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CHAPTER ONE

A PICTURE WORTH FIGHTING FOR

My Story. A Modern Story.

I could feel the veins in my neck bulging.

The veins in my neck never bulge. I'm the emotionally unhealthy guy who internalizes everything—no matter how much the circumstance warrants a reaction.

The more she explains how my negligence of our relationship makes her feel, the more I want to jump in my truck and spend the weekend alone on the open road—neglecting our relationship.

Instead, I apply the proven tactic of bringing up unrelated issues as a means to make her feel shame. And voilà—she backs down and the night ends right on queue.

We then resort to our increasingly popular nightcap. I walk out slamming the door behind me for dramatic effect. She crawls under the covers in tears—but not before setting up her wall of pillows down the middle of the bed just to remind me, when I do come to sleep, that things are not okay.

Needless to say, Analee and I didn't come into marriage expecting, after only eighteen months, that screaming matches, excessive amounts of frustration, and pillow walls would become our norm. How did we get here? How does anyone get here?

To answer that question, we should probably start from the beginning.

IN THE BEGINNING.

I used to think I was a decently articulate guy, reasonably comfortable in my own skin. Then Analee would walk in the room.

Instantly, I had nothing but unintelligible things to say and a deep urge to be someone cooler and wiser and generally better than myself.

She was everything I wanted—everything I dreamed of in a woman. Electric personality. Exotically gorgeous. Lit up a room. World-travelled. She had a faith that was real and seasoned. She did most of the talking so I didn't have to. The list went on, and as it did, I became more and more convinced I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life waking up next to her.

Of course, that meant she would have to feel the same way about me—a risky endeavor for any woman.

It took me six months of running in the same social circles to work up the courage to talk to her. Fortunately, I found the grit to mumble words in her direction and after a handful of texts—which may or may not have involved a few helpful Justin Timberlake lyrics—we found ourselves dating. Nine months later, I convinced her to marry me.

Saying “I do” to Analee is one of the better choices I've made in life. Anyone who knows us would concur and secretly wonder how I married so far up.

Our first year and a half of marriage felt like a perpetual sleepover with my best friend. We lived in a tiny cottage, in a quaint city, and bought a cute dog—all the makings of an absolute dream.

Then it happened.

It only took me eighteen months and a few blunted expectations to feel sincerely disappointed with marriage. There was nothing “wrong” with Analee. In fact, she was as lovely as she had ever been. This disappointment had little to do with her, and everything to do with my own misinformed ideas about marriage and their inability to support the very unnatural art of loving another person.

I had brought suitcases of misconceptions to the altar. And as these misconceptions were tested in the face of a very real relationship, we slowly but surely waved goodbye to our best friend slumber party and Norman Rockwell picturesque life.

Unresolved conflict soon became a staple of our relationship.

Failed expectations, yelling matches, and sleeping with a pillow fortress between us was not entirely new to this season. Yet these episodes seemed to be more frequent and less forgiving than in our first year of marriage.

We weren't supposed to be the ones in a perpetual fight. After all, we had all the tools to have a successful relationship. We knew each other's love languages. We had navigated conflict in the past. All throughout year one of newlywed life, we spent two hours every other week in counseling so we could avoid meltdowns like the ones we were now consistently experiencing. We were the couple who underlined and dog-eared their marriage books. Yet despite having all the tools at our fingertips, we often found ourselves too angry, exhausted, and generally uninterested in using them.

Something was missing. We both felt it. We both wondered why.

We exhausted those books early on, subtly believing that if we could expose ourselves to all of the best three-step formulas and tab them for easy reference, we could somehow avoid all of the ugly, uncomfortable realities of life with another human being.

But we couldn't. And as it turns out, we were never meant to.

