

## Endorsements

A modern-day marriage miracle! A tribute to the power of God and clinical skills in healing marriages and people.

—**Pat Love**, Ed.D.

Co-author *How to Improve Your Marriage Without Talking About It* and *The Truth About Love*

No matter where you are in your relationship, “*Rebuilding Broken Bridges*” gives you proven strategies and time tested wisdom to create a brighter future. John Wagner is a true master. He understands what it takes to rebuild a marriage because he has done it and now he is making it available for the rest of the world to see.

—**Dr. Dave Martin**

America’s #1 Christian Success Coach  
& author of *The 12 Traits of the Greats*

This is an inspiring story about faith in God made operational by clinical skills which saved and transformed a marriage. It should bring hope to all its readers.

—**Harville Hendrix**, Ph.D.

Author: *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*



REBUILDING  
BROKEN  
BRIDGES

FOR COUPLES



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—**Harville Hendrix, Ph.D.** Author: *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide For Couples*

# REBUILDING BROKEN BRIDGES

FOR COUPLES

*Dream a New Dream in Your Relationship*

JOHN WAGNER, M.S.



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This work is dedicated to Susan, the woman of my dreams, who saw a vision and was willing to help resurrect our marriage to give me a blessed life that is safe and passionate. I also want to dedicate this work to my adult kids, Jeff, Kimberly, and Kristin, who have given us nine beautiful grandchildren. To Harville Hendrix, whose work was an inspiration to heal our marriage, to Pat Love, whose friendship and training has inspired me to go to the next level, to Dwight Bain, whose encouragement to do this work and not quit was a blessing, and to Lee Warren and Dawn Liphrott, whose ideas inspired me in so many ways.

And most importantly, to my Father in heaven, whose unconditional love forgave me all the wrongs that caused so much pain and lifted me up to help other couples heal.





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## PREFACE

*REBUILDING BROKEN BRIDGES* aims to give hope to those who are struggling and want to find the relationship of their dreams. It also puts forth biblical ideas on healthy marriages and joins them with the latest research in relationships. A couple's model for therapy, Imago Relationship Therapy, was developed by Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt and is presented to give a Christian perspective on this topic.

When discussing biblical concepts in this book, I am not writing from a legalistic perspective. Rather, I am writing from the perspective of seeking God's wisdom. When we seek his wisdom, we can understand why God opposes divorce or sex outside of marriage. When we approach this legalistically, we begin judging individuals and using Scripture to shame them into submission. That will not work on any meaningful level.

Some readers may be offended by these concepts, so I ask you to approach this book with an open mind. My wife and I dream of having an impact in our world in the area of marriages and relationships. Our vision is "to save the children of our world by healing relationships." It is critical that the body of Christ begin walking in the love of God and the Spirit of Christ, instead of judging and shaming one another.

When looking at the idea of obedience, we need to look at the Greek words the Bible uses. The English language does not always

convey their original meanings. One word, for example, is *peitharchoo*, which refers to obedience to authority. Yet this word is not used for the obedience of faith. The word *hupakoe* is the word used for obedience of faith. This word is a compound of “hupo,” a preposition, and “akouo,” a verb meaning to hear or understand. Putting the two together, this word translated *obedience* means “to submit to and hearken to what is said.”

The very Greek word itself shows us we cannot have obedience apart from hearing in such a way as to hearken and obey what is heard. In the beginning of Genesis, the most obvious thing about God is He speaks! “And God said, Let there be light; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3 AMPLIFIED). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul tells us that “faith comes by hearing, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom. 10:17 AMPLIFIED). Obedience comes by faith and hearing God. When we hear the word that God speaks today, it gives us the power to accomplish what God has spoken.

When I use the idea of obedience, I refer to hearing God and then, through faith, taking a step by hearing his voice and guidance. God is the ultimate mentor, the ultimate life coach, the ultimate therapist. Many times we miss our destiny by not listening to that still, small voice inside and then stepping out in obedience and faith to reach our full potential.

I sincerely hope that this book motivates readers to be all they can be in their marriage, relationships, family, life, and career.

## **Why Is Marriage So Important?**

Marriage trends in the United States show that beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, marriage rates began to decline. From 1970 to the present, the marriage rate has decreased by fifty percent. The trend also shows that divorce and unwed childbearing significantly increased. Today four out of ten births are to unwed mothers.

