word in a way that would move us to ever-deeper spiritual growth. That's what *really spiritual* couples did. Do. Whatever. Thoroughly convinced that we'd share a regular devotional life that we'd cling to faithfully, we plowed ahead with sincere hearts—but also with a good dose of naiveté. All too soon we discovered that the aggressive everyday-ness of life prevented us from practicing the established model that was consciously and subconsciously set in cement long before we said our "I do's."

Now let's stop for a second and ask a crucial question: Who created the assumption that the really connected couples have deep, daily devotions together? Maybe there's an official Marriage Manual somewhere that proclaims: "Couples will study the Bible together every day, ignoring insignificant factors such as whining, arguing, or screaming kids; the inconsequential need for sleep and nourishment; mothers-in-law, school principals, or other emergency personnel at the door; and natural

disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and toilets that overflow due to the submersion of a foreign object. They will do this with unrestrained commitment, tremendous energy, and focused attention, finding that their efforts result in an exemplary marriage that exhibits profound spiritual growth. Even in light of the toilet and the mother-in-law."

I (Carolyn) am going to write a new Marriage Manual someday, and mine will feature a unique spiritual growth model that actually fits marriages like yours and mine. (It will also cover the really important stuff like Rules for the Remote.) The old model of a spiritual marriage seems to have been passed down by the generations before us through osmosis. And no one seems to have questioned this assumption despite the fact that few couples are actually able to pull it off.

As you've probably guessed, this assumed model didn't work for us. Period. For years we struggled, feeling guilty and frustrated, failing repeatedly to do what we were convinced we were supposed to do…and what we assumed everyone else was doing. But you know what? We weren't alone in our failure, even though we felt like it at times. Recently we asked a number of couples to share their thoughts and experiences on the challenge of growing spiritually as a couple. How we wished we could've heard years ago what they said about their struggles:

- We try to study the Bible together, but it's rarely successful.
- We failed mainly because we were doing this at night and were just too tired.
- Our lives are too complex and filled with the unplanned to make this work successfully. The harder we try to plan it, the more often something important arises.
- Our failure has been in the consistency department. I talk to God about this… I ask for strength… I ask Him to take control… But then I continue to struggle with it.

And let's not forget the guilt. Guilt is evidently with all of us in abundance:

- Our failure is very frustrating and brings forward a lot of guilt because I basically feel like a loser when I give in to laziness.
- If "the regimen" is interrupted or doesn't come off, then you face guilt; even if it is not genuine, it is still a form of guilt, and that is defeating.

We felt every bit of that as well—the frustration, guilt, and defeat—just the opposite of what a couple's devotional life should elicit. Our friends Karl and Sharon put it in a way that renews hope and desire: "We know we've grown spiritually as a couple by coming through the difficult times—when we had no one else but each other and God. Those struggles taught us the important lessons and drew us together more closely and deeply."

Learning the important lessons. Coming together more closely and deeply.

Those two phrases essentially encompass what spiritual growth in marriage is about: first, what we desire out of this journey together—discovering what's really important in God's eyes—and second, how we want to journey—closely, deeply. Charging right on the heels of those goals, however, is the stark reality of the challenge before us: How on earth do we actually get there? How do we grow spiritually as couples? What really works?

We constantly asked those questions, all the while wading through the blatant evidences of our failure until eventually, something ironic happened. The challenge of finding intimacy with God through our marriage relationship caused us to focus more on the goal—and less on the model. Stumbling and bumbling along, we communicated and sought intimacy with each other. We walked through parks and neighborhoods and malls, and we chatted away. We talked in the car, whether we were on vacation, on our way to our new home across the country,

or just popping out to the store. We hammered through the issues of life at the kitchen table or in the family room, covering everything from the everyday stuff to the major crises.

The critical point of all this? For some reason, couples have created a false dichotomy. We've segregated all that talking—intimate communication—from the process of growing together spiritually. Something is wrong with that misguided separation—and the resulting conclusion that we're failing miserably in our efforts. For now, hear this one conclusion that you can count on: Growing spiritually as a couple is well within your reach. Don't let go of the goal!

