



Renew the Romance in Your Marriage

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Part of the “WE, not ME” series



The Mystery of Marriage

A Romantic Evening: The day had been uneventful, yet Jeremy felt a happy sense of anticipation. He was trying to concentrate on the customer complaint when he started daydreaming. He let his thoughts wander to the evening. Mom will pick up the kids at about 7:00, he mused, then Rachel and I will have the evening to ourselves! He smiled as he turned back to work.

Rachel's day had been stressful, one crisis after another. Even so, her warm sense of anticipation would not go away. Her mind wandered to the evening. It's been too long since we had an evening together, she thought. I can't wait until his mom picks up the kids. She let the glow of anticipation linger as she went back to work.

Whoops ... the mood changes! "Why can't you ever stand up for me?" Rachel demanded, hurt and angry, as Jeremy stomped out of the room. It was only 7:15 and the anticipated evening was already a disaster! Jeremy had his own angry thoughts as he retreated to the garage, "Why can't she get along with my mother?"

What happened to the mood? The mood shift was dramatic! Rachel and Jeremy were kidding and touching as they got the children ready for grandma. Ten minutes later, there was nothing but anger and tension between them. All that happened was a comment from Jeremy's mother, "Looks like I will have to teach him some manners."

"She didn't mean anything by that," Jeremy argued, defensively, as his mother drove off. "Then why did she look straight at me when she said that?" Rachel shot back. "She implied that I don't discipline correctly. Why did you just stand there?"

Wow! The evening went from warm and romantic to cold and angry in seconds! What caused the dramatic mood shift?

Who was at fault? Neither Rachel nor Jeremy wanted the evening to end like it did. But as each assessed the situation, it was obvious that the other person caused the problem. They were both wrong.

The problem was the relationship. Communication broke down between them and a bad mood set in. They blamed each other because they could not see the relationship! They went from allies, using the word, “we,” to two individuals using the words, “you” and “me.” To put it simply, the WE split apart into two ME's!

Try these exercises:

1. Write WE in capitals on a piece of paper. Go over the letters to make them dark. Flip the paper over, turn it upside down and look at the letters from the other side. Now you see the word ME. When communication breaks down, the sense of being allies is lost and you feel the need to defend yourself. It's like your relationship got flipped upside down!



2. So where is the problem? It may feel like it's your partner's fault. Try this exercise to see it differently: Write the words, "The Problem" on a sticky note. Stick the note on your spouse's forehead, as a symbol of representing where you usually think the problem is. Notice that you can see the problem but your spouse cannot! Now put it on the table between you. Now you both can see the problem and work on it together.

Blame the WE!

The WE controls the mood. When the relationship is connected, you are allies and the mood is good. Your home is a safe place. When the WE breaks down, the mood is turbulent and things are no longer safe. At that point, you are more interested in defending yourself (ME) than working together (WE).

Marriage means WE, not ME. There is great mystery in being a WE. It's one of the most powerful forces on earth. It can join the couple together for life, weathering all storms that would destroy it. The book of Ephesians in the Bible gives a graphic illustration of this powerful force: "And so a man shall leave his father and mother and the two will become *one flesh*." (See Mark 10:6-10)

It is helpful to see this one flesh, or WE as a separate entity. Building the WE is like constructing a house. There are many different kinds of houses, but each one needs careful planning, a solid foundation, strong building materials, and a balanced design. The structure of your marriage is invisible, but must be carefully organized and put together in a balanced way.

Think of your marriage as a "WE" that is built on four pillars. Each pillar must be gradually built and strengthened, and all four must stay balanced in terms of depth of intimacy.

When these pillars are strong and balanced, your home can weather the storms of life.

The Four Pillars of the WE

- I. Intellectual (good communication)
- II. Emotional (a safe place to control the mood)
- III. Physical (familiarity and respect)
- IV. Spiritual (commitment and trust)

Let's take a look at how each pillar can be strengthened, and how they work together to form a powerful WE.

I. Intellectual Pillar of the WE

Back to the romantic evening: *Rachel watched Jeremy turn away in anger and thought, he doesn't care about my feelings. He would rather take up for his mother ... he should be married to her!*

Jeremy retreated to the garage workbench, angry and mumbling to himself: "All she cares about is herself. It's her way or no way! She has to control things all the time."