## **Why Marriage Matters**

In 2002, a report from U. S. Family Scholars drew twenty-one conclusions from the Social Services. These are a few of those conclusions:

- Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children.
- Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed parents.
- Divorce and unmarried childbearing increases poverty for both children and mothers.
- Parental divorce or failures to marry appears to increase a child's risk of failure in school.
- Marriage is associated with better health and with lower rates of injury, illness, disability, alcohol and substance abuse, delinquent behavior, and depression.

## **Does Divorce Make People Happy?**

A 2002 study done by Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Leu, and Stanley shows that divorce does not make people happier. Here are some of the study results:

Unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married. Even unhappy spouses who had divorced and remarried were no happier than unhappy spouses who stayed married. This was true even after controlling for race, age, gender, and income. Divorce is usually not the best choice for solutions to marriage pain.

Divorce did not reduce symptoms of depression for unhappily married adults, raise their self-esteem, or increase their sense of mastery, compared to unhappy spouses who stayed married. This was true even after controlling for race, age, gender, and income.

Staying married did not typically trap unhappy spouses in violent relationships. Eighty-six percent of unhappily married adults reported no violence in their relationship. Ninety-three percent of unhappy spouses who avoided divorce reported no violence in their marriage five years later. The majority of marriages were not violent. (Source: American Institute of Values—[www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org))



## Chapter One

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# REBUILDING A BROKEN BRIDGE

AS I SAT in our backyard with my eyes closed, I barely felt the heat of the Florida summer afternoon. Maybe the pain would just fade away if I just kept my eyes closed. Tears needed to come, so why fight it? I opened my eyes and stared into the sky in a daze as the sadness welling up within me brought endless sobbing. My eyes were so filled with tears that things looked blurry as I tried to focus on my surroundings. One painful thought began pulling me out of my shock and numbness: My wife Susan had just walked out on me after eleven years of marriage.

Time stands still in moments like that. One minute feels like an hour, an hour feels like a day, a day feels like a week, and a week feels like a month. Like a merry-go-round spinning out of control, my mind raced through thoughts of my life, showing me flashes of bad choices. My mind was obsessed with all my failures. Through my mental fog a fear began to swirl up from my inner self. *This must be what a nervous breakdown feels like.* My breathing was labored, and my heart palpitated. A dizzying sense left me paralyzed as I sobbed uncontrollably.

As I looked around the yard hoping with all my heart that I would see her coming back, my hands shook and my heart ached. If only she would come out into the yard. But she didn't come out that back door, no matter how much I hoped for. Finally, I looked skyward—toward

the only answer that was left. I cried out to God, asking him to forgive me for the sin I had committed.

The first month after I realized my marriage to Susan was ending, I lost all sense of time. Some days I would just walk around crying, remembering nothing but being in a foggy daze. How could this be happening? We were active in our church. I knew God's Word and could quote Scripture with anyone. We even had a ministry helping couples. Yet there we were, on the threshold of being total failures in our sacred covenant of marriage before God.

What led to this devastating point? I had been aware of a few of our problems as they were happening. But much of the understanding I will relate in this book came only years later as I reflected on those pivotal events. We had come into our relationship with a lot of baggage. But like most couples who fall in love, we were not aware of how that baggage would eventually affect us.

Susan and I went from being so in love and passionate about our relationship to feeling emotionally unsafe with each other. When couples reach this point, they feel disconnected and avoid relational intimacy. In our relationship, most of the issues were my own, and I unknowingly sabotaged our marriage. At the time I tended to blame Susan, and I took little if any responsibility for my part in our difficulties. .

For a man who is performance-oriented, as most men are, failing as a protector or provider erodes the very core of our masculinity. The shame we feel leads to a fatalistic philosophy: "Nothing I do will be good enough."

At the time I thought my wife was criticizing me. Only years later did I realize the problem arose from the issues I brought into the marriage. She was just trying to get me to show up for our relationship in the way she needed me to. I took her expression of her legitimate needs as unwarranted criticism. Men and women are wired differently, as Pat Love writes in her book *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking about It*. Unfortunately, at that time I lacked any relationship education. Oh, I tried to save our sinking ship. But I had neither the right attitude nor the right tools.

Still, God wasn't done with me. In Romans 12:2 Paul wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of



your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good, acceptable, and perfect” (NASB). And the Master was about to transform my mind.

My wife had good reason to leave me. Not only had I been unfaithful to her, but she discovered I had also been having an affair for some time. My behavior was selfish, deceptive, and manipulative. How can an individual betray a person you marry and love? It would be some time before I understood the answer to this question.