The Challenge

Rick and Tracy said to us, "What keeps us from doing the activities which help us grow spiritually as a couple? Life gets in the way." Can you relate to that or what? There is indeed an *aggressive* everyday-ness to life that constantly gets in our way! Some days it feels like there's this monster ready to devour you, and it's comprised of appointments, schedules, and a crisis or two thrown in just to keep you on your toes. Forget being worn out by actually doing all that stuff; just a quick glance at your family calendar can hurtle you into a mental breakdown—or a glassy-eyed stupor!

No matter who we are, what we do, or where we live, it's still an absolute fact: Life gets in the way.

The Time Crunch: What on Earth Happened to the Month of June? If you're searching for a word that sums up what life is like in this twenty-first century of split-second computers, instant everything, and impatient, why-wasn't-this-done-yesterday demands, how about this one? *Rush.* Add that need for speed to a multitask, multifaceted life and you have a couple who will find time for what's necessary and urgent—

and skip everything else. As Rick and Tracy added, "There are so many things that are pressing on us every day, and our activities like growing spiritually as a couple just get put on hold."

Job Stress: So How Much Money Is Left in the Checkbook?
What are we feeling on our jobs? Pressure—to succeed, to pay the bills, to keep our heads above warp-speed technological advancements, to prove that we are indeed essential to the companies we work for. The amount of stress all that brings to our relationships is simply enormous. And after a tough day at work, we're supposed to find the energy and desire to read the Bible together?

Children: After Kids, Will We Ever Be Normal Again?
Depending on the ages of your kids (if you have them), you might find the operative word to be *messed…*or possibly, *stressed!* But no matter how young or old your kids are, your life is still affected by a blatant lack of necessities (well, what you thought were necessities before having children), such as sleep, time, money, peace and quiet, and rational thought processes—not necessarily in that order. A friend named Don says it better than we ever could: "When both children were small and at least one member of the family was taking a turn being sick, that was the hardest time to 'be spiritual.' Yet that was when we really needed it. Rebecca and I were running on fumes."

Church Commitments: Did We Really Leave Junior in the Parking Lot?
Sunday school get-togethers, midweek clubs for the kids, Bible studies, youth socials, committee meetings, holiday programs, Vacation Bible School, prayer breakfasts, women's retreats, men's retreats…need we go on? They are all incredibly worthwhile activities, but when do a myriad of activities become more hassle than help? Dare we suggest that too

much of a good thing might indeed be too much? Don and Rebecca put it this way: "What hinders us from doing activities to grow spiritually as a couple? Outside demands, work, kids, the phone, even our commitment at church!"

Any of that sound familiar? By now it must be clear that you're not alone. So many of us have been there, feeling the same frustrations and guilt and even defeat. So now—what do we do about it?

The Solution

We have a suggestion for you, one that will challenge not only your assumptions but also your ability to think outside the box. First, trash all those preconceptions that you have about what devotions as a couple should be. And best of all, pitch all the frustration, guilt, and feelings of defeat with them!

If you're having trouble shifting gears this quickly, then release your previous assumptions and replace them with a totally new model—a solution like no other. In the past, Christians have attempted to practice spiritual growth as a couple in a way that eventually leads to certain defeat because it's inherently flawed in its focus. Our mistake is that we have modeled our couple devotions after the pattern that is designed for individual devotions. One person focusing on God is obviously not the same as when two meet together.

Think of it this way: When I meet God as an individual, I come as one complete sphere. Within that sphere is all of what I am—my thoughts, feelings, desires, and hopes, plus my need of him. And God can indeed meet me there, within that sphere. But when we approach him as couples, we come as two separate spheres. We've expected that, because we are married, we can meet God as though we are already one sphere. What's missing is the process of just how the two overlap in

unity—and how that joining then flows toward a shared relationship with God.

In our search for help with this topic, we sent out more than fifty questionnaires to a wide variety of couples. They represent varied evangelical denominations and a wide range of ages, number of years married, and socioeconomic levels. Over and over, they told us, "We've tried the model. It doesn't work." And yet, ironically, from those same couples we also heard, "We have grown spiritually as a couple through everyday life…through crises. We love talking about everything. Being vulnerable and sharing our hurts has been key." Could it be that we've been so loyal to the old model that we've missed the possibilities for tremendous spiritual growth that were right in front of us? Have we been wasting our already-depleted energies on a process that's doomed to failure, when the solution was one we intuitively, albeit blindly, sought all along? What could happen if we combined the correct process with intent and intensity?