This is what they believed to be true of each other. But they were both wrong! Rachel didn't want to control things. She wanted Jeremy to take charge. And Jeremy didn't take his mother's side; he was just trying to be reasonable about how to deal with the situation.

Boy, did they miss each other's souls! It's like they really didn't know each other.

Think back to the first time you saw your spouse. How much did you know about her at that moment? The answer is probably very little! You saw the surface, but really knew nothing about her soul.

This pillar grows gradually until the two of you become soul mates. Mental intimacy develops with greater self-disclosure, honesty, and patient listening so that you can get into each other's world. What inhibits such intimacy is lack of self-disclosure and misunderstanding.

Self-Disclosure

Building the WE requires an increasingly deeper understanding of the other person's soul. This means each of you must disclose what you are thinking and feeling; you must let the other person understand your inner world.

It is tempting to present only what you believe the other person wants to hear or what will make you look good in his or her eyes. It's tempting to keep the peace and not stir the waters. None of that is good for the WE.

Your inner thoughts and feelings cannot be seen. The only way for your spouse to understand them is for you to *express* them. Telling it like it is in a loving way is good for the WE. I like the way this insight for healthy relationships is expressed in the book of Ephesians: "Speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we are to grow together..." (Ephesians 4:15a).

Understanding Each Other

And then there is listening. Misunderstanding destroys the WE. About 90 percent of arguments are not true disagreements; they're misunderstandings. We each have a different way of expressing ourselves, so it's no surprise that we don't always understand one another. One helpful way to understand how people tend to communicate is to know the difference between **painters** and **pointers**.

In most marriages, one person is a painter, like Rachel. This person notices everything and reacts to things as they occur. Many different things go on in her mind at once. When talking, the painter will use many brush strokes, or words, to paint the picture. The painter often thinks out loud, putting the picture together as she talks.

The pointer of the relationship, like Jeremy, focuses on one thing. He will think things through and sort them out before speaking. The first thing out of his mouth is the point and everything he says will stick to this point.

You can now see what went wrong as Rachel and Jeremy tried to talk about his mother. Rachel, the painter, put up the first brush stroke. "Why don't you ever defend me?" Jeremy reacted to the first thing she said, thinking this was the point, "How should I have known that you needed defending. I can't read your mind!" Rachel was then frustrated because Jeremy wouldn't let her paint the whole picture. Jeremy became frustrated and defensive at the first brushstroke, but that was designed to get the pointer's attention.

Then Jeremy, the pointer, tried to bring up the subject. "I think we are making too much out of this," he began in his usual logical format, trying to find a solution. Rachel, looking for brushstrokes of detail, did not listen, but immediately begin digging for more information. "Why do you say that? Doesn't she upset you at all? Don't you feel anything?" Jeremy quickly became aggravated. These questions forced him to jump from file to file inside.

"Yes, I do feel things," Jeremy objected as he walked away, responding literally to one of Rachel's questions. "You feel for your mother, but what about me?" Rachel shot after him.

Skills to strengthen the intellectual pillar of the WE

- **Talk about specifics.**

You probably need to work on this if you tend to talk about things in the abstract, in general terms, or in absolute terms. (*"You only think of yourself."* *"You always ..."*)

At any point in the conversation, focus on a concrete situation. (*"Let's talk about last night when you got upset and walked away from me."*)

Then share what you were thinking and feeling at that moment. (*"I walked away because I felt ..."* *"When you turned and walked away, it made me think that ..."*)

- **Tell the truth about yourself.**

Sometimes what you really feel is disguised in a question or critical comment. This makes your feelings the other person's problem. (*"Why do you always say that 'It's nothing'?"*)

Instead, take responsibility for yourself and tell your spouse how you feel. (*"Maybe you don't see this as a big problem, but I am anxious about it."*)

Then let your spouse know that all you want to do is share how you are feeling. Be clear that you are not trying to put her down. (*"I just need you to listen and not react for a few moments until you understand what I am feeling."*)

- **Listen.**

No buts. When your spouse is talking, don't prepare your rebuttal. (*"I know you think it happened that way, BUT ... "*)

Pointers, like Jeremy, must learn how to listen by waiting for the whole picture to be painted before reacting. (*"Mom's comment left you feeling upset. I want to know exactly how you feel. Paint me a picture."*)

Painters, like Rachel, must learn to double-click on the pointer's first words, like an underlined word on the Internet, asking for more detail. (*"Tell me more about 'making too much of this.'"*)

II. Emotional Pillar of the WE

Back to the romantic evening: *Rachel thought about going into the garage and continuing the conversation, but stopped herself. It didn't feel safe to be vulnerable again. She tried to tell Jeremy how she felt, but it felt like a slap in the face when he walked away with his jaw set.*

Jeremy thought about going to find Rachel, but knew it would just be another argument.