As I took inventory of our relationship, the one thing I couldn't seem to find was a vision for our marriage worth fighting for. Don't get me wrong, I thought I knew what we were—by default—trying to build together: a happy life. A loving relationship. Two successful careers with a cushy joint bank account. A someday-family we could spend the rest of our lives driving to soccer practices, sending to college, and pushing out of the nest so we could retire into wild motor home adventures. But in the midst of a relationship that internally demanded so much, something told me a dream lifestyle wasn't the kind of vision that our marriage needed.

What we needed was a better picture of what marriage could be . . . one that didn't stop at a well-insulated life with a good partner and kids who don't do drugs. We needed a picture that answered in the deepest part of us *why* marriage is

important,

and valuable,

and worth investing into as much as it asks of us.

The interesting thing is that most of us today *have* a vision for marriage—whether or not we recognize it or can put it into words. We all bring to the table some construct of what we hope it will be. It's not a lack of vision that threatens many marriages today. What threatens our marriages is that many of our visions for matrimony have been crafted by modern and misguided ideas about love.

The next one hundred or so pages are about exposing these misguided ideas and exploring a vision of marriage worth fighting for.

MODERN MATRIMONY IS A STALE BRAND.

My general disillusionment with marriage is a popular place to land these days.

Sociologists say marriage is fundamentally broken.

Historians say it's outdated.

Progressives say it's not even necessary.

And tragically, statistics seem to say it's not worth it.

In America, one marriage ends every ten to thirteen seconds.¹ Almost half of the weddings you go to this year will celebrate the union of a couple who won't stay together. And if they do stay together for more than ten years, one out of every four of them will say they are unfulfilled in their relationship—but too comfortable to leave.²

The number of Americans saying “I do” has dropped each decade since the 1950s and cohabiting-but-unmarried partnerships have risen 1,000 percent over the last forty years.³ “The question has become,” as social scientist Andrew Cherlin says, “not why fewer people are getting married, but why so many are still getting married?”⁴

The disheartening statistics go on. Yet the statistics are also incredibly understandable.

Our parents' generation was handed a vision of marriage that apparently wasn't worth more than a 50 percent success rate.⁵ They added their own dysfunctional patterns, as did any generation before them, and passed on this mediocre brand of what is supposed to be the height of human relationship.

As the infamous *Newsweek* article “The Case Against Marriage” put it, “Many grew up shepherded between bedrooms, minivans, and dinner tables, with stepparents, half-siblings, and highly complicated holiday schedules. You can imagine, then—amid incessant high-profile adultery scandals—that we’d be somewhat cynical about the institution [of marriage].”⁶

Then again, your parents may be about to celebrate their thirtieth anniversary of being happily married. Or maybe you’ve been fortunate enough to grow up with very functional and loving divorced parents. Or maybe you’re just now entering marriage with nothing but the very best hopes and dreams. Regardless of the good, bad, or ugly exposure we’ve had personally to the institution of marriage, it’s hard to deny that the path to marital disappointment is all around us. It’s put on display every day—in the news, in celebrity relationships, in our friends’ and coworkers’ lives—and the truth is that even in the healthiest relationships, we will inevitably have moments with our spouse that cause us to entertain this exceedingly popular *misunderstanding*—the key word here—that marriage, as an ideal, is simply broken and disappointing.

However, the flip side of the divorce statistic tells a dramatically different narrative—one that perhaps we have not given enough attention.

MARRIAGE ISN’T BROKEN— IT’S SIMPLY MISUNDERSTOOD.

Yes, many marriages end in divorce.⁷ The research is clear. But research also shows that when marriage “works,” it *really* works. In fact, if cultivated, marriage is actually better for you on all fronts—physically, materially, and emotionally.⁸ Studies show that healthily married people live longer, have better health, earn more money, accumulate more wealth, feel more fulfillment in their lives, enjoy a more satisfying sexual relationship, and have happier and more successful children than those who cohabitate or get divorced.⁹

Happiness? You are twice as likely to be happy if you stay married. And married people, in general, report lower levels of depression and stress than non-marrieds.¹⁰

Health? Robin Simons, a sociologist at Wake Forest University, has done research that reflects that “married people overall do better on virtually every indicator of health and well-being.”¹¹