That's exactly what we're going to explore in the chapters that follow. We plan to challenge you, guide you, and fill you with hope for a model of spiritual growth in marriage that *does* work. Communicating with intent and intensity, clothed in an atmosphere that's tailor-made for your marriage, just might be the Spirit's pathway for progress as you've never known before. Easy process? Not quite. As a matter of fact, if you think you're going to get "chatting briefly at dinner will do it!" or "Ten Easy Steps to Spiritual Maturity," or "no real change needed," then you're in for a surprise. But will it be worth the effort? Absolutely.

Here's an ironclad guarantee: Give communicating on this level and in this format a fair try. If you're not satisfied, you can have your old relationship back!

Come on this journey with us, will you?

mugs of coffee on saturday mornings

How Do We Stay Connected When Life Is So Hectic?

It was 1980, and our life was rather interesting. (Isn't it always?) We had two active boys, our very first teeny home with a mammoth mortgage, a budget stretched to the point of snapping, and such incredibly busy lives that we wondered if *we* might snap. Craig was pastoring a church and also studying full-time for his master's degree. I divided my time between mothering and ministering at church. And our boys spent their time being…boys. As in racing cars everywhere, bouncing balls off the ceiling, and drenching our elderly volunteer baby-sitter with the backyard hose. Like I said, life was interesting.

Because we desired to grow in our faith and relationship with God, we still tried hard—despite the busyness of life—to make our devotional life a priority in our schedules. We each had personal devotions, and we also attempted nightly family worship. Before the boys went to bed, we read Bible stories, sang, prayed together on our knees, and sometimes—depending upon how much energy was left at that point—we acted out those Bible stories. By the time we coaxed our guys

into bed, we were both exhausted. So now we were supposed to sit down together for a meaningful time of spiritual growth as a couple? Not on your life. All of our attempts to establish a regular time for couple devotions failed because life was simply too hectic.

Can you relate? On Mondays I (Craig) could nearly hear the race announcer yell, "And they're off!" as we charged full-speed into the week ahead. What is it about Mondays anyway? You think you're ready to jump back into the regular schedule, but it's always a bit of a jolt! One day blended right into the next for me as I squeezed in time at my office interspersed with driving to classes; various committee and board meetings in the evenings; study and classwork spliced in wherever there was a spare moment; and time with Carolyn and the boys on my once-a-week day off. Did I mention our spray-painted, held-together-with-duct-tape car? And that I had to patch it back together whenever a piece happened to fall off? Not that I minded. (Carolyn always insisted it was God's way of keeping me humble.)

As for our communication during a typical week, I recall perfunctory conversations on the phone to catch up on the events of the day, attempts to communicate as best we could in the car or during dinner while cleaning up spilled milk or whatever—all the while arbitrating disagreements like, "You gave me more green beans to eat than he has!" Lastly, there were the nights that Carolyn brought up an issue just after we'd climbed into bed and switched off the lights. And she would get mad at me when I only did what I was supposed to do—promptly fall asleep!

I (Carolyn) recall the daily feeling of nearly drowning in motherhood: changing diapers, sorting laundry, refereeing arguments, cleaning up the most recent mess, nursing one or both boys through the disease of the month, teaching by providing a good example, and being constantly responsible for the care of those two precious little boys. I tried to save energy—both emotional and physical—for Craig when he came home, but too many times I was absolutely drained.

My view of our communication was that I felt like a puppy at Craig's feet, begging for some of his time when he came home from work by whining, nagging, pestering, and, yes, confronting him at bedtime with whatever we hadn't had time to solve during the day. Hey, at that point I at least had him trapped in close proximity! And what did he do when I was intent upon in-depth conversation? He snored!

Every now and then, you'll find a box like this one. This is a way for us to ask you to stop reading and think for a minute about your relationship with your spouse. Sometimes you may want to use these questions as discussion starters; other times, they might be food for thought for your own personal reflection and exploration. We offer these so that our suggestions and ideas may be adapted to become uniquely yours.