This wasn't the first time there had been an argument over his mother. It was about the 137th! Each time nothing got settled, and the sides were drawn even more rigidly until the mood shifted as soon as Jeremy's mother was mentioned. Their home certainly was not an emotionally safe place at the moment. There was no way to be vulnerable in this area of their relationship.

When you first laid eyes on your spouse, how vulnerable did you feel with him? The answer is you didn't. You had no emotional attachment. You had to be on your best behavior.

As the emotional pillar grows, you develop deep emotional connections. Positive connections create a good mood, closeness, and emotional intimacy. You can kick off your shoes, get comfortable and talk over anything. When you're together, you know you have an ally. Your relationship is a safe place.

Unresolved conflict weakens the emotional pillar, making home an uncomfortable, unsafe place. When you get frustrated and pull away from each other, the turbulence does not go away! It becomes freeze-dried and sticks in the atmosphere between the two of you. I call these freeze-dried mood particles (FDMPs).

These mood particles hang in the atmosphere of your relationship. When the same upsetting topic comes up again and again, it adds more and more freeze-dried mood particles to the atmosphere.

Rachel and Jeremy have 137 of these mood particles accumulated in the atmosphere. Now just a mention of his mother will change the mood as quickly as a tornado sweeping through the house! With such unresolved mood particles, anything to do with his mother will not be a safe place.

Skills to strengthen the emotional pillar of the WE

- **Money in the bank keeps a good mood going.**

Most couples give nine disconfirming statements for every affirmation. We do it without thinking because there is always something that seems to need correction. (*“Why don’t you just ignore my mother?”*)

Reversing this ratio puts money in the bank. Give each other five affirming comments before you earn the right to express one item of concern, and you build a reserve of good mood. (*“I love how you notice everything. Very little gets by you!”*)

- **Be allies to get the good mood back.**

When the WE breaks down and your feelings are hurt, it’s natural to blame your spouse. (*“Why are you so critical?”*)

Instead, recognize the problem as a misunderstanding and shift from you to WE. (*“I think WE missed each other. Let’s try that conversation again.”*)

- **Clearing the air keeps bad mood particles from accumulating.**

Deal with conflict as soon as possible. The author of Ephesians recommends, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and upset with each other” (Ephesians 4:26). (*“I guess WE both have a right to be upset about the situation with mother, so let’s stop blaming and get to the bottom of our differences.”*)

III. Physical Pillar of the WE

Back to the romantic evening: *Jeremy remembered how natural it was for the two of them to touch before the “mom” situation occurred. Now he felt like the last thing he wanted to do was touch Rachel. Then, being honest with himself, he did like things a lot better when they were close. He didn’t like the cold wall between them. He wished he could reach out and break it down so they could feel close again.*

Rachel felt lonely and confused. Why had Jeremy shifted so completely from being close to not even wanting to touch her? Was she that bad? Then she realized that their moments of affection had diminished as the bad moods seemed to stay around longer and longer. They didn’t kid around as much, either. I miss our first year together when we seemed to be in each other’s arms all the time, she thought.

When you first laid eyes on your spouse, how comfortable and familiar did you feel with her? At that point, there was no familiarity. You had not yet touched. Her presence was not familiar.

The physical pillar of your relationship develops as you become more comfortable touching and being close to each other. Touch must stay pleasurable for both and gradually become more intimate, staying in balance with other pillars of the WE. Appropriate touch creates intimacy through familiarity. It grounds the relationship in a powerful way and leads to the wonderful, mysterious intimacy of becoming “one flesh.”

Inappropriate touch or the lack of touch damages this pillar. In fact, not touching allows bad moods to persist, but resuming considerate, non-sexual touch is the fastest way to get the good mood back.

Often the physical pillar is out of balance with the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual pillars.

If sex enters the picture too early, that skips many of the steps to building touch intimacy. The couple never experiences the joy of simple touch — holding hands, hugging, playful touch. If touch becomes explicitly sexual too quickly, this pillar is weak and cannot remain robust and exciting. In fact, a couple with a poorly built physical pillar may gradually stop touching altogether, until even sex stops. (See the section on skills to build the physical pillar for specific suggestions on dealing with this problem.)

