

# Love and Faith in Times of Trouble

In the midst of the joy and excitement of their wedding day, some couples operate under one of two possible misconceptions as they confront the future. Some have the nagging feeling that life is all downhill from here—the freedom is gone; marital spats, conflict, and struggles lie ahead; and surely no day in the future could be as exuberantly fun and exciting as this one.

What is especially disheartening, we think, is that popular culture often ascribes this bleak view to the husband and supports the common metaphors that describe husbands as strapping on a “ball and chain” or being “henpecked.” At a wedding ceremony one of us attended, someone used masking tape on the soles of the groom’s shoes to spell out the word *help* for all the congregation to see as he knelt at the altar.

We experienced this attitude on the occasion of our own wedding, when we went to the airport to pick up one of the attendants. The groomsman stepped off the plane and announced to the nervous groom, “Just think, only forty-eight hours and it’s nag, nag, nag till the day you die.” Popular television shows like *Married with Children* depict couples dissatisfied with each other, sarcastic, and critical. Although we recognize that all these attitudes are aimed at getting a laugh, they do represent a belief that married life is really not much fun, especially for the husband.

Under the second misconception, on the other hand, some couples blissfully gaze into the future and see only a scene of domestic utopia. When we succumbed to this misconception, sometimes we would see ourselves in a perfect suburban home with a white picket fence, a cozy fireplace, several happy, loving children, and a family dog. At other times we fantasized about living an exciting life abroad in a foreign city with interesting, important careers, several happy, loving children, and a family dog. No matter the setting, we fervently believed that we and our imagined offspring would always be happy (and for reasons we cannot quite remember, a dog always figured into it). Life would always turn out as we planned, and it was only going to get better from this day forward.

On the occasions when popular culture depicts matrimony as a good thing, the story usually leaves marital bliss to the imagination, ends with the wedding scene, and implies (or states outright) a “happy ever after” sentiment.

## Life Has Its Ups and Downs

The reality for us—and, we think, the reality for most couples—is that the future (thus far) turns out to be a combination of good and bad times. Indeed there are moments when we feel nagged, sense a loss of independence, or even feel like calling for help, like the unsuspecting groom with the masking tape on his soles. Every married couple we know experiences this reaction at some point. Sometimes the two just cannot see eye to eye on anything. At other times the world, the fates, or some force seems dead set on bringing them hardship. Almost all marriages have rocky spells.

Conversely, if yours turns out to be one of the rare weddings that goes off without a single hitch, you can rejoice in the fact that nearly all couples have many more “perfect” and once-in-a-lifetime days ahead. There will be events that rival your wedding day in excitement and bursting-with-pride joy, such as the first home, job hirings and promotions, and the birth of children.

Many couples report that the happiest day of their life is not the day they get married but the day when a child enters their life, whether through birth or adoption. Your children and their accomplishments will, in turn, be the source of many happy days for you: first tooth, first step, first word, First Communion, graduation, wedding, and so on.

There will also be other days, not momentous enough to be red-letter days on the calendar but contributing to the good times nonetheless: walking through the leaves on a beautiful fall afternoon,



enjoying a relaxing family vacation, engaging in sporting activities together, reading stories as a family, finishing a home remodeling project, participating in family holiday customs, and having your children surprise you when they complete a task or do something so genuinely thoughtful and mature that it makes you want to cry. Frankly, there will be times when a couple are so obviously happy being together and in love that it sickens those around them just to look at them.

The good news for us is that because we have stayed faithful to our commitment to each other, the good times have considerably outweighed the bad ones. If we charted our marriage on a graph, we think it would look a lot like the stock market over recent decades. Although periodically there have been significant dips and even an occasional crash, the overall trend is upward. Like the stock market over the long haul, our marriage investment has yielded significant returns and is in a much better position now than five, ten, or more years ago. We believe married life can continue that pattern. Life is not perfect, and we are not always happy, but it does keep getting better and better.

Precisely because most couples do experience highs and lows in their marriage, the vows ask them to declare their commitment to each other for both the good and the bad times. The act of commitment in itself has helped sustain us in our bad times.

## Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Simply saying that you will remain true through the bad times is not enough, however. The words are important, but actions, as the old saying goes, speak louder than words. Fortunately, our pre-Cana marriage preparation provided a great deal of information about how to resolve conflict in our marriage. We learned a lot about “fighting fair,” and we have tried to abide by certain rules when we are mad at each other. One rule is that we do not say or do things that cannot, in essence, be taken back. Although Jesus taught—and we believe—that *anything* can be forgiven, we have tried hard never to wound too deeply.