- **In the past week/month, have you felt like you are "losing" each other? In what ways, specifically?**
- **Are there areas or issues that you need to talk about but haven't had the time? Take a moment and list some of the most pressing matters.**

By the time we got to the weekend, we were both thinking about one thing: recovery. Well, we could hope, couldn't we? Instead, Saturdays were a whirlwind of activities that shoved us right into Sunday—ah, the day of rest!—which included several church services; teaching (for both of us); in-depth conversations with a variety of people; and scheduled and impromptu meetings. After a long day of constant rushing to services and meetings, Craig and I were dead tired, and our little guys were cranky and/or wired. By the time Monday kicked in, we needed relief from the weekend!

Is it any wonder that we began to notice distance slowly growing

between us, choking off our intimacy? It was hard work to simply find time for mere snatches of conversation—the type that allowed us to catch up on the basic necessities of the to-do list. As for our hopes, dreams, and deeper feelings, those went unspoken and unshared. There was nothing left over for real communication—not the time, not the emotional reserve, not the physical energy. The only thing we did have was desire; we both missed *us!*

Finally, we sat down and discussed the crisis. We needed time to catch our breath, to look each other directly in the eyes when we were talking, to actually concentrate on a conversation. We recognized that we wanted a block of time to tackle sensitive subjects that threatened to bury the core issues in our relationship with each other and with God. And lastly, we desired the intimacy of sharing feelings that can only come through intentional effort. We recognized that through the craziness of life, we were losing each other. And that was entirely too much to lose.

A Less-Than-Auspicious Start

That serious discussion of the crisis we faced in our marriage and the desperate need to have a concentrated block of time to talk led to a brainstorming session. How could we fix this? After listing several ideas, we decided to do something deceptively simple. We committed to talk. On Saturday mornings, for most of the morning. Not impressed? Neither were we, to be honest! We tentatively began this tradition with no pious motivations on our part. In no way did we commit to those Saturday mornings together with the intention that "this would become our marriage devotional time."

As for our goal—other than pure survival, that is!—we focused on in-depth communication at a time in the week when we both had the energy and desire to make it worthwhile. Saturday mornings provided the block of time that we needed and that fit our schedules best. And

hopefully, we could limit the interruptions, allowing us the opportunity for amazing, quality, intimacy-building communication. Okay, we admit that we were well-intentioned and naive at the same time.

Our sons were around five and two years of age when we announced with fanfare that "Saturday mornings would now be 'Mommy-Daddy Time!'" Since the family room was in the basement (where we kept the television) and the living room was located off the kitchen on the main floor, we staked out our territory and then quickly ticked off the rules. The boys were to stay out of the living room the entire morning unless an emergency occurred (and infractions had better be real emergencies), certain cartoons were off-limits by Mom and Dad's decree, we would help them get refills as needed, and there would be *no* arguing or fighting between them. (We always threw that rule in, for any event, all the time. Which was a total waste of breath.)

To make this first conversation meaningful, try some starter questions like these:

- **What was the best thing that happened to you this week?**
- **What were your strongest feelings this week, and what event elicited those emotions?**
- **If you could have one major wish fulfilled this week, what would it be and why?**
- **What quality in your life does God appear to be chiseling just now? Can you describe how that's happening?**

Even at those young ages, the boys were a bit skeptical. But they soon warmed to the idea as we armed them with sippy cups of orange juice (you know, those wonderful little inventions that are supposedly spill-proof—whatever) and plastic mugs of dry cereal (also frequently spilled onto the carpet, but fortunately the family dog Hoovered it in no

time, which meant that he learned to appreciate Mommy-Daddy Time quite quickly). That very first morning, we enthusiastically began. After sending our sons off to enjoy a morning of silly rabbits and doomed coyotes, we poured our coffee, found comfortable chairs, and settled down for a good talk.

Quite honestly, we don't remember much about that first morning. Were we interrupted by the boys? Several times, undoubtedly. (I, Carolyn, can't recall the details of those early years, but somehow I do have very clear memories of spilled orange juice on the carpet. Our Saturday morning times together lasted far longer than that carpet did!) Obviously, that first conversation failed to leave a lasting impression upon us. But evidently it did encourage us to plan for the next Saturday and then the next.

We were onto something here.

