



Tend: Before the Wedding

Matt Headley

Advance Review Copy — July 2026

Introduction: Before the Wedding

Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features of men's faces.

— Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”

Opening Scene

The laptop was open on the desk. The desk was in what used to be an office and was now Hannah and Noah’s bedroom. Stuffed animals on a shelf. A nightlight shaped like a moon.

Heather sat in the chair. I pulled another up beside her and sat down.

The therapist’s face came on the screen. She said hello. She asked how we were doing.

Neither of us answered right away.

I reached over and found Heather’s hand. She didn’t pull back. She squeezed. Not hard. Just enough.

I kept my eyes on the screen.

I was terrified. Not of the conversation. Of what came after it. Of what Heather might decide, once all of it was out in the open and she had enough room to choose.

We had stayed fine for a long time. We couldn't stay fine anymore.

The therapist waited.

The Premise

Most couples prepare for the wedding.

Almost nobody prepares for the marriage.

Not because they're careless. Because the wedding is concrete and the marriage is abstract. The wedding has a date, a venue, a checklist. The marriage is a Tuesday in February six years from now when you're both exhausted and you can't remember the last time you looked at each other. The wedding is easy to plan. The Tuesday is hard to prepare for.

This book is five conversations before you say I do. Not because they'll prevent every hard season — they won't. But they'll mean you go into the marriage knowing each other better than most, with more to work with when things get hard, and a clearer sense of what you're actually promising.

I wrote this from the inside of a marriage, not from above it. Heather and I have been married for fifteen years. We've had our own marriage counseling, our own hard seasons, our own cycles that we didn't see until we were in the middle of them and someone helped us name what was happening. I've also spent twelve years walking alongside couples as a pastor — using research-based tools in premarital counseling sessions, officiating weddings, watching people make vows and then living inside them.

The credential isn't the title. It's the experience. The room.

What This Book Is

Five conversations. One per chapter. Each one covers ground that engaged couples typically skip — not because they don't want to talk about it, but because nobody gave them permission to go there before the wedding.

Conversation 1: Who You Are. Your attachment wiring. The landscape you move into under stress. Your partner has one too. Until you can name them, you'll mistake each other's defaults for hostility.

Conversation 2: The Cycle You'll Fight In. Every couple develops a negative cycle. Yours already has one. This conversation names it before it runs your first decade.

Conversation 3: What You Carry. You're marrying someone's whole formation — their family, their wounds, the lessons they learned about love before they met you. This conversation surfaces what you're both bringing in.

Conversation 4: The Rhythms That Will Hold You. You're not building a perfect marriage. You're building a marriage with practices of return — things you keep doing even when you don't feel like it, so that when you drift, you have something to come back to.

Conversation 5: The Promises You're Actually Making. Not the vow you say on Saturday. The vow you keep on Wednesday. What covenant means when things get hard. How couples find each other again after rupture.

What This Book Is Not

This is not therapy. If you need that — and many couples do at some point — go get it. That's brave, not weak. This book is one step before therapy and one step after a checklist. It's a guide from someone who has been in the room, not above it.

This is not a list of rules for a successful marriage. The couples who lasted longest, in my experience, were not the ones who followed the most rules. They were the ones who could see each other clearly and keep choosing each other anyway.

This is not a promise that if you read it, your marriage will be easy. It won't be. Marriage is the most sustained, demanding, and worthwhile work most people ever do. These conversations won't make it easy. They'll make it more honest. That's better.

How to Use It

Read it together. Do the prompts together. Have the conversations before the wedding — not the night before, but in the weeks leading up to it. Give each conversation its own night, its own hour, its own space.

Don't try to finish each other's answers. Don't rush toward resolution. The goal of each conversation is understanding, not agreement. You're not solving anything. You're seeing each other more clearly.

Some of what comes up will be surprising. That's the point. You thought you knew each other. You do. And there's more.

Conversation One: Who You Are

The essential function of religion is to radically connect us with everything.

— Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*

Opening

Here is the opening scene:

Heather came into the office on a Tuesday afternoon and leaned against the doorframe.

“Hey,” she said.

I was looking at my laptop. Something about Exodus 3. I said hey back without looking up.

She stood there for a second. Two seconds. Then she said, “I just need to talk to somebody.”

I said, “Give me like five minutes.”

She left. I finished the paragraph. I looked up and she was gone and the house was quiet and I went back to the screen.

Later she would say she had needed me right then. I would say I had not known that. She would say it was obvious. I would say I thought she meant five minutes. She would say she did not mean five minutes.

None of that happened that day. That day she went to the kitchen and I stayed at my desk and we both moved the way we always moved, the way water moves, without thinking about it.

The Conversation

You already have an attachment style.

You didn't choose it. It formed in you before you had language — in the earliest years, in the rooms where you learned whether the people you needed would show up. It's the wiring underneath everything. It runs before your conscious mind engages, before you've decided how to respond, before you even know you're scared.

And it's going to show up in your marriage.