Sex? According to Linda Waite’s research for her groundbreaking book with Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*, over 40 percent of married women said their sex life was emotionally and physically satisfying, compared to about 30 percent of single women. The same trend is seen among men—50 percent of married men say they are physically and emotionally content versus 38 percent of cohabitating men. And 40 percent of married people have sex at least twice a week (not to mention those who have more!), compared to 20–25 percent of single and cohabitating men and women.¹²

The list of perks goes on, but only perpetuates the countertrend that marriage is not, in fact, disappointing. It’s simply misunderstood. And we as a modern society seem to be largely unaware of its unique purposes.

IT’S TIME FOR A REBRAND.

Just as Analee and I were entering the painful epiphany that our marriage was missing something, we were invited to a friend’s home for a “marriage day.” We spent the day hearing timeless perspectives and honest reflections on marriage from older, more seasoned couples, and with every story they shared, a bit more color filled my picture for what marriage could be.

This day at a friend’s home challenged my paradigm of matrimony. It painted just enough of a new picture that I couldn’t help but want

more. It marked the beginning of a personal journey to cultivate a vision of marriage worth fighting for.

It's a journey I'm still on today and a journey in which I'd love for you to join me.

I've spent the last three years putting the most basic assumptions about modern marriage to the test. Along the way, I've interviewed three *New York Times* bestselling authors, a molecular biologist devoted to family development, a prime-time TV star, a personality psychologist, two marriage therapists, and several couples whose relationships I simply admire. I've exhausted resources by Israeli Breslov rabbis, modern sociologists, sex therapists, Orthodox priests, university professors, and Christian counselors. And perhaps most importantly, my wife and I have explored these various ideas we've come across by conducting several experiments in our own marriage—every one of which has helped us change our marital narrative and learn the very unnatural art of loving another person.

I began sharing some of my experiments and findings over a year ago and was astonished at the responses. My first article on the subject, “3 Things I Wish I Knew Before We Got Married,” was shared online over 350,000 times and the conversations started by readers clued me in to a few things.¹³

I've noticed I'm not alone in my desire for a new brand of marriage. In fact, I'm walking alongside a vast amount of people—like you—who aren't interested in accepting “marriage as usual.”

I've noticed that most of us want something more from marriage than some quick fix for loneliness or romantic obsession or a tool of self-fulfillment. We want to invest ourselves deeply and see a deep return.

I've seen that many of us believe God created marriage for more than the American dream and idyllic family Christmas card. We want to know what He originally designed it to be.

Most of us know there's more to life than happiness. Instead, we want a version of marriage that actually deals with the realities of life in radical proximity with another person.

We all want to see the end of broken homes and raise children who grow up emotionally connected and confidently commissioned into adulthood.

We want relationship. Real, challenging, relationships that don't just enrich our lives, but play a role in showing the world a better way of life.

In the end, we want a better vision for marriage—one that answers in the deepest parts of us *why* we stay married—a vision that's worth fighting for.

I have no intention of spending the next few chapters handing you a step-by-step formula to a better marriage. You can pick that up from your local Walmart. I simply want to paint a picture of marriage that's worth endlessly investing into.

Join me on this endeavor and we'll talk about four misconceptions about love that accompany modern marriage—happiness, me-centricity, falling in love, and privatization. My hope is that by the end of this book, we'll have replaced them with timeless truths that will play a leading role in writing a better marriage narrative for us all.

However, before we jump in, here are five thoughts—in no particular order—that may help us get started.

1. *Different strokes for different folks*

This book is written under the assumption that if we want to change our reality, we must first change our own minds. Accordingly, we'll use three types of content.



Mindset. These sections deal with debunking common misconceptions and offering a better way to see marriage.



Best Practices. These sections suggest practical ways to help walk out the proposed mindset shifts.



Case Studies. These sections document real-life experiences, primarily through interviews, of those who have seen these mindsets and best practices make a difference.

