

WHAT

**RADICAL
HUSBANDS**

DO

12 STEPS TO WIN AND KEEP
YOUR WIFE'S HEART

REGI CAMPBELL

PR*in*SS

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12 Steps to Win and Keep Your Wife's Heart
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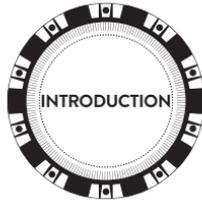
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HOW'S YOUR MARRIAGE REALLY?

"Your present circumstances don't determine where you can go; they merely determine where you start."

— Nido Qubein



I'm a guy who's been hanging on to his marriage for almost 45 years — by a thread. If there were ever two people not prepared for marriage, it was us. Two twenty-year-old college sophomores, infatuated and hot for each other. Raised in homes where you only had sex after you were married and divorce was out of the question, we announced we were getting married in August. We had met the previous September and started dating in February. We tied the knot after dating for only six months. We hardly knew each other, and worse, the dense fog of intense infatuation veiled our deep differences.

We differed on everything — *everything*. She was a pessimist; I was an optimist. She was fearful; I was fearless. I was extroverted; she was introverted. I wanted to party; she just wanted to be with me. I was A.D.D.; she did one thing at a time. She cared immensely what people thought; I didn't give a rip! She enjoyed beauty and wanted to "smell the roses"; I was in a hurry and didn't even notice the dang flowers. She was a perfectionist; I did just enough to get

by. She loved houses and decorating; I couldn't have cared less. I could go on for pages about our differences. Those who know us, even today, say they've never seen two people more different.

Once we were married, the sexual pressure was released and things rolled along well for a while. Sex had been a dirty word in her house and her reluctance soon became apparent. My sex education had been, "Keep it in your pants, boy — until you're married!" Now that we were married and it was legal, I wanted sex all the time. And she yielded; for a long time she yielded. But there was less and less intimacy. More routine . . . and resentment.

Eighteen months after our wedding, she faced student teaching at the university. Her supervisor was so intimidating, Miriam literally fainted one day under the pressure. She went into survival mode, doing everything she could to please this supervisor and get through the semester. She had nothing left for me, but instead of rallying behind her, I turned on her. I interpreted the lack of attention (i.e., lack of sex) as rejection and I was angry. A pattern was set that carried on for the next 12 years.

Anger comes from unmet demands and the more she didn't meet my demands, the angrier I got. What's worse, I didn't release the anger; I harbored it. I kept it in the dark where it could grow. I quietly seethed. I loved her, especially when she did what I wanted. But when she didn't, I was manipulative, critical, sarcastic and downright mean. By this time, we were college seniors and had been social drinkers for a couple of years. I took it a step beyond social drinking and used alcohol to numb the anger, but actually feeding it.

The years went by. We morphed from college to career, marrieds to parents, and renters to homeowners. We made all the transitions couples make. From the outside, we looked like the happy little couple with two happy little kids. We went to church, took trips, worked in the yard. We looked like everyone else. But our relationship was steadily worsening. I wanted sex. She wanted intimacy. I didn't have time for intimacy; I was going to school at night,

working on my MBA, climbing the corporate ladder. I worked hard and wanted to play hard. She cared for two little kids all day, every day and wanted rest. (We had at least one in diapers for five straight years). She wanted the perfect house, with just the right tile in the bathroom. The tiles all looked the same to me.

Eventually, it all crashed.

I had married the wrong woman. The differences were just too great and she wouldn't even try to change. She saw me as a corporate "hoe," willing to sacrifice her, the kids . . . *anything* . . . to get ahead. She had submissively moved five times in nine years and the last one took a huge toll. I'd accepted a job far away from her hometown, her mother and her sisters, and I had done it without even talking to her. I simply announced it.

In a particularly lucid conversation one night, she looked at me and said, "Regi, we have different dreams." She was leaving me. "Get to know your kids," she said, and walked out the door.

Not once had I thought she might leave.

Stupid me.

That night, and over the next few days, I got clarity for the first time.

I had taken her *completely* for granted. I had assigned no value to what she meant to me. What she did for me, for our kids or for our home.

The old saying, "absence makes the heart grow fonder," is true.

Over the next week, I realized what I had. I looked myself in the mirror and didn't like what I saw. I saw an angry 33-year-old, drinking to hide his anger, married to a beautiful woman who simply wanted a home and a family. I

decided that if I could get a do-over, a second chance, I could be happy. And I could make her happy.

But there was a problem.

Twelve years of career worship, corporate moves, selfishness and insensitivity had driven Miriam away. I had created an environment of criticism and rejection — a place where she never measured up. I had subtly threatened to abandon her. I had been restless and unhappy. Now I thought I could be content. Now I wanted to commit to her. But she was gone.

Before she left, I had been a good dad. But now, having the kids all by myself, I fell in love with them all over again, and in a deeper way. I saw I could be a great dad and we could have a great family, if only she'd give me another shot.