Not because something is wrong with you. Because this is how human beings work. We develop strategies for getting connection and avoiding pain, and those strategies get very efficient over time. By adulthood, they run automatically. Your partner will trigger them, and you'll trigger theirs, and neither of you will always be able to see it happening in real time.

The goal isn't to eliminate your attachment style. You can't. The goal is to know it — to have enough distance from your own defaults to see them when they're running so you can make a choice about what to do next.

What the Research Says

Geoff Holsclaw, a theologian and neuroscientist who studies how attachment and faith form together, identifies four attachment landscapes. Think of them not as fixed categories but as territories — places you move into under stress.

The Pasture is the secure landscape. You feel safe. You can reach for connection without terror, stay yourself without shutting down. You're not anxious about whether the other person will leave. This is where you function best, where your real self shows up.

The Jungle is anxious attachment. You move toward people — urgently, sometimes desperately. You need reassurance. You scan for signs of disconnection. You may pursue harder when you feel your partner pulling away, which often makes them pull away more. The fear underneath: *I'll be abandoned.*

The Desert is avoidant attachment. You move away from people under pressure. You need space. You go quiet, go internal, pull back when things get intense. You can look cold or indifferent, even when you're not. The fear underneath: *I'll be swallowed up, I'll lose myself.*

The War Zone is disorganized attachment — wanting connection and being terrified of it at the same time. Harder to navigate. Less common, more painful.

Most couples consist of a Jungle person and a Desert person. The pursuer and the withdrawer. The one who gets louder when scared and the one who goes quiet. Each is trying to get back to the Pasture. Each is making the other's landscape worse.

The Jungle person pursues because they're scared. The Desert person withdraws because they're scared. The Jungle person reads the withdrawal as rejection and pursues harder. The Desert person reads the pursuit as overwhelm and withdraws further. Nobody's winning. Nobody's bad. They're both stuck in their landscape.

What It Looks Like in Our House

Heather would come home and want to talk about her day. I would already be somewhere else in my head — a project, a problem, a sentence I was trying to work out. She would say something and I would say “mmhm” and that would be enough for me and not nearly enough for her.

She did not say that for a long time. She just got quieter about it.

What she said was “it's fine.” What she meant was that it was not fine, and that she had already learned it was not worth saying so. I did not know that. I thought we were fine.

Monica helped us see it. Ten years of Thursday afternoon telehealth calls, Heather and me in our separate rooms of the same house, and eventually we had a language for it. Monica is a UMC deacon and a marriage counselor and she does not rush to fix things. She just names them. She named the pattern: Heather moves toward, I move away. Not because I do not love her. Because the Jungle scares the Desert.

There is a word for what Heather was doing. It is called minimizing. She was making herself smaller to fit what I could hold. She stopped doing that somewhere around year eight. It was not dramatic. She just started saying what she actually needed, and I had to learn to stay in the room for it.

We still have our landscapes. That has not changed. What changed is we know whose we are standing in.

Before the Wedding, Have This Conversation

Sit together. Put the phones down. Give yourselves at least an hour.

Question 1: When you feel scared or disconnected in a relationship, what do you do? Do you reach for the other person? Do you go quiet? Do you get busy? Do you become more critical?

Question 2: Think of a time you and your partner were out of sync. Without blaming anyone — what was each of you doing? What were you each afraid of?

Question 3: What does your partner do that helps you feel safe? What do they do, even without meaning to, that makes the fear worse?

Question 4: When you're in your worst landscape — most anxious, most shut down, most defended — what do you need? And can you ask for it?

The One Move

Name your default landscape to your partner. Not as a diagnosis. As an invitation.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to give your partner something more to work with than guessing.

Conversation Two: The Cycle You'll Fight In

Until I have been brought in solitude to the very ground of my being, where I am beyond the grip of my surface self with all of its plans and distractions, I am not able to hear the divine whisper.

— Rueben P. Job & Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Walk with God*

Opening

The day after Thanksgiving, 2008. I was supposed to be at her family's house.

I was four hours late.

I was finishing a video — a proposal video I'd been making for weeks. I didn't tell her that. She didn't know what was happening. She thought I was ending it. By the time I arrived she had been sitting with that for four hours. When I apologized, she minimized it. Said it wasn't a big deal. Let it go.

That evening, at Noccalula Falls in Gadsden, I got down on one knee in the Christmas lights. She said yes.

The wound from the afternoon disappeared under the joy of the evening. Nobody said anything. Nothing changed. We got engaged, and the pattern that would run our first decade of marriage had its first win.

The Conversation

Every couple develops a negative cycle. Yours already has one. It started before the wedding.

That's not a warning. It's a description. The cycle isn't your fault and it isn't your partner's fault. It's what happens between two people when they're scared and trying to stay connected. The problem isn't the cycle. The problem is not seeing it.

Here's what the cycle looks like from the inside: you're arguing about something that seems important — the dishes, the schedule, who was late for what. You're both saying things that feel true. The conversation gets louder or colder or both. One of you shuts down. The other pushes harder. Eventually it stops, but nothing is resolved. You're both confused about how you got there. You don't know what you were really arguing about.