When Susan confronted me, at first I denied it. I was so out of touch with how my unfaithfulness had devastated her, I was concerned only that I had been caught. Worse, when she tried to confront me, I would react in anger. At the time I didn't realize my anger came from my shame and humiliation. I had betrayed my wife and the covenant we entered into when we were married. Getting angry when we are confronted by the person we have betrayed is the way many men and women act when we get caught. What is the logic in that reaction?

I stopped the affair. But like a lot of couples, we swept the situation under the rug. Part of that is the responsibility of the partner committing the offense, because they think they can repair the relationship. There are many reasons a betrayed spouse might fear dealing with the real issue. Often the reason is economic because as a mother, the woman fears isolation or financial hardship. That is such a sad position to feel trapped in. Though we tried going to counseling, Susan and I never really dealt with the pain of my infidelity. Nothing seemed to help us.

Months later, Susan found children's toys in the back of my car. She was convinced I was still seeing the woman. I tried to explain that I was innocent. As a real estate broker, I had been showing houses to a couple, and their children had left some toys in the back seat. Susan didn't believe me. Who could blame her, as I didn't know how to earn her trust. I believed that trust should just happen. I felt my infidelity lay in the past—and now we just needed to move forward. Today in my counseling practice, I often hear statements like that from men and women who have been unfaithful. I also find that few couples ever develop a strategy for redeveloping trust in the relationship.

A few weeks later, Susan left. I was in such denial and shock. To me, our relationship seemed fine. How could I have been so wrong?

In reality, we were not fine. We were broken, and I had no idea how disconnected we were. Now I remember this when couples come to my office for help with their marriages. One person thinks everything is fine, and the other is miserable. The fact is, I heard Susan, but I never really *heard* her.

As I walked around in a daze of total depression after she left me, I couldn't understand how this could be happening. I was so selfish and in such denial. I never once thought of the horrible pain she must have felt when she discovered my unfaithfulness. All I remember is making a statement I would later understand as the alcoholic creed: "I was sick and tired of being sick and tired."

One day as the sun was going down, with darkness closing in and suffering unbearable pain, I fell on my face before God and began a new and foreign journey. I would encounter something powerful that would change my entire life: *repentance*.

### **Step One: Repentance**

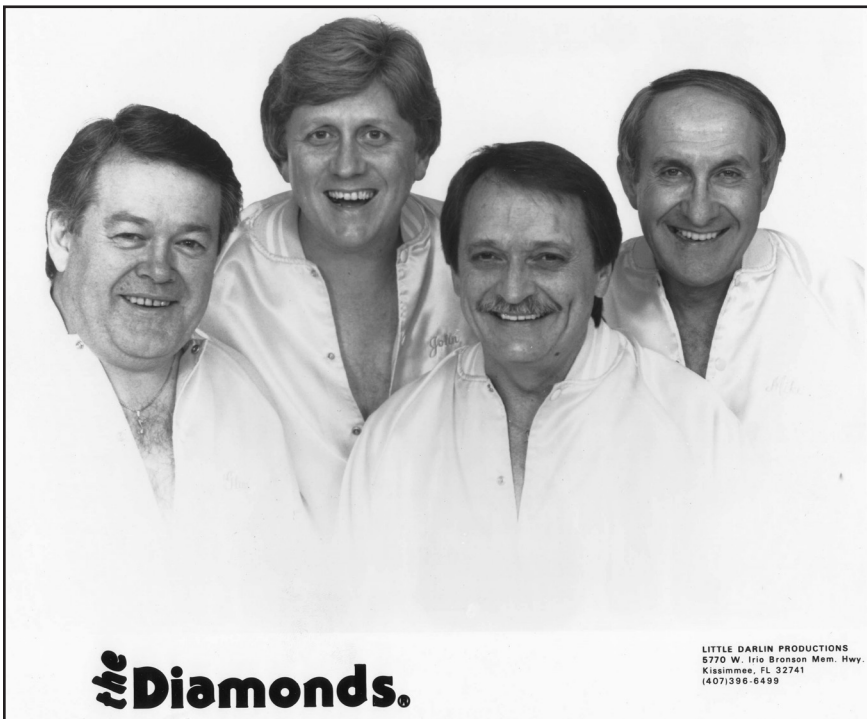
If only we Christians could grasp the cleansing power of repentance—of being sorry for our shortcomings and wanting to start anew.<sup>1</sup> This is not repentance as a single event, but as a journey we can walk throughout our lives. Repentance is not beating ourselves over the head because of our behavior—all that does is deepen our shame. Repentance is not some ritual we go through to let us off the hook from facing the consequences of our behavior. Repentance is not asking God to forgive us on Sunday for what we plan to do on Monday. God may forgive us, but we will still have to experience the consequences of our actions and unhealthy choices. Repentance is a process of change from my way to God's way. I believe it is a total surrender to seek his will for our lives. When we spend time with God, when we know God and not just know about him, when we meditate on the Word, step out in faith and let hope and patience work, we can evolve to the place we need to be.