The trust on which a marriage is based leaves couples vulnerable to hurtful actions by either partner. It is an act of love to avoid taking advantage of that vulnerability when one partner is angry. For instance, no matter how angry, upset, frustrated, or hurt we are, we do not resort to attacking each other’s weaknesses or areas we know the other is sensitive about. Neither of us has ever said, “I hate you,” to the other, although we’re sure both of us have thought it at one time or another. We do not use four-letter words to get our message across. We have never resorted to physical violence—ever.

It is tragic that domestic violence is all too common today. Most couples who are in an abusive relationship find themselves there after having moved gradually toward it—beginning with hurtful words, then threats, then physical violence. Verbal and physical violence are not only wrong; they are illegal. If you find yourself involved as either a victim or a perpetrator, you should seek professional help immediately.

Instead of hitting below the belt, so to speak, we avoid accusations and try to focus on communicating our feelings to each other, in the hope that our partner will remember how strong our love is and will care enough to do something about our hurt feelings. “Doing something” might mean an agreement to change behavior: “Okay, from now on, I’ll try to remember to call you if I’m going to be late.” We often need gentle reminders so that we can establish the desired behavior permanently.

In the early years of our marriage, this practice became something of a joke between us. Announcing the introductory phrase, “Just for future reference,” was a gentle way for us to say to each other, “You are doing something that bugs me. Do you think you could please stop it?” Dealing with hurt feelings also means simply apologizing: “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking of how worried you might be when I wasn’t home on time.”



Perhaps you feel that you shouldn't have to call when you are late. You are your own person, after all, and you can take care of yourself. You don't like being told what to do. What then? We think it is crucial to examine priorities when desired behaviors continue to conflict. If loving your spouse and caring about his or her feelings is the most important thing to you, what you should do becomes obvious. Focus on your love for each other. Try to be unselfish. Try to be Christlike. Your conflicts will work out, we hope, if you bear these virtues in mind. In the example above, we think that easing our partner's worries with a quick phone call when either of us is late is more important—that is, a higher priority—than nursing the somewhat immature feeling that we do not want to be told what to do.

Some people think, as we did early in our marriage, that you can guarantee a fair fight by using rules like the "I statement" rule: when you are angry, begin your statement with "I" rather than "you." In principle this is a fine idea. For example, "I am feeling hurt and angry because I had dinner ready an hour ago and didn't know where you were" is better than "You are so inconsiderate when you don't call and are late; now dinner is ruined!" The first statement is an expression of your own feelings; the second, a blaming accusation and attack.

These rules alone obviously do not guarantee that the statement will not be hurtful or vindictive. "I feel that you are an insensitive jerk." "Oh, yeah? Well, I feel that you are a nagging cow." See? Preventing a couple from hurting each other takes more than mere rules. It demands the love of both people combined with a good deal of maturity and self-control.

Many couples find themselves unprepared for another instance of good and bad times that can occur: the feelings that surface when things seem to be "better" for one spouse than for the other. In our experience this situation happens most often in the area of careers and is due to a variety of factors. Many couples decide together, as we did, that one person's career will become less of a priority when children enter the picture. Often it is the woman who quits working outside the home altogether, or one spouse may reduce her or his workload and professional responsibilities. In essence this person puts a career on hold until the children are in school or even older.

Bearing a greater responsibility for raising children and caring for the home is often a more difficult task than many careers (and certainly a more important task than most occupations). It tends to receive little recognition and external rewards and generally does not include salary and benefits for the worker—important signs of validation in today's society.

As the years go by, the spouse who did not put a career on hold receives annual salary and benefit increases, greater responsibilities at work, promotions, and even awards and other accolades. For the other person, happiness and pride for the spouse are tempered by feelings of discouragement, envy, or resentment (perhaps accompanied by guilt for having these feelings). Why should one spouse get all the credit when both work equally hard for the family's happiness? Communication, sensitivity, a supportive attitude, and frequent verbal encouragement are key factors on such occasions.

In our family we consider that Andy's proportionally larger paycheck and Amy's correspondingly smaller one represent the combined effort of both of us to support our family. Two paychecks signify the family income that we work together to earn. We make an effort to thank each other every day for what each has done to support the family, whether by making dinner, working hard at the office, or taking the children to the dentist. We share our successes and give credit to the one who earns recognition. We do not hesitate to make it known that each of us is "the wind beneath the wings" for the other. Finally, we remind ourselves that the choices we have made together reflect our values and priorities and that we wouldn't do it any other way if we were to do it over again.



## Under Pressure

. . . Couples often face bad times that are the result of external factors beyond their control. Through no fault of either marriage partner, some couples face trouble brought about by infertility, illness, the loss of a child or other loved one, difficult economic times, unlucky circumstances, the trials of their adolescent children, and so on. Although couples have some control over the “good times and bad” by the way they choose to act toward each other, we think that the “in sickness and in health” portion of the vows speaks to the difficulties in marriage that are caused by external factors over which couples have no control.