Sue Johnson spent her career studying this. She's a psychologist who developed a method of therapy called Emotionally Focused Therapy — EFT — by watching couples argue and asking one question: what is actually happening here? What she found is that most couples are having two conversations at once. The surface conversation is about the dishes. The deeper conversation is about something older and scarier: *Am I safe with you? Do you still want me? Are you going to leave?*

She called the surface pattern the demon dialogue. The pursuing partner and the withdrawing partner — each doing the thing that makes sense from the inside, each making the other's fear worse. The pursuer pushes because they need contact. The withdrawer goes quiet because they need space. The pursuer reads the silence as rejection and pushes harder. The withdrawer reads the pressure as attack and pulls back further. Both of them are trying to get to each other. Neither of them is making it.

The argument about the dishes is almost never about the dishes.

What the Research Says

Gottman identified the same thing from a different angle. After forty years watching couples, he found that the happiest couples weren't the ones who never fought. They were the ones who could fight without losing each other.

The difference wasn't the conflict. It was the story each person told about the conflict. Couples who stayed together tended to interpret negative events as temporary and situational — *he was late because he was stressed, not because he doesn't care*. Couples who struggled tended to interpret the same events as permanent and personal — *she always does this, she'll never change*.

Same argument. Two different stories. Different outcomes.

The couple who sees the cycle can interrupt it. The couple who doesn't see it will live inside it.

What It Looks Like in Our House

I am an Enneagram One. I have a reformer's instinct — I see what's wrong, I want to fix it, I tend to assume my read is correct. The gift of that is clarity and follow-through. The shadow of it is this: I override people. Not loudly, usually. Quietly. I ask Heather where she wants to eat. She says Wendy's. I say, actually, let's go here instead.

She's an Enneagram Two. She puts other people's needs before her own. She says yes when she means no. She minimizes things that hurt her because she doesn't want to cause trouble. She's generous and warm and she swallowed her real preferences for years without either of us fully noticing.

That's the pattern. I steamroll. She absorbs. I don't feel the friction. She doesn't produce friction. The cycle runs smoothly and quietly until it doesn't.

For a long time, the cycle ran like that — me driving the agenda, Heather adjusting to it. I thought things were fine. She was experiencing something different, but I didn't know to ask, and she didn't know how to say.

Then she started talking. Not all at once. Slowly. She said no when she meant no. She said *actually, I wanted Wendy's* instead of letting it go. We fought more. The fights were uncomfortable, especially for me — I wasn't used to friction, and I didn't know what to do with it. But we were finally having the real conversations instead of the managed ones.

We still have the cycle. We still get into it on the evening walk sometimes, about nothing, about everything. But we can see it now. And when we see it, we can say: I think we're doing the thing. Let's stop for a second.

Naming the thing is half the work.

Before the Wedding, Have This Conversation

Sit together. Put the phones down. Give yourselves at least an hour.

Take turns answering these questions. Don't evaluate each other's answers. Don't fix anything. Just listen.

Question 1: What do you do when you feel disconnected or scared in a relationship? Do you move toward the other person? Do you go quiet? Do you get critical? Do you fill the silence with activity?

Question 2: What are you usually actually afraid of, underneath the behavior?

Question 3: What does your partner do that makes the fear worse, even when they don't mean to?

Question 4: What does your partner do that helps?

The One Move

The next time you feel the cycle starting — one of you going cold, one of you pushing harder, both of you confused about how you got there — say this:

That's it. Don't problem-solve. Don't explain. Don't defend. Just name it. Then stop and breathe for two minutes before continuing.

You won't always catch it. Sometimes you'll be three rounds in before one of you can see it. That's fine. Even catching it late is better than not catching it at all.

Conversation Three: What You Carry

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings.

— Wendell Berry, "To Know the Dark," *The Selected Poems*

Opening

The first marriage enrichment retreat Heather and I attended was at WinShape Retreat Center at Berry College in Rome, Georgia. We drove there from Indiana early in our marriage, not because things were bad but because someone had told us this was worth doing before things got hard.

We sat in a room with other young couples and a teaching couple who ran the conference. The teaching couple asked us to look at what we were carrying. Not what we wanted from the marriage. What we had already brought into it — the patterns we'd learned, the things we'd decided without deciding, the version of love we'd watched growing up and were now either repeating or reacting against.

It was uncomfortable. The things you've been carrying for twenty years don't feel like weight anymore. They just feel like you.

The Conversation

You are marrying someone's whole formation.

Not just the person you know — their preferences, their habits, their sense of humor. You're marrying everything that made them who they are: their family, their wounds, the lessons they learned about love before they had words for them.

Some of what they carry is a gift. Some of it is a strategy that worked in their family of origin and will cause problems in yours. The strategy isn't a character flaw — it made sense where it came from. But it's going to show up.

The question isn't whether your histories will enter the marriage. They will. The question is whether you'll be able to see them when they do.