The repentant voyage is a day-by-day, week-by-week, and month-by-month journey. The Bible says a "godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation" (NKJV). Repentance leads to a person being cleansed, and I was certainly going through a cleansing that would change my

heart for the rest of my life. At the time, however, I had no idea of the eventual outcome. This account of our journey may seem simple at first, but this was the most difficult experience I have ever been through. My goal is to stay on that journey the rest of my days.

When we begin to seek the very presence of God and ask for forgiveness and wisdom to guide our steps, an empowerment comes upon us that cannot be described. Such empowerment can only come from the power of God's Holy Spirit inside us.

I had been full of pride. Although I can't blame the profession I was in, it didn't help. I had been in the entertainment business since I was fourteen, and I traveled the world performing concerts and making television appearances as a singer with a vocal group called The Diamonds. We had sixteen Top 40 hits during the Doo-Wop era of the late 1950s and early 1960s. While I played thirteen instruments, my main one was the tenor saxophone. All of this success fed my ego.



The Diamonds –(Glen Stetson, John Wagner, John Davis, Mike Douglas-1990)

Music was much of my life. It was a gift I inherited, and when I stepped on stage, my alter ego took over and masked all the inadequacies I felt. People would look at me and think I had it made. We would come off stage to adoring fans. Few knew that inside my adult self, I was like a crying little boy. I was looking for love in all the wrong places, as the Johnny Lee song states. For decades I hid behind the tenor saxophone.

I had not been the man, the father, or the husband God wanted me to be. And I didn't have a clue how to be that man. I was a phony Christian in so many ways. I talked the talk, but in many areas of my life didn't walk the walk. I used to hear a message from the fifth chapter of Ephesians that a husband was to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Would someone tell me how to do that?

As I began spending daily time on my face before God, seeking his voice, forgiveness, and perfect will for my life, my heart began to change. I could sense the Holy Spirit cleansing me from the inside. Entering into a covenant with God, I told him that whether or not Susan ever came back, I wanted to be his man. At the time, I had no idea what a pivotal point that was in our journey as a couple. I was letting her go. She didn't deserve to be with a man displaying my kind of behavior.

I made another key decision. I went to my pastor and the elders of our church and confessed my sins according to James 5:16: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (NIV). I wanted healing, but being on my knees confessing this horrible sin before these men I respected was one of the most difficult things I can remember. Yet I needed to perform this act of remorse. I had failed more than just my wife—I had failed them by my actions. As I released the weight of the secret I had kept, I broke down in front of them. As they saw my remorse, they put their arms around me and encouraged me to continue on my new journey. It was cleansing to get my secret out in the open. I was discovering that carrying the weight of this secret had burdened me far more than I realized. As painful as it was to go through, I was being set free by the truth.

There apparently had been a dark side of my life that I battled for years and didn't know how to face. I believe in earlier years I had been fighting a compulsion, almost like an addiction to love. I was so naïve

in those earlier years that I could not see that issue. One would have thought a person could be aware when they have a number of failed relationships. I might have been aware in some way but didn't know how to rise above that. This is more of the type of baggage we bring into a marriage relationship.

Through counseling I began working on my deepest issues, and I became totally transparent in dealing with them. Transparency is not easy, yet it is so freeing to let go of the shame that binds you and to experience what John 8:32 says: "You will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free" (AMPLIFIED).

I had asked my counselors to be truthful and not pull any punches. They didn't! At times that was difficult. When we face the darkness in our lives, it is like sandpaper being rubbed across our skin. That is a painful process, but the journey to healing requires going through pain. In counseling, the defensive layers I had developed through life scripts were peeled away to get to my core issues. The infidelity was my selfish way to get validation for who I was. Life scripts are masks we develop to hide the self-hatred we feel from the shame that binds us.

Many of our friends began seeing a changed heart in me. Many, including one of Susan's best friends, were praying for us and the restoration of our marriage. At the time, even though they knew what I had done, no one had any idea of the devastating hurt and anger Susan had gone through.

But God had not yet touched Susan. She was not impressed by any changes in me—so not impressed that she divorced me. I recall sitting in her attorney's office making the statement that one day we would be back together. This really angered her, especially when her attorney said the same thing. Yet God was not done with either of us.