What is a couple to do when they have little or no control over a troublesome situation? The best remedy—the only remedy, we believe—for these times of “sickness” is prayer. As any caring parents of an adolescent can tell you, prayer becomes a significant part of their life (if it isn’t already) when their children reach the teen years and become more and more independent. Parents can say whole rosaries waiting for a teenager to return safely home by curfew.

Couples who face a profound struggle with grief or loss often say that their faith and prayer are the only things that sustain them. We know a couple whose teenage daughter ran away from home. Their love for each other, along with the help of their friends, their pastor, and a good deal of prayer, supported them through this difficult period. Happily, they have resolved their differences with their daughter and are now closer than ever to her. The sickness in this family has healed, for the most part.

Another kind of “bad” or “sick” time is economic hardship. Most couples experience at some point in their marriage a period of what they consider to be economic adversity. In some cases it’s just a matter of expectations or overextending themselves: “With our vacation bills coming in, I don’t know how we’re going to make the payment on the second car.” In other instances a spouse loses a job or suffers an injury that prevents work, and the couple teeter on the brink of (or even slip into) poverty.

Some friends of ours tell of a time in their marriage when they were both out of work. With a couple of children to raise, they decided that they needed to go on welfare. They also relate that their love for each other provided the emotional support they needed to get through this difficult period in their lives. When one of them was starting to get down about their circumstances, the other was able to provide just enough energy to pick the spouse up, and vice versa. Their commitment to each other and their faith in themselves and in God sustained them through to better times.

Bouts of emotional illness or relational sickness are common in marriages and families, but so too are physical maladies. Minor illnesses like chicken pox, flu, or even the common cold place stress on family relationships, require an adjustment of routine, cause an inequitable distribution of workload, and create other inconveniences. Major illnesses like heart disease, cancer, or Alzheimer’s disease can have devastating effects on relationships, drive couples apart, and propel them away from their faith.

In a powerful and moving scene in the film *Lorenzo’s Oil*, the parents of a terminally ill child fight bitterly over the circumstances of his illness until one spouse accuses the other of causing the boy’s disease. The tragic aspect for viewers is that they want this couple to remain strong for each other and for their sick son. In times of grave illness, families need their love for each other and their faith to be the strongest.

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner points out that when times are at their worst, the love the family members give to one another sustains them. He suggests that the love families offer one another in these times is God’s own love, manifest on earth. Many people faced with a life-threatening illness get angry at God for causing their hardship. Kushner argues that God does not cause illness; rather, God is present to comfort people through the love and support of spouse, family, friends, and church.



We personally have not had to face these times of “sickness” as a couple, but we do pray regularly and fervently. We make an effort not to pray *for* things; instead, we have developed the habit of praying to accept God’s will. Although it is so tempting to pray, “God, please make Grandpa’s cancer go away,” we know that God is not in the business of granting favors like that. Instead, we try to pray, “God, please make us all strong enough to endure Grandpa’s illness. Please help us accept your will and love and support one another as much as we can.”

As Kushner suggests and as the Prayer of Saint Francis describes, we need help in acting as God’s instruments, as “means of God’s peace.” We have seen miraculous feats performed by people whose spouses were gravely ill. These were not instances of sudden healing or anything as dramatic as that. Instead, the miracles we have seen have been simple acts of strength and courage, like a reassuring smile when inside they were terrified or an offer of comfort when inside they were weeping.

People who are in love with each other are capable of incredible acts of bravery that they would not have believed themselves capable of—acts they never would have thought necessary. No marriage partners ever expect the part in the wedding vows about sickness to apply to them, but when they are sick, how lucky married people are to have someone close at hand to manifest God’s love!

## Sharing the Good Times

To close . . . , we would like to mention one other thing about good times and bad, sickness and health. If you will be fortunate enough to experience good times and good health in your marriage, you can be certain that there are others who will not. There are marriages and families in trouble everywhere, and there are plenty of sick people. All of them need to be assured of God’s presence on earth. This reality is an opportunity for happily married couples to share their love with the world.

Do not hoard the gifts you will give to each other or those God will bestow on you. Share them with people who need them. Being a good listener for a friend who is having marital difficulties might be just what is needed to help that marriage get past a rough spot. A letter to older or faraway relatives reminds them that they are important to you, even if you cannot see them every day. Visits to those in the hospital, in jail, or in a nursing home remind them that God is alive on earth and working through people.

Of course, married couples are not the only ones who can share their own and God’s love with the world, but we think they have a particular responsibility to share their good fortune with others by contributing time, talent, or treasure to some needy cause in a specific way. Spouses can support each other in these gestures of kindness and also teach their children to do the same.

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