The Enneagram is useful here — not as a system that defines you, but as a map that names the default under pressure. You don't need to know your number to start. You need to know your mask. The thing you reach for when you feel unsafe.

The perfectionist reaches for control. Not because they're mean — because if they can make everything right, nothing will go wrong. The helper reaches for selflessness. Not because they're generous — because if they can make themselves indispensable, they won't be abandoned. The achiever reaches for busyness. The peacemaker reaches for agreement. The challenger reaches for strength. Every type has a strategy. Every strategy was smart somewhere, for someone, at some point.

What happens when two people marry their strategies instead of each other is a slow collision. It rarely looks dramatic at first. It just looks like Tuesday.

If you've taken an Enneagram assessment and know your type, bring it to this chapter. If not, take fifteen minutes now — Truity offers a free version — and note what resonates. Then come back. You're not looking for a label. You're looking for the pattern underneath your behavior when things get hard. Because that pattern is already packed.

What the Research Says

Family systems research has a concept called differentiation — the ability to stay connected to another person while also remaining yourself. Low differentiation looks like fusion: you take on each other's moods, you can't disagree without feeling like the relationship is threatened, you need constant approval to feel stable. Or it looks like cutoff: you stay so separate that nothing gets in, including the things you actually need.

Most of us land somewhere in the middle, leaning one direction or the other depending on what we learned growing up.

What parents model about conflict resolution tends to show up in the next generation. Not always as a direct copy — sometimes as the opposite, as a reaction. But the original pattern is in the room.

What did your parents model? That's not a therapy question — it's a preparation question. You're not being asked to diagnose your family. You're being asked to know what you inherited so you stop being surprised by it.

What It Looks Like in Our House

Early in our marriage, Heather and I tried to model our life together on another couple — a senior pastor and his wife in Muncie. We admired them. We studied how they moved through the church, how they handled conflict, how they presented themselves. We were trying to build something, and we were using someone else's blueprint.

The problem with that isn't that the couple was a bad example. The problem is that it wasn't our marriage. It was a performance of someone else's marriage. And the performance held until it couldn't — until the real pressures arrived and there was nothing underneath to hold us.

Heather was also handed a role she hadn't applied for. In ministry, a pastor's wife comes with a job description written by the congregation. Certain things are expected. Certain things are not said. She took that role on because it seemed like what you did. Over time she recognized what it was costing her. Now she doesn't play it.

What I carried into the marriage was a pattern of overriding — steering decisions toward what I thought was right, assuming I had the clearer read. I learned this somewhere. I carried it forward. It ran for years before I could fully see it.

What Heather carried was a pattern of accommodation — giving way, minimizing her own needs, saying yes when she meant no. She learned this somewhere too. She carried it forward. She's still undoing it.

Neither pattern was chosen. Both were inherited. Seeing them didn't fix them overnight. But seeing them made the marriage something we could actually work on instead of just living inside of.

Before the Wedding, Have This Conversation

Give yourselves an hour. Put the phones down.

Question 1: What did you learn about love from watching your parents or the adults who raised you? Not the lesson they intended — the lesson you absorbed. How arguments ended. Whether they ended. What affection looked like. What was never spoken.

Question 2: What have you sworn you'd never do, that you've already caught yourself doing?

Question 3: What role has been handed to you in this relationship that you didn't apply for? What do people expect of you that you haven't agreed to?

Question 4: What do you need from your partner that you've been afraid to ask for directly?

The One Move

Tell each other one thing you learned about love from watching your family. Not the headline. The small thing. The specific one.

How arguments ended. Whether someone apologized. What happened the morning after a hard night. What the table felt like on a good Sunday. What was never talked about at all.

You don't need to unpack all of it. You just need your partner to know it exists. Because it's coming with you. And they're better prepared to meet it if they've at least been introduced.

What It Looks Like on the Other Side (*Deliver — Matt writes this*)

Conversation 4: The Rhythms That Will Hold You

Opening

Heather and I take a walk most evenings. Twenty minutes, sometimes less. The kids are outside or doing chores, and we step out together and catch up about the day.

Sometimes we argue on the walk.

We still take the walk.

That is the whole thing, really. Not that we never fight. Not that we always feel close before we head out. Sometimes I am still carrying something from the afternoon, and she can tell, and within four minutes we are into it on the road in front of the neighbors' place. But we are walking. We are together. And usually, by the time we circle back, something has shifted, or at least we are less alone with it.

We started doing this because we needed it. Two people raising kids and managing a household and trying to stay married and stay sane. The walk was not romantic. It was structural. A container we built because we knew ourselves well enough to know that we would drift without it.

You will drift. That is not a prediction about your particular marriage. It is a description of how people work. Life gets full. You get tired. You start managing parallel, you and your spouse moving through the same house on different tracks, efficient and separate. You forget to look at each other. You forget to be curious about each other. It happens in good marriages, ordinary marriages, marriages that last fifty years. The drift is not the problem. The problem is not having anything to bring you back.