## **Step Two: Release**

I then entered into the second step of my journey. That step was release. One evening as I walked around my neighborhood, I realized I needed to release the situation to God—to give him my life and my marriage. Sometimes we try to manipulate God with our prayers, as if he doesn't know everything we are thinking. But sometimes, when we

have petitioned God with our prayers, we have to release those requests for God to work them out.

I believe that when I did that the spiritual forces of the universe were released so God could begin working on the healing of our relationship. At the time of this release I could not say I prophetically saw this happening. I just knew I had to cast all my cares upon him who cares for me (1 Pet. 5:7). One reason I had to learn to let go was that my personality was very manipulative, and that would have to change.

### SUSAN'S STORY

It just couldn't be true. "I'm telling you Susan," said my good friend Jan, "he's seeing somebody else. I saw them together last night, and it sickened me."

The pain drove me to my knees. My mouth opened in an attempt to scream, but my stomach was twisted in too many knots for any sound to escape. *John is having an affair? How dare he!* I fell on my knees. This couldn't be happening. He would never betray me like that. How could he do that to me, us, our family?

My thoughts swung from rage to depression to near-hysteria. I remember throwing myself on our bed and crying for what seemed like hours. I picked up the phone to call John—and started screaming at him. When your heart has been pierced by betrayal, most of us lose control of our emotions. Grace and forgiveness were the furthest ideas from my mind. I wanted to pay him back; my rage was one way of doing that. In moments when we lose all control of our rationale, we often do things like that, somehow thinking we are paying someone back. The truth is, we are not.

You think because you are a Christian and get married that everything will be wonderful. When you are so in love, you think this connection will last forever. What we don't realize when we get married is that we are selfish. For a marriage to succeed, we need some basic tools. We need information and understanding on why we are attracted to each other, how to communicate with each other, and what we need from each other. We need to learn how to be married and how to raise children.

When we married, John and I both had unresolved business from our past. But we didn't realize it. I look back and wish we had received help and healing before I left him. Actually, I didn't leave at first. Somehow I thought we could crawl out of this hole. So I gave John the benefit of the doubt, thinking we could heal. Months later, still not trusting him, I found toys in his car and was convinced he had never stopped the affair. I left him then, only to find out later that he had stopped seeing the woman months before.

John and I first met at Calvary Assembly's singles ministry in Winter Park, Florida. We had both been previously married. I had two daughters (ages eight and ten), and John had a son (age twelve). He asked me out for coffee. When I got home that night, I said to myself, "No, he is not the one." We just didn't click. I didn't realize he felt the same way.

A year went by. With my parents, my children, and a prayer partner, we went on vacation to Heritage USA in South Carolina. While there, my prayer partner had a vision. Visions were new to me. She told me she knew who my husband was to be. She told me he was John Wagner. She saw us older—in a chapel building. John was sitting on the platform looking very distinguished, and I was speaking. The people in the audience had slanted eyes. She asked the Lord if the people were Asian, and God said no; Susan is opening the eyes of the deceived. I was taken back with this vision as John and I were not even talking—let alone dating.

I didn't believe my friend at first. I got back home with my family on a Sunday evening. The next morning, John called me. I was shocked because I had not seen him for a year. We began dating, and this time it clicked. Eventually he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. How could I have not fallen in love with him? He was so charming, charismatic, spontaneous, and passionate about life. Having a family was so important to him. John adopted my daughters and raised them as if they were his biological children.

Years later, when I learned John was having an affair, I thought my world was coming to an end. I can remember saying to God, "You gave this vision to me; how could this be happening?" A mistake must have been made. The pain was unbearable. I didn't want to live this way. No words can describe the pain you experience when your dream comes

apart. I can't begin to describe those horrible hours. Months later, I was still so angry and hurt that when I saw those toys in John's car, I would not talk to him and I left. Convinced the affair was still going on, I would not believe him.

During the next year, I stayed angry and hurt and filed for divorce. Some friends were telling me that John had been working on himself and having a heart change, but I could not trust that with what had happened. Time went on and John's son, Jeff, was getting married. Jeff wanted me to be there when he got married, so I accepted his invitation with some apprehension. Little did I know what was to happen.

As we both showed up at the wedding, a miracle happened. In church earlier that day, the Holy Spirit came upon me. I couldn't stop weeping. I wept through the service and all through lunch. I did not understand why I was crying, but I felt the Holy Spirit upon me. I believe God was softening my heart so that when John and I saw each other, I would be able to talk to him.