Make your marriage an embrace place.

A healthy physical pillar means that there are dozens of casual touches every day. Most relationships are several quarts low on hugs and run a real danger of the engine overheating. To keep things running smoothly, strive for at least a half dozen hugs a day, three handholding opportunities, two longer snuggling times, and a dozen playful touch moments!

Men and women tend to crave different kinds of affirmation from their spouses. Men generally like that look of respect in a woman's eyes in order to feel masculine. Women usually appreciate that powerful look of love in a man's eyes in order to feel feminine.

Advice to Rachel: For the sake of the WE, do not belittle Jeremy. Show him respect, even if he doesn't deserve it at the moment. This gift will help him value your needs as highly as his own.

Advice to Jeremy: For the sake of the WE, do not regard Rachel as hard or unimportant to you. Show her that she is the most precious, special part of your life. Do this even if she doesn't deserve it at the moment. This gift will help her value your needs as highly as her own.

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, your spouse gradually becomes what you believe her to be. People are truly changed by being loved, not by being criticized!

Skills to strengthen the physical pillar of the WE

- **Strengthen the WE.**

See the WE as the "third person." It starts out as a "baby" that needs nurturing and attention.

Make WE-time a priority, developing habits that include time each day (like taking a walk together) to catch up on each other's life and time to talk through things.

Set aside one night a week as a "date night" — this is good for the WE!

- **Build better physical intimacy.**

Initiate non-sexual touch every time you are with your spouse. For example:

Hug each time either of you leaves or comes home.

Hold hands, touch knees, or lean against each other when watching TV.

For Jeremy: Think of touching Rachel as a way of giving her security and love. Your touch can make her feel like you want something, especially if the touch has sexual connotations.

For Rachel: Think of touching Jeremy as a way of showing admiration and respect. Your touch can feel condescending to him, especially if you don't feel close to him.

If the physical pillar was not built carefully, you may be missing the richness of non-sexual touch (and sex may have lost its passion because this richness is missing). Consider going back to the beginning and starting touch over! Agree not to have sex for two weeks while you learn again how to enjoy being close. Start with holding hands, hugging, and other non-sexual touch. Focus on how the touch feels. Imagine giving your spouse warmth and love through your touch.

Then, gradually become more intimate over the two weeks. Keep talking to share what you are feeling. You will find a different kind of connection, and a stronger physical pillar, when touching means more than just sex!

IV. Spiritual Pillar of the WE

Back to the romantic evening: *I guess I don't trust him anymore when it comes to his mother, Rachel thought. He just will not back me up or stand up for me.*

Jeremy was having the same problem with trust. I would rather go to my mother's by myself. When Rachel is with mom, there always seems to be tension, he thought.

Rachel remembered when she would have trusted Jeremy with her life. They seemed to be such allies. How can we get that feeling back? she wondered.

When you first laid eyes on your spouse, how committed were you and how much did you trust him? The answer is likely not at all. You were two separate persons. There was no WE.

We have seen so far that when you built your marriage relationship, you created something that did not exist before. I like to call this a spiritual structure, or a WE. It is spiritual because the relationship cannot be seen and contains some of the most powerful forces in a person's life. It is a structure because it is constructed of the interaction patterns that become the habitual ways you and your spouse relate to one another.

A Team of Three

As a couple, you are really three: YOU, ME, and WE. This is where your two spirits are united so that the mysterious oneness can occur in all of its power. You start out as two MEs. As the spiritual pillar grows, the two of you become a WE! You gradually shift from concern for yourself and what you can get out of the relationship to concern for one another.

I like the way this quote from the second chapter of Philippians in the Bible describes the concept of you, me and WE: "... Be like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:2b-4). When you actually start thinking and saying WE, there is commitment and trust!

In every relationship, however, there are ways of communicating that cause the WE to break down. In a typical argument, you could probably predict what each of you is going to say. You could write the script! You don't have to go far into one of these arguments before the mood shifts because the WE broke down.

You become most concerned with your own hurt feelings and frustrations (ME).

When you are thinking ME, you will keep track of everything you contributed to the relationship. When arguments come up, you remember every thing that ME did.