That is what this conversation is about. Not the wedding. Not the honeymoon. The Wednesday night six years in.

The Conversation

Here is what most couples do: they wait until something is broken to figure out what might fix it.

They go to counseling after the distance has been there for two years. They plan a date night after three months of never being in the same room without a screen between them. They have the big conversation about their marriage after the smaller conversations stopped happening.

The premise of this chapter is different. The premise is that you do not wait.

You build the practices now, before you need them. You decide, together and in advance, what the ordinary shape of your marriage will be. Not the extraordinary shape. The ordinary shape. Not the vacation and the anniversary and the big celebration. The Tuesday. The Thursday. The moment after dinner when the dishes are still on the table and you could either drift toward your phone or drift toward each other.

There is a version of marriage that is entirely reactive. You respond to crisis. You manage symptoms. You show up when things get bad enough that you can no longer ignore them. Some marriages survive that way. Most just get slowly emptier.

There is another version. You decide, ahead of time, that certain things are non-negotiable. Not because you are rigid. Because you know that when the fullness of life crowds in, and it will, the things you never protected will be the first things to go.

This is not about rules. It is about identity. The couple you are building is the couple whose practices reveal their priorities. When you look back in twenty years, the story of your marriage will be told, in large part, by what you kept doing.

What did you keep doing?

What the Research Says

John Gottman has spent forty years studying couples. His lab at the University of Washington has watched thousands of marriages, tracked them over decades, and identified what separates the ones that last from the ones that don't.

Here is what he found. The couples who stayed together were not the ones who never fought. They were not the ones who had resolved all their core differences. Many of the lasting marriages had the same arguments, repeatedly, for years. The same friction points showed up in year three and year twenty-three.

What separated them was something Gottman called "positive sentiment override." The simple version: they had made enough deposits that the withdrawals did not bankrupt them.

A deposit is small. It is a hug in the morning before you leave the house. It is asking "how was your day" and actually listening to the answer. It is a ten-second eye contact across a room. It is taking a walk. Gottman's research found that stable couples had a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interactions. Five moments of warmth, connection, or simple pleasure for every one moment of conflict, complaint, or distance.

Five to one.

Not one grand gesture for every argument. Not a vacation to make up for a hard season. Five small things for every one hard thing. Over and over, in the ordinary run of a week.

He called it “small things often.” The way you build a marriage is not through the occasional heroic effort. It is through the accumulation of ordinary moments that say: I see you. I am still here. You still matter to me.

The couples who forget this tend to invest their energy in the dramatic rather than the daily. They plan the big trip. They have the long conversation. They make the gesture. And then they go back to running parallel, assuming that the capital from the big thing will last.

It does not last. The account needs to be replenished regularly.

The couples who know this tend to have a few practices that they protect. Not because they are particularly disciplined. Because they decided, at some point, that these things were worth protecting. And they kept deciding. Over and over, until the practices became the texture of their life together.

What It Looks Like in Our House

I will tell you what we actually do, and I will tell you that it is imperfect and inconsistent and real.

We give each other a hug in the morning. Not always a long one. Sometimes it is brief and functional, somebody has to get the kids up, somebody is already half-gone toward the day. But we reach for each other before we reach for the day. That hug is a decision, made small and quietly, every morning. This person is the person.

We try to walk in the evenings. Twenty minutes, usually. Heather and I step outside while the kids are still playing or finishing their chores, and we catch up about what happened while we were apart. Sometimes those conversations are easy. Sometimes we walk into something hard, a frustration one of us has been carrying, a tension that has been building, and we work it out on the road. I have had some of the most important conversations of my marriage while walking. We also walk on Saturday afternoons when we can. Sometimes on Sundays. The walk is the place where we return to each other.

We did not always live on a country road. When we were newlyweds in Muncie — first a trailer, then our first house — we walked sidewalks. Hours of them. The practice started there, on those flat Indiana streets, before kids, before the demands that would make the walk feel like a discipline rather than just what we did. Some of the best conversations we have ever had happened on those sidewalks. The location changes. The practice does not.

We try to hold hands on those walks. Until Heather needs her hands back. She talks with her hands, and when something she is saying gets big enough, she has to let go to say it right. We laugh about this. But until then, we are holding on. That matters more than it sounds. There is something about physical contact — what Arthur Brooks, the Harvard professor and happiness researcher, calls a form of love that operates below the level of language — that bypasses the part of your brain that is still in work mode and touches something more fundamental. Your body knows things your mind is still catching up to. When I reach for Heather's hand on a walk, even a walk where we have just been arguing, there is a signal being sent: I am still with you. We are still on the same side of this.

In the evenings, when we are able, we read together with the kids. Right now we are working through Harry Potter. Our son Soren loves to read out loud, and we let him. There is something about gathering around a story together that slows the house down, that makes everyone, including us, more present. It does not happen every night. But when it happens, it matters.

For several years, we used a tool called The Marriage Journal, put together by Jeremy and Audrey Roloff. Six questions, once a week, a short devotional, a calendar for the week ahead. We would sit down together and write in the same journal, taking turns, week by week. It gave our conversations a shape when we needed one. We do not use it as consistently now, but what it built in us — the habit of asking, the habit of answering — stayed.