After the wedding we stayed in the sanctuary and talked endlessly. A week later, we met for dinner. That evening when I got home, the Holy Spirit said to me, "Are you going to live your life your way, or are you going to live it my way?" Those words penetrated my being and I knew God was bringing that vision back into my heart. He was saying to me, "I have a plan for your life."

## JOHN'S STORY

Months went by and nothing happened. I went on with my life until one day God touched Susan's heart and mine. A most amazing thing about this miracle was that it occurred at my son's wedding—reminding me that the first miracle Jesus performed was also at a wedding. That day as we met, we were both apprehensive. We had not communicated for nearly a year, but at the wedding we started talking. We talked so much we even missed part of the reception. We began discussing the possibility of exploring how to put our relationship back together.



### Step Three: Obedience

Talking with Susan again brought both of us to a third step, which is obedience. God was putting us back together—whether we felt like it or not. We knew deep down that our destiny was to be together. But we were not two people running in slow motion across a meadow embracing in the middle and having skyrockets go off. This was a scary time. I had not yet earned Susan's trust, and a lot of healing still had to occur. From one day to the next, we did not know what was happening between us. But the decision we made to become obedient began our healing process.

When some Christians think of obedience it is usually in the context of being obedient to Old Testament laws and commandments. That kind of obedience might also be thought of as legalism. But the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that no one could keep the law in every detail. Because of that, Jesus came to fulfill the law. Christ gave his followers only one commandment, and that was to love him and our brothers.

Applying that to our decision, Susan and I were being obedient to love each other. Refusing to take that step would not condemn us or put us beyond the pale. But by taking that step, we were putting ourselves in a position to be blessed. We were not aware of this as we took these steps, however. Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if we all walked in that love instead of judging one another and gossiping? Think of the incredible blessings we would receive.

We made a commitment to love each other, and our feelings gradually began to come back. One problem in our microwave Western culture is that we are oriented to events and feelings. As long as there are the feelings of love, we think we are with the right person. When those feelings are no longer there, we are not with the right person. The modern mass media has programmed us to believe that love is confirmed on the basis of our feelings.

The statistics show how much we believe this. We know that about half of all first-time marriages end in divorce, but what we don't hear is that sixty-five percent of second-time marriages and about seventy percent of third-time marriages also end in divorce. If divorce were the answer, then these statistics for second and third marriages would be going the other way.

When we make a decision to love our spouse, the byproduct of that decision is our emotions or feelings. But our own “selfness” can make us incapable of making that decision. There are times when we are so self-oriented that the pain we feel in a ruptured relationship keeps us from the very hope that can bring a rebirth to that relationship.

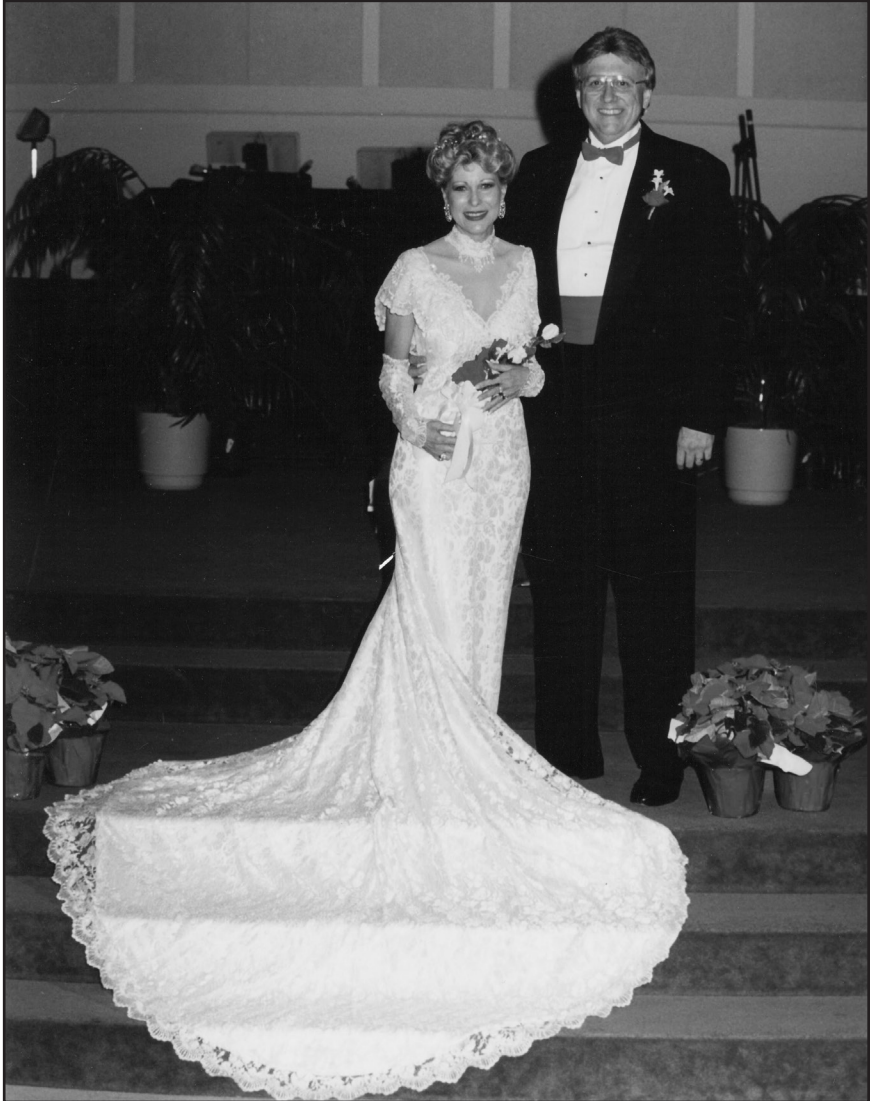
I believe there are times when a marriage between two hurting people has to die before a resurrection can happen. In the middle of an argument with your beloved, you are not feeling great love. But when we make a decision on the other side of that argument to love that person, the feelings come back. Put that idea in a larger piece of time and make the same decision—and the feelings will return. In therapy this is one of the most difficult concepts for individuals to understand.