Establishing the Habit

Best intentions aside, we soon discovered that establishing consistency for our new approach would not be easy. We stumbled often, we missed scheduled times together, we messed up by sometimes starting off with an out-of-sorts tone that then colored the entire morning—causing frustration, anger, or hurt—but overall, we did one thing right. We never gave up. Although there were weeks when it felt like we'd gone one step forward and two back, the overall progress in our lives and our relationship remained constant, steady, and encouraging.

Life, however, seemed determined to work against us. The calendar was our greatest competitor and, sometimes, our downright enemy. We battled everything from the kids' activities to church prayer breakfasts to out-of-town trips. No matter what stage or transition we were in, life remained a frantic race. And the main straightaway seemed to be—Saturday mornings.

Then there was the distraction of our responsible, energetic neighbors along with their trimmed-with-a-cuticle-clipper yards. Good grief. Couldn't they just keep their productivity to themselves? In the winter, we'd watch them shovel snow, run errands, and shuttle their kids to all those absolutely essential activities to boost the all-important self-esteem. Arghhh! How dare we make our kids miss even one of those opportunities? We battled guilt every time the neighbors' vans drove by.

When the weather was nice, we could enjoy sitting outside on the porch—while listening to the neighbors mow their grass, weedwack, edge the lawn, all the projects we needed to do in our own yard. And what were we accomplishing in the midst of all that neighborhood activity? Well, we were communicating. But was talking *that* important? Later, when we were slaving away in the yard during the heat of the day, our savvy neighbors were enjoying lemonade on their porches, probably shaking their heads at our procrastination!

Remember also that we began this tradition way back in the dark ages, long before voice mail and even before every home had an answering machine. Often we would be in the middle of an intense discussion when the phone would ring. Was it an emergency? Could it be one of our parents? A church member who was seriously ill? Or was it a telemarketer wanting us to refinance with a lower mortgage rate? Sometimes we just let it go, and sometimes we didn't; sometimes we chose well, sometimes not. Needless to say, we bought an answering machine soon after they became affordable.

There were also mornings when communicating was…umm… difficult at best. Christian psychiatrists and psychologists advise that painful experiences must be shared verbally before a person can find complete healing, but achieving that goal means that you must feel worse before getting better. We know that advice to be absolutely true. It is incredibly painful to resurface and share hurt feelings—and to hear them from each other. After initially being criticized by someone, I

(Carolyn) don't enjoy bringing up that hurt and experiencing the pain yet again. But ultimately, like cleaning infection from a wound, this is indeed a necessary step in our ongoing pursuit of marital intimacy. We find that we must remain focused on the future benefits to find the courage to wade into this area in the first place. The reward is that core issues are exposed, processed, and eventually resolved. Possibly the greatest benefit (and one that we would not recognize nor understand for years) was that we were learning how to be more intimate with our God. Exposing our feelings to him also can be difficult, but as we practiced this skill with each other, we were learning how to share feelings with a loving and accepting God too.

What time of the week might work best for you? Can you come up with at least two possibilities to test?

Setting a regular, weekly time to talk is easy, but following through is one of the toughest things you'll ever attempt. So get your battle plan together now: What do you envision inhibiting or interfering with your commitment to talk regularly? List these potential obstacles specifically, and then jot down how you plan to counteract each one.

Lastly, some Saturday mornings may have found us simply out of sorts, sifting through frustrating experiences from the week related to work or relationships, exhausted from issues with our kids, or distracted by chores or other responsibilities. Week after week, it was quite clear to us that nothing about life was going to make this commitment to Saturdays easy!

At this point, you may be thinking to yourself, "Oh my. If they're suggesting we stop everything to talk on Saturday mornings—of all times—then that would never work for us!" If so, please hear us clearly:

We're not suggesting that Saturday morning is the only possibility. What we are saying is that you must work hard to find the right time for your relationship. "Your time" might be Tuesday nights, Sunday afternoons, Thursday mornings. Maybe you'll need to test several different days before one stands out as the best fit for you. We're offering you the opportunity to adapt this material for your unique lifestyle and needs. It's up to you to make sure it's a tailor-made fit!