And we try, though we do it less now than we used to, to light a candle and share prayers and gratitudes before bed. We started this when the kids were very young. It was simple: here is something I am grateful for, here is something I am praying about. The candle made it feel like an event rather than a task. Some nights it was beautiful. Some nights someone was crying. Some nights I was the one crying. But it was ours. It was the moment at the end of the day when we named what was true.

These days, we do it less. Life is full. We are often tired. Some weeks it does not happen at all, and we fall into bed without it, and we do not feel particularly guilty about that. But we return to it. We light the candle again. We find our way back.

That is the honest version. We are sometimes managing life in parallel, two competent adults moving efficiently through the same space without really touching. And then something pulls us back. A walk. A hug. A Harry Potter chapter read out loud by a kid who loves his own voice. The candle.

You are not building a marriage where connection is permanent and effortless. You are building a marriage where the practices of return are so deeply embedded that you always know how to find your way back to each other.

Not a perfect marriage. A resilient one.

Before the Wedding, Have This Conversation

Sit together. Put the phones somewhere else. Give yourself at least an hour.

Here is the question:

Take turns answering. Do not evaluate each other's answers. Do not negotiate yet.
Just listen.

Then ask: what would it look like to build that practice now, before we need it?

Write your answers below.

The Tradition Behind the Practice

There is an ancient Christian practice called the Divine Hours — fixed times of prayer throughout the day, inherited from Judaism, practiced by monks and ordinary believers for two thousand years. You pray at sunrise, midday, evening, and night. Not because you feel like it. Because the hour has come.

Phyllis Tickle, who spent years researching and writing these prayers, described what they do to a day:

“Prayer is always a place as well as an action, and the daily offices are like small chapels or wayside stations within the day’s courses. May grace attend all who enter there.”

Small chapels within the day’s courses.

That is what the practices in a marriage are. Not grand sanctuaries. Small chapels. Wayside stations you return to. The walk. The hug. The ten minutes on the porch. You build the chapel small enough that you can always enter it, even on the hardest days, even when the door feels heavy.

The hour comes. You show up. Something in you reorients.

The One Move

Pick one practice. One. Not five. Not a system. One.

The morning hug. The evening walk. Ten minutes on the porch after the kids are in bed. A candle and two questions before you sleep.

It does not need to be profound. It needs to be yours. It needs to be small enough that you can do it even in the hardest weeks, even when you are depleted, even when you do not feel like it.

Then make a decision. Not a goal. Not a resolution. A decision.

Write it here:

You will miss it sometimes. You will have weeks where it disappears entirely and you look up and realize it has been a month. That is not failure. That is marriage. The failure would be forgetting that you ever decided.

Come back. Light the candle. Take the walk.

The practice is waiting for you.

Conversation Five: The Promises You're Actually Making

We hurt, and are hurt, and have each other for healing. It is healing. It is never whole.

— Wendell Berry, “The Broken Ground”

Opening

December 4, 2015. 9am.

Jim Allison and Anna Warren came to Weaver First United Methodist Church before the wedding. They sat with me and I asked them the questions I always asked: Why do you want to be married? What do you believe about marriage? How will your family feel about a private wedding?

They answered. Jim had cancer. They both knew. Anna knew what the odds were. She had asked herself the question and found her answer before she ever called to ask me to officiate.

4pm, same sanctuary. Small group. Shirt and tie. No program. No unity candle. Just the two of them and the witnesses, and the words.

She married him anyway.

The Conversation

A contract has conditions. You hold up your end, I hold up mine. If circumstances change enough, the contract can be renegotiated or dissolved. That's a reasonable arrangement for most agreements.

A vow is different.

A vow is made precisely because circumstances will change. It assumes the worse will come. It is not a bet that things will go well. It is a promise to stay when they don't. Anna Warren didn't negotiate terms with Jim Allison. She didn't write an exit clause for the bad diagnosis. She made a vow.

Most couples getting married don't feel the weight of that. They're not trying to avoid it — they just can't see it yet. You can't fully understand what you're promising until you've lived inside the promise long enough to be tested. That's true for everyone who has ever stood at an altar.

But you can get closer to understanding it before you stand there.

What the Research Says

A theologian named Robert Jenson wrote something worth carrying into the ceremony. He said that in an age when our culture has lost faith in promise-keeping, the church could be an outpost of promises made and kept.

Not a place of perfection. An outpost. A community that holds the promise even when the people inside it are failing at it.

That's the real function of the witnesses at a wedding. You're not just asking them to watch. You're asking them to hold something with you. When you forget what you promised, or when you're too tired or too hurt to hold it yourself, the witnesses remember. The community carries what the couple can't always carry alone.

Anna and Jim had a small group. But they had witnesses. And they had a room that had held a lot of promises before theirs — some kept, some broken, all of them real.