These three chapter elements are for people like me whose mood often dictates whether they want to chew on deeper ideas and philosophy, acquire practical life tools, or get proof via real life accounts. My hope is that when all three elements converge, a greater vision for marriage will start to come together.

2. *Reflection helps*

If you would like to dig deeper than this book has the page space to go, I've produced a downloadable PDF with questions as you read for personal or group reflection. It also includes suggested experiments and tools to try on your own. To download, simply visit www.tylerwardis.com/marriage-rebranded-reflections.

3. *Formulas are for institutions*

Don't be fooled by the term "Best Practices." I'm not suggesting a one-size-fits-all approach to marriage. These are simply practical insights and suggestions I've come across that have proved worth some experimentation.

Though we'll read plenty of cause-and-effect stories throughout the book, let's be clear that every relationship is profoundly unique. The success or failure of every relationship is a combination of many variables. The goal of this book is to look at a few of those variables from several different perspectives—not to offer a comprehensive guide. If you're looking for a way to avoid the process of trial and error required in developing any real relationship, there are plenty of books out there offering $A + B = C$. However, this is not one of them. Comprehensive formulas are for institutions, not relationships. And I think what we're all after is the latter.

4. My wife is going to join us

I've invited my wife into our time together. At all the right moments, she'll offer her own brilliant thoughts and perspectives.

5. Why I wrote this book

Let's be honest. If I picked up a book about marriage by an author who had only been married for five years, I'd be skeptical too. In our digital age when seemingly anyone with access to Wikipedia can become an overnight guru, I'd be apprehensive to read on as well. If I'm being honest, I initially turned down the request to write this book because of this exact stigma. However, after months of feeling drawn back to the project, here are two reasons I decided to write it.

One, I'm an expert. But only if by “expert” we mean what physicist and Nobel prize winner Niels Bohr means by it: “An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field.”¹⁴ In fact, one could say this book is largely inspired by the documentation of all my mistakes in marriage, identifying the bad ideas behind them and attempting to replace them with better ones—key word here being “attempting.” My wife would be the first to tell you that just because I may be writing about a beautiful

picture of marriage does not mean I'm not in a long and challenging process to cultivate it in my own relationship.

But she can say it far better than I:

Analee's Point of View. *Marriage is the beautiful, messy at times, unfolding of two people in which our growth is never meant to stop. No matter where we are in this lifelong process, WE ARE ALL learning. And there's no question that I have my share of growing to do. But let's just say that the running family joke—that Tyler coined—throughout this writing process was that he couldn't make me his priority because he was too busy WRITING about making me his priority. In all seriousness though, I am incredibly thankful he has been so committed to finding the greatness in marriage and leading us toward it. I've never expected him to be perfect, but to watch him stay open and devoted to the process has been everything a wife could dream.*

I will be opening the good, bad, and ugly of our married life to you with the hope that you might see a bit of yourself in our story, or at least find a slightly better way to develop your own story. But in many ways, I'll simply be a guide to an exploration of ideas and suggestions posed by far more experienced people than I. Most of whom (they're all listed on the dedication page) took the time to sit with me, share life with me, and show me another piece of the beauty of this thing called marriage.

And two, I couldn't not write this book. The statistics are one thing, but I've watched nine young couples in the past two years walk away from their marriages. No doubt you've watched the painful process of marriages falling apart in the lives of friends and family, as well. And while it's true that the decision to end each marriage was unique, I would venture to say many if not most of

these relationships were severed under the influence of bad ideas they've inherited about matrimony.

Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying divorce is universally wrong. Or that I am some sort of hero, here to rescue our current state of matrimony. What I'm saying is simply that, after watching several friends have their relationships destroyed by modern yet misinformed ideas about marriage, I couldn't *not* write this book.

So regardless of how broken your ideas about marriage are or are not, or how functional your marriage is or isn't, let's start over together. Let's wipe our slates clean and become apprentices to this thing called matrimony—or as I've come to know it, the very unnatural art of loving another person.