Surprised by Pure Pleasure, Puzzled Reactions, and Even Tough Times

Fortunately, amidst the frustrations of distracting phone calls, tense conversations, and watching neighbors get a headstart on weekend chores, we discovered that positive things were indeed happening. And the emerging benefits were encouraging enough to keep us committed. For example, one of the benefits we soon noted was how much we looked forward to our time every week. Strange, but you know how the anticipation of something can be almost as much fun as the actual doing? That's what we still feel nearly every week, and a major contributor to that sense of anticipation is the now nearly ingrained habit of "tucking away" highlights from the week before—humorous happenings, insights from prayer times, stress at work, whatever.

So often I (Carolyn) have thought something like, "Oh, I can't wait to tell Craig about the hilarious e-mail I received, but I'll save it for our time together. That way I can stretch out the story and savor watching him enjoy every moment of it!" Or maybe my thinking goes more like this: "Craig's had such a rough week. Even though I've got to confront him about how much that incident on Thursday hurt me, it can wait until the weekend. We'll wade through all the feelings then, when we're both better able to deal with the emotional work this is going to call for."

I (Craig) have been surprised by how often my emotions are ready to surface by Saturday morning—feelings that I sometimes didn't even know were hidden or buried. When I'm under stress and conflict at the office (and when *isn't* there either stress or conflict at the office?), Carolyn will often press me with questions like, "Didn't that make you angry? Certainly he hurt your feelings! Didn't that bother you at all?" But all she gets at that moment is my shrugging shoulders and nonchalant response. Generally at that moment, I didn't note feeling much of anything.

Because of my background and the person that I am, I have a tendency to delay the actual feeling of my emotions. But as the week goes on and Saturday arrives, I relax in my recliner with a good cup of coffee. As I replay the week with Carolyn, sometimes only then do I realize that I did indeed feel offended or insecure or rejected. Quite honestly, if it weren't for our commitment to that time together, I can't imagine how many pent-up feelings would remain buried within; they'd never surface and be processed, nor would they be shared with my wife, who truly desires to know my heart.

Another totally unexpected benefit we've noted is how our commitment has affected our sons over the years. When they were small—on a purely base level—they obviously enjoyed the uninterrupted time to watch television! But it wasn't long before we saw an interesting trend. Sometimes one or both would forget the drill and wander into the living room where we were talking. After finding out that there was no emergency, we'd remind the offenders that it was our time to talk. Interestingly, they would almost always dramatically roll their eyes, grin, and mischievously announce, "Oh, that's right! It's Mommy-Daddy Time. Well, excuuuse us!" The feigned irritation was merely a smoke screen. Their response was, in every way, evidence that our ritual had become a security blanket of sorts. The fact that we were deeply committed to connecting with each other seemed to give them a lifeline—

especially during those times when some of their friends were suffering through their parents' painful divorces.

Can you envision yourselves attempting this strategy? What positive benefits might you experience immediately? What long-range advantages might you enjoy?

Even throughout their teenage years, though packaged a bit differently, their reactions were almost exactly the same. They'd gripe about our "hogging the family room" (at this stage, cartoons were definitely out; they were asleep until nearly noon!), making it evident that they found bedrock security in the fact that we were still committed to each other, still talking away on Saturday mornings. We've heard them "brag" to friends (you understand that teenage bragging has to be disguised as disgust somehow) about "how our parents talk all morning," and even warn overnight guests about invading "their"—meaning selfish Mom and Dad—family room. But it was all done in that tone of voice—the one that hints and even insists, "This makes us feel secure. Please don't stop!"

In a similar vein, we wonder if other couples have vicariously benefited from our insistence on our commitment to intentional, weekly times of communication. Church staff members, laity, friends, and family have all heard about our tradition throughout the years, and whether they responded with a "You do what?" type of puzzled reaction or appeared genuinely intrigued, we certainly left some sort of impression! Craig has turned down speaking engagements, passed up golf (yes, women—even golf!), and rescheduled meetings. Men and women clearly noted his commitment to us as a couple, and that spoke volumes about how much our Saturday mornings meant to him.