What It Looks Like in Our House

I have stood in front of couples on their wedding days and said the words. Lots of couples. I have also stood in front of some of those same couples years later and watched the marriage fall apart. I have watched people keep promises that cost them something real.

Here is what I know: the couples who stay together are not the ones who never hurt each other. They're the ones who know how to find each other again after they do.

Every marriage ruptures. That's not a failure of the marriage. It's a feature of two people living in close proximity under real pressure. The rupture is not the problem. Not having a way back is the problem.

What the couples who last tend to have in common isn't the absence of hard seasons. It's a repair loop. A way back. Something they can say or do that opens the door again even when they're too stubborn or too hurt to want to walk through it.

Our repair loop isn't elegant. It often starts with someone saying something awkward, or walking into the kitchen to offer a hug when neither of us is ready, or just saying: *I don't want to be fighting*. It doesn't always work on the first try. But we have a door. We know where it is. After a hard night, one of us always reaches for it eventually.

That's the promise, lived out on a Tuesday.

Before the Wedding, Have This Conversation

Sit together. Give yourselves an hour without phones.

Question 1: What does “for better or worse” actually mean to you? Don't give the ceremonial answer. Name a specific worse — something that has already happened in your relationship, or something you can see coming.

Question 2: What is the hardest thing you can imagine staying through? Not the hardest thing you expect. The hardest thing you can imagine.

Question 3: When you've hurt each other and need to find your way back, how do you do that now? What works? What doesn't?

Question 4: What do you need from your partner to feel safe enough to come back after a rupture?

The One Move

Write your repair sentence together. Not a script — a door.

Something one of you can say after a hard fight that signals: *I still want to be in this. I'm ready to find you again.*

It doesn't have to be poetic. It just has to be true. And you both have to know what it means.

Not the unity candle at the wedding. The candle you light on a Tuesday in February when the kids are finally in bed and neither of you feels like it. The one you light anyway because you decided — before the wedding, in a conversation like this one — that this was the practice you were keeping.

That candle is the vow. Not the ceremony version. The Tuesday version.

The Tuesday version is what you're actually promising.

Closing: Tend

Taylor and Karrie got married on September 2, 2017, at three in the afternoon.

They'd spent the summer having conversations. Four sessions over four months — the questions nobody asks before a wedding, the ones about wiring and wounds and what each of them had learned about love from watching their families. They argued in some of those sessions. That was fine. They were practicing.

They came to the wedding knowing more about each other than most couples do. Not everything. You never know everything. But enough to start with more to work with.

That's all these conversations were ever trying to do.

The word *tend* is a farming word. You tend a field. You tend a fire. You tend something alive that needs regular attention to stay that way. It doesn't happen all at once. It happens in small acts, repeated over time, some of them noticed and some of them not.

A marriage is something you tend.

Not a project you complete. Not a problem you solve. Not a feeling you sustain. A living thing that requires your regular, unglamorous, faithful attention.

The morning hug. The evening walk. The candle you light on a Tuesday when nobody wants to, when the kids are finally in bed and you're both too tired to do anything except sit there, but you do it anyway because you decided — before the wedding, in a conversation like the ones in this book — that this was the practice you were keeping.

That's tending. Not the dramatic version. The Tuesday version.

You will have seasons where you lose the practices. You will have weeks when the walk doesn't happen, the candle doesn't get lit, the hug becomes perfunctory and then disappears. That is not failure. That is life. That is what it means to be two real people sharing a real life under real pressure.

The question is not whether you'll drift. You will.

The question is whether you have practices of return. Something you know how to do to find each other again. A walk. A candle. A sentence one of you says when you've hurt each other and are ready to come back. The door you both know how to open.

These five conversations were meant to give you more to work with. A vocabulary for your wiring. A name for your cycle. A clearer picture of what each of you carried into this. A practice or two that you decided to protect. And a more honest sense of what the vow actually costs and what it's actually worth.

Take that into the wedding. Let the ceremony say the big words. And then go home and tend the thing.

One Page to Keep

Who You Are — Name your default landscape to your partner. When I'm scared, I tend to . *What I actually need is* .

The Cycle — Name the cycle to each other. When we're disconnected and scared, here's what happens between us: . *When I notice it starting, I'll say:* .

What You Carry — Tell each other one thing you learned about love from watching your family. One thing you're bringing into this marriage that you didn't choose.

The Rhythms — Pick one practice and protect it. The morning hug. The evening walk. The candle. Name it. Decide it. Keep it.

The Promises — Write your repair sentence. When things go wrong between us, I can always say: ____.

Conversation Cards — Printable / Expo Hand-Off

Card 1: Who You Are

The insight: You have an attachment landscape. So does your partner. Under pressure, you move into it automatically. Until you can name each other's defaults, you'll mistake them for hostility.

Your move this week: Tell each other your default. Not as a diagnosis — as an invitation.

Card 2: The Cycle You'll Fight In

The insight: Every couple develops a negative cycle. The cycle is not the problem. Not seeing it is the problem. A cycle you can name, you can interrupt.