Part of our journey to be obedient was putting to work a process we learned from a model of marriage counseling developed in the 1980s by Dr. Harville Hendrix and his wife, Helen Hunt. They called it “Imago Relationship Therapy.” Hendrix’s first book *Getting the Love You Want* explains this process with one of the main skills being the “Couple’s Dialogue,” where a couple engages in a structured conversation. The communication skills we learned began to help us understand the core issues in our power struggle which led to the tearing apart of our marriage. (When I mention communication skills, I mean learning to connect with each other at a deeper, more intimate level. We had talked for years. Couples talk all of the time, but they rarely connect and truly understand each other.)

Eventually an exciting day came to pass. After a painful year and a half, Susan and I decided to get remarried. Had a vote been taken in our church, we would have probably been voted the couple least likely to succeed. Our remarriage was not just an exchange of vows, but a whole church celebration, with Susan walking down the aisle wearing the wedding dress our daughter wore at her wedding the year before.

Susan was gorgeous as she walked down the aisle. My son Jeff, was my best man. Susan’s friend Jackie, who had prayed for us through our ordeal, was her bridesmaid. The ceremony was truly a celebration to a victory of God and the process of Imago Relationship Therapy in our lives, offering hope to others who may walk through a similar crisis. As she walked down the aisle, Susan was thinking what a tribute to God’s

victory this was. She was thinking what a beautiful story of how two people who walked through such bitterness, lack of forgiveness, anger, and pain could come to the victorious place of being healed, set free, and totally in love with each other.



**JOHN AND SUSAN**-our remarriage picture

## Healing Relationships

In our journey we learned how to make history actually become history in our lives and relationship. What we discovered was that in order to heal the dysfunction in our family, we first had to heal the dysfunction in our relationship. Ideally, this healing starts from the head of the family and works down, not from the feet up. This lesson, one I have walked through myself, now serves as the basis for the work I do with couples. If a husband and wife are not in harmony, it is difficult to have harmony in the rest of the family. 1 Peter 3:8–9 states, “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing” (NIV). In other words, we are to inherit a blessing by learning to bless others and not control them. How difficult that is in the middle of pain and hurt!

The healing Susan and I went through was only part of our journey. With my selfish behavior, I had hurt many people. Most importantly, I hurt my kids, who were young adults by this time. And I also hurt Susan’s parents. I knew I had a long way to go to earn their trust. One of our daughters wouldn’t talk to me for two years after we were married and Susan’s father didn’t want me on his property. I could not blame them for feeling that way.

As our remarriage date was December 7, when Susan’s dad told her he didn’t want me at their home, she was not going to go see them at Christmas. I told her she had to maintain that relationship with her parents as we never know when they won’t be with us any longer. The next year her father went through major health problems with his heart. I would go to the hospital and stay in the lobby praying for him. I walked in unconditional love, and I believe God honored that. Shortly before he died we made a connection and her father forgave me.