And lastly, those toughest of times—the days when major con-

frontations were necessary—were a surprise too. Why? Because when we compare the discussions that pushed us the most, the times of sharing that called for the greatest vulnerability and trust, the Saturdays when we can recall moving closer in our intimacy…we would most definitely point to those tense and painful times. In our individual spiritual growth, we often see the painful lessons as those when we grew the most. Although we certainly don't want to repeat them—nor do we go about looking for more "opportunities" for pain and therefore growth—the fact remains that they do indeed push us to trust God and know him more intimately. Craig and I feel the same way about our confrontational times. We never want to feel that kind of pain again. But we are grateful for the growth that we gained. Once again, God was involved. And he's always about miracles, it seems!

The Discovery of Spiritual Growth

Over the next several years, we moved from state to state; we weathered the stages, transitions, and changes that life brings; and the day of the week that was "ours" sometimes changed. But two constants remained: a morning committed to us and the ever-present guilt that we still weren't practicing the assumed model for couple devotions.

However, when we were approaching fifteen years of this tradition (we're admittedly rather slow learners in this respect), we discovered something amazing. Our skills at sharing—practiced week after week and bolstered by certain guidelines (more about those in the chapters ahead)—progressed and grew into real intimacy. The more we were able to intimately share with each other, the more that in turn taught us how to be intimate with God in our individual lives. That growth was then reflected in our times together, creating this endless circle of one fueling and feeding the other. We were growing in our individual lives with God due to our Saturday mornings, and our growth as a couple from

our weekly intentional communication was also providing incredible spiritual growth for us as individuals. After all those years of feeling guilty about not "doing devotions," we had stumbled onto a process that actually enhanced spiritual growth. Was this the "devotional life" we should have been seeking all along?

We can both remember those initial conversations, the questions, the freeing feeling of beginning to throw off years of guilt. Still stuck in our stubborn ingrained beliefs, we fought the facts before us, argued with the evidence, asked each other, "This can't be, can it? Did all that actually happen just from our commitment to really connect every week?" But there was no denying the truth: We had grown as individuals and as a couple from merely talking. *Merely* talking? Or was there much more to this? It soon became apparent that it was time to break down the process, discover what all it entailed, and, finally, share that with others.

It's been over twenty years, and we're still at it—although now we're in the midst of a mostly peaceful empty nest, a heavy travel schedule, and a still-packed calendar. But as we look back over the years, we both agree that those weekly times of intentional connection have been the single most important investment in our marriage. Never did we envision the depth that would result from merely talking week after week, year after year. Never would we have guessed how tenaciously we would cling to this tradition. And never would we have imagined that both of us would honestly say that the two greatest influences upon our spiritual growth and personal intimacy with God have been our individual devotional lives and our Saturday mornings together.

Wherever you are in your marital journey—newlywed, middle-aged, empty-nest, or coasting through retirement—you can grow in your couple relationship. And whether you've managed to be disciplined in your couple devotional time, have sporadically tried various approaches, or maybe never had any scheduled "formal" time together, you can always begin anew. Today. Try a Friday night date. Set aside

undistracted time to talk this weekend. Or maybe you have some free time this Tuesday morning? You just may discover that once you start, you don't want to stop!

Balking at that level of commitment? That's understandable, so why not ease into it slowly with these ideas:

- Plan a "date night" out—for several weeks in a row. Allow that to slowly develop into a regular and intentional time to talk.
- Begin with small, manageable blocks of time. Schedule an hour per week, but keep those appointments. Remember to schedule your time together for the best time of the week—the time that will minimize interruptions and maximize your energy level!
- Agree to meet for breakfast or lunch, but also agree to pick a topic for discussion ahead of time and stick to your chosen topic. Don't follow the temptation to stray back to the to-do list for the day or week.

Those of you who are more adventurous by nature may, however, plan to jump right in—starting this weekend!

Here is one of the most amazing privileges about growing intimately in our relationship with God, as well as in our marriage: We never "arrive." There are always more journeys ahead, more opportunities, more challenges. This challenge is before you now. We're here to help and guide and provide plenty of suggestions. Most of all, God is readily available to direct—and bless—your journey.

Bought that coffee yet?

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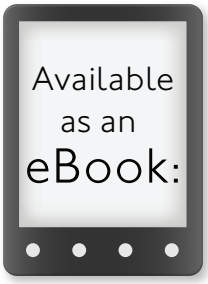

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