Your move this week: The next time you feel it starting, say: *I think we're doing the thing.* Stop there. Breathe first.

Card 3: What You Carry

The insight: You're marrying someone's whole formation. Some of it is a gift. Some of it is a strategy that worked in their family and will cause friction in yours. The strategy isn't a flaw. It's inherited. See it.

Your move this week: Tell each other one specific thing. Not the headline — the small thing. How arguments ended. What was never spoken. One thing.

Card 4: The Rhythms That Will Hold You

The insight: You're not building a perfect marriage. You're building a marriage with practices of return. Small things, done often. When you drift — and you will — you need something to come back to.

Your move this week: Pick one. Not five. One. Name it. Start it before the wedding, not after.

Card 5: The Promises You're Actually Making

The insight: The vow is not a contract with conditions. It's a covenant — a commitment that assumes the worse will come. Every couple ruptures. The question is whether you have a way back.

Your move this week: Write your repair sentence together. It doesn't have to be poetic. It just has to be true. And you both have to know what it means.

Enneagram Appendix — Tend: Before the Wedding

Understanding Your Types

The Enneagram is a personality framework built around nine core motivations — not just behaviors, but the deeper *why* underneath your behaviors. In a relationship, knowing your type and your partner's type doesn't predict success. But it gives you a language for the patterns that will repeat — the ways you'll frustrate each other, protect yourself, and show love.

What they bring: Integrity, reliability, a strong sense of right and wrong. They show love by improving things — fixing, building, holding the standard. *Mask under pressure:* Criticism (of self and others). Perfectionism that stalls intimacy. “This isn't good enough” — about dinner, about the relationship, about themselves. *What their partner needs to know:* Their inner critic never stops. The criticism you feel from them is usually aimed inward first.

What they bring: Warmth, attentiveness, a gift for knowing what others need. They show love by giving. *Mask under pressure:* Resentment. When giving becomes obligatory, they stop saying no and start keeping score — often without realizing it. *What their partner needs to know:* Ask them what *they* need. They won't offer it. They've been trained not to.

What they bring: Drive, confidence, the ability to make things happen. They show love by succeeding on behalf of the people they care about. *Mask under pressure:* Image management. When things are hard, Threes look fine. The performance is convincing enough to fool even them. *What their partner needs to know:* The most important thing you can do for a Three is stay curious about who they are underneath the achievement. They may not know either.

What they bring: Depth, emotional honesty, the ability to sit with hard things. They show love by being fully present in the dark. *Mask under pressure:* Withdrawal and idealization. What's missing always looks better than what's here. The relationship in their imagination is always more vivid than the one in front of them. *What their partner needs to know:* They don't want you to fix the hard feeling. They want you to stay with them in it.

What they bring: Thoughtfulness, self-sufficiency, the ability to stay calm in chaos. They show love by knowing things — and sharing that knowledge with you. *Mask under pressure:* Withdrawal. When overwhelmed, Fives disappear. Not to punish — to preserve the small amount of energy they have left. *What their partner needs to know:* Solitude is not rejection. It is how they come back to you.

What they bring: Commitment, dependability, and a radar for danger that protects the people they love. They show love by staying. *Mask under pressure:* Anxiety that looks like suspicion. When afraid, Sixes test loyalty — sometimes in ways they

don't recognize. *What their partner needs to know:* Consistency is the most important thing you can offer them. Reliable presence over time is the language they believe.

What they bring: Joy, possibility, the ability to make ordinary moments feel like adventures. They show love by making life more fun. *Mask under pressure:* Avoidance. Pain, boredom, and limitation all feel like emergencies to a Seven. They escape forward — into the next plan, the next trip, the next idea. *What their partner needs to know:* Help them stay. Not by trapping them — by making the present moment worth being in.

What they bring: Strength, protectiveness, the ability to tell hard truth. They show love by fighting for you — sometimes, unfortunately, with you. *Mask under pressure:* Control. An Eight who feels exposed will become the aggressor before they become the vulnerable one. *What their partner needs to know:* Their intensity is not a threat to you. It is a form of respect. They don't show this much to people they don't take seriously.

What they bring: Calm, acceptance, the ability to see everyone's side. They show love by making space — for you, for the relationship, for whatever you need. *Mask under pressure:* Disappearance. Not dramatic — Nines go numb. They'll agree with everything and mean nothing. They lose themselves so gradually they often don't notice until they're gone. *What their partner needs to know:* Ask them what *they* want. Not “what do you think?” — what do *you* want? Then wait. Give them time to find it.

How to Use This in Your Relationship

1. Both partners take the free Truity assessment ([truity.com](https://www.truity.com)) independently.
2. Read each other's type description — out loud, together.
3. Ask: “*What's accurate? What's not? What surprised you?*”
4. Find your pairing at tendmarriage.com/enneagram for a snapshot of your specific dynamic.

The Enneagram doesn't tell you whether your relationship will work. It tells you *where* the work will be — and gives you words for it before you're in the middle of the hard conversation.