I had to do the same with my daughter, and eventually we made a reconnection. Behavior has consequences, however, and to this day I am so totally aware that I need to honor her and walk in unconditional love.

The beauty of a repentant journey is that God gives the grace and wisdom not to expect that we’re entitled to forgiveness. With the new

heart God had given me, I knew I had to walk in unconditional love with everyone I had hurt. That kind of love can only come from the grace (unmerited favor) that God gives us. In time, I earned the trust of those I had hurt in so many ways.

As we began to be healed in our relationship, God gave us both a vision of “saving the children of this world by healing relationships.” As our healing grew, our spiritual walk with God grew. We became teammates, not just helpmates. We became best friends and not best enemies. We became prayer warriors earnestly seeking God’s will for our future. Our healing was so dramatic that I began to see a vision of helping other couples find the dream relationship we found.

## Following the Vision

When you believe God gives you a vision, step out boldly to claim it. I decided to follow that vision and start graduate school at an age when I should have been thinking of retiring. At age fifty I finished graduate school in psychology. I then began the process of getting licensed, with the goal of being a family therapist and getting my certification in Imago Relationship Therapy. I wanted to help troubled couples by blending biblical teaching with practical application and skills that individuals could understand.

I went to Boise, Idaho, to intern with Ron Dent, a psychologist who trained me in Imago Therapy. My formal Imago training was with Pat Love in Austin, Texas. Pat is the author of *The Emotional Incest Syndrome*, *Hot Monogamy*, *The Truth about Love*, and most recently *How to Improve Your Marriage without Talking about It*. That last title is probably every man’s dream—the two words men fear the most are “let’s talk”!

The vision of saving the children of this world by healing relationships started becoming a reality as we began helping other couples through their struggles. After all, we did not just talk the talk; we had also walked the talk. By God’s grace, the power of our testimony has given hope to hundreds of other couples in crisis who saw no way out.

I believe that *couples do not want divorce; they want an end to pain*. If they can find a way to deal with pain, many marriages heading toward divorce can be saved. God has shown me that before we can have a unified family, one based on intimacy, we have to have marriages in

harmony. Many couples' power struggles occur because they sabotage their relationships with the baggage brought into that relationship. That baggage creates an emotionally unsafe environment for the pair.

One goal for couples on their journey of healing is to see their partner's world as it is to their partner, rather than to see it only from their own perspective. In other words, to learn what that world is like for one's spouse, not just what you think it is.

When a couple doesn't feel safe with each other, either emotionally or physically, distance begins to develop. And when distance develops, relational intimacy suffers. That is when a couple feels like they are two ships passing in the night without a rudder, feeling like roommates instead of lovers hopeless that they can ever feel love for each other again. The only way to rekindle that intimacy and passion in a marriage is to find a way to redevelop safety so the emotional distance begins to close. The book of James states, "Let every man be quick to hear [a ready listener], slow to speak, slow to take offense and to get angry" (1:19 AMPLIFIED). That is the key to unlock your spouse's heart.

I have yet to see a couple intentionally using these skills who do not find the "relationship of their dreams." Imago Relationship Therapy is the door through which couples can discover harmony, intimacy, and passion. Their children can be saved from drugs, alcohol, suicide, and gangs. I believe in the potential of us all coming together—and walking toward the path of healed children.

Susan and I have not arrived. We do not walk on water. We are on a journey to eventually spend eternity with our Father. Our journey is exciting, romantic, and filled with daily blessings. When marriage is in harmony, couples enjoy many byproducts. Their prayers are no longer hindered, according to First Peter 3:7; financial blessings can be poured out so we can concentrate our energy on the majors rather than the minors. And most importantly, we can join together as husband and wife and become prayer warriors to present our petitions to God

Our goal is to become and stay "warriors for Christ." Repentance, release, and obedience can bring God's blessings and favor as we have never known. Susan and I have come to believe that our transparency in sharing our testimony can bring hope to couples in crisis. In that way we can truly save the children by healing relationships.

The next chapter will reveal the idea and connection of blood covenant in the Bible and how that relates to marriage covenant. *Covenant* is a concept few Americans understand, thus making it difficult to grasp why it is so important in the Bible. For example, if we do not understand what a blood covenant is, how can we understand what having a relationship with God is all about? And beyond that, how can we understand the marriage covenant that is created when we exchange our wedding vows? Explore this vital mystery with us.