When things are turbulent and you are thinking ME, not WE, do a reality check. Go to your heart. What is really more important to you: your hurt feelings or your relationship? The moment you find the love in your heart for your spouse, reality changes. The WE actually becomes more important than the ME.

This attitude is revealed powerfully in the next lines from the preceding quote in Philippians, where we see an example of this selfless thinking: *“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”* (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus gave His life, the ultimate selfless act, to restore and heal humankind’s relationship with God. Jesus offers you the benefits of His love. He offers you unconditional love, forgiveness for all your failings, and He can give you the power to focus on the WE instead of ME.

Sometimes this is the only hope you have, especially when you don’t feel like doing a reality check because things are really bad and you are convinced that it is all your spouse’s fault. When you’re in that difficult space, try this simple prayer: “God, I don’t want to be loving right now. Help me want to!” Jesus can change your heart.

The promise of God’s power is expressed beautifully in the book of Ephesians in the Bible, *“I pray that out of His glorious riches God may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that [Jesus] Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...”* (Ephesians 3:16-17a).

When you can think WE, not ME, the spiritual pillar of your relationship grows and becomes stronger.

Skills to strengthen the spiritual pillar of the WE

- **Show respect.**

Research has shown that healthy couples show respect, even when they are upset with each other. (*“I know you may feel differently, but I don’t like how she speaks to us.”*)

Couples with poor relationships show disrespect more often. (*“Boy, that is so stupid!”*)

Decide not to cross the boundaries by calling each other names. Build this part of the WE by showing respect every time you talk. (*“You have a right to feel that way.”*)

- **Work on your half.**

We all see and want to fix the other person’s faults before we work on our own. But you have no power over your partner’s half of the relationship.

Instead, focus on your half of the relationship. Your relationship is a series of interaction patterns. You can break the pattern by doing or saying something differently. For example, do you usually look away from your spouse and emotionally withdraw when there is conflict? Instead, try looking directly at her, ready to listen to her perspective.

- **Communicate heart to heart.**

The spiritual pillar of the relationship strengthens through heart-to-heart communication. Through such talks, conflict can help the relationship grow.

First, prepare your own heart before you start talking. God can help you with this. (*“God, I’m upset and blaming my spouse for my hurt feelings. Help me see things as You see them. Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.”*)

When your heart is right and you see the WE as more important than ME, make the first move to have a heart-to-heart talk. (*“I know WE are upset with each other, but this is not helping our relationship. Why don’t WE sit down and talk?”*)

Pray together, silently or aloud, for the WE. Then talk about the problem with respect for the WE. Stay in your heart and you will gradually restore the WE. Another name for this process is confession and forgiveness. (*“I was out of line last night when I made fun of you in front of our friends, and you have a right to be upset with me. I understand how much that hurt you. I don’t deserve it, but please forgive me.”*)

Renewed Romance

Back to the ruined romantic evening: *“Why did you just stand there?”*

These words echoed in Jeremy’s mind as he pattered in his garage workshop. “Why can’t you get along with my mother?” he fumed, putting all the blame on his wife, “Why can’t you just ignore her offhand comments like I do?”

He tried to stay angry, but deep down he realized that he would rather be close to Rachel again. He was confused and uncertain, part of him still angry, but part of him wanting to be close. He wasn’t used to praying, but that was all he could think to do. “God, help me with my own mood,” he sighed.

The rest was mysterious. As he worked, he felt his mood shift. Then he remembered the WE. And he did something quite extraordinary.

He went back into the house to find Rachel. “I think we need to talk.”

“Too late for that,” Rachel replied, still hurt and angry. Jeremy felt his mood sink again and started to walk away, but then remembered his determination. I’m not going to let this mood destroy our evening, he thought.

Turning back toward Rachel, he said with a loving firmness, “No, we are going to do something different. Let’s talk about how WE are going to deal with my mother.”

Rachel was taken by surprise. She felt her mood shift. This was different. “I think WE should let your mother know that it’s our job to raise the kids, not hers,” she began, expecting his usual defensiveness.

“I think you’re right,” came the surprising answer. “We need to talk to her together and set things straight.”

The rest is history! As soon as both said “WE,” the mood shifted between them. The closeness returned and ... well, the evening turned out quite differently. After talking with his mother, Jeremy realized that he felt different inside. Like he had grown up some. And Rachel knew that now she and his mother could build a good relationship.

Think WE, not ME! *“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ ... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:1a-2).*

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