In the loneliness of her leaving, I started thinking about all the good instead of the bad. I thought of all the things *she did* and started to forget about the things I'd "tried and convicted" her of *not doing*. I knew I could stop criticizing her. I was ready to accept her as she was and ready to stop trying to change her.

That was the birthplace of this book. Miriam did come back, agreeing to stay one day. She said, "You're saying different things, but your voice sounds the same." Interpretation? "You're saying words I haven't heard before, and there's a sincerity that's unfamiliar. But the sound of your voice tells me it's still **you**." She decided to come back and check it out. After that day, I asked if she'd stay another day. She agreed. Then another.

It's been 31 years now. I'm still on a day-to-day contract.

I had to take *radical* action. I had one day to win her heart. That "win" got me another day. Ever so slowly, she warmed up to me, and it got better and better from there.

You see, it was my chance to *win* her love for the first time. When we first met, it was easy. It was chemistry . . . infatuation . . . hormones. This time, it was going to take effort — second effort, third effort, endless effort. Even though the “day-to-day contract” has become a light-hearted euphemism, it reminds me that my marriage is up to me. It will become what I make it. I am responsible. I am the leader. Love isn’t a hole I fall into; it’s a choice I make.

YOUR STORY ISN'T MY STORY

That’s what happened to me. Not for a minute do I think your marriage is like mine. No way. But it’s not what I think that matters. The question is: “How do you feel about your marriage?” I want you to find the same clarity about your marriage as you find about your weight. Get up in the morning, step on the scales, stand still for a minute and you’re going to know your weight. You can lie to yourself about whether you ate one or “just a few” Oreos. About whether your last workout was a week ago or a month ago. But put your bare feet on the scales and the truth comes out. I wish there was a machine like that for marriages, one that would tell us where things really stand.

But since it hasn’t been invented yet, we’ll use a different approach. I’m now going to give you snapshots of different marriages and ask if you see yourself in any of them. You’ll need to be patient because a lot of these aren’t you . . . but stick with me. You might find something that hits close to home.

1. You wake up feeling lucky (or blessed, depending on your point of view) because your marriage is so good. You get along great. You talk things out. You believe the best about each other. You’re giving and getting focused attention. It feels good. Sex is frequent and there’s no pressure. There’s little criticism. When friends ask how it’s going at home, you answer, *Couldn’t be better!* . . . and you mean it.

It’s rare and it’s never permanent, but there are times when it’s just about perfect. As good as it gets. A husband and wife working together on their marriage and on themselves as individuals. It’s a season . . . a really good one, but still a season.

Here's what's going on when you're in that "good place":

- There's open communication, even about tough stuff like sex.
- Conflicts are resolved without a lot of emotion.
- You work together smoothly making plans, solving problems and making decisions.
- You have a shared vision for your marriage and family. You both know what you want it to look like, and you're willing to make individual sacrifices to make it happen.
- You've figured out your roles, with the "blessing" of the other. There's little conflict about who (normally) does what and a clear willingness to have each other's backs in emergencies.
- There's a healthy level of respect, never threatened by disagreements on small stuff. No one yells. No one pouts. You work stuff out.
- Each accepts the other *as he or she is*. No one's trying to change anyone. And each spouse tries to not take "personal" things innocently said. When feelings get hurt, you talk it through quickly, repair the relationship and move on. You don't hold grudges.

So how rare is this? There is not a marriage on earth that totally measures up to all that. There'll always be "soft spots" and things to strengthen. And people change. Sometimes we grow, sometimes regress, but we never stay the same. And while the stars can align for a while, it's nearly impossible to stay "great" all the time. Some would say it's not even healthy, but it sure sounds appealing, doesn't it?

If your marriage sounds like this, consider these 12 steps to keep it going and growing. Perhaps you'll see a few things to look out for . . . things you can do to avoid becoming overconfident, or going to sleep at the switch and sliding into "okay."

2. **Your marriage is “okay.”** Things are stable. Consistent. There’s general harmony, peace, cooperation and collaboration. There’s a routine to life together. Could be you’re both so busy, you don’t have time to think about your marriage as a “thing.” It “is what it is,” so why bother? *We’re making it. We’re getting by. My marriage is fine. We rarely fight. We love each other. We’re nowhere near the messy stuff you’ve described so far. There’s no war going on here.*

Be grateful you’re not at war.

But peace is not defined by the absence of war. Nor is a great marriage defined by the absence of conflict. It’s easy to take things and people for granted. Sometimes what feels like peace to you may feel like boredom to her.

Take the case of my friend who sent a document to the printer at his house. When he reached for the tray, a document was already there. He picked it up and it just about knocked him over. It was a copy of an email his wife sent to her mentor talking about him. She says she doesn’t love him anymore. She doesn’t “feel it.” She’s tired of being taken for granted and wonders what happened to the man who wooed her like the Queen of Sheba.

Or you might have a good marriage that never becomes great because you took it easy and settled for status quo. If you think it’s good just because you’re getting what you want, put a hold on that. Your wife might say your marriage isn’t anywhere close to where you think it is. In fact, surveys show

- Women are less happy in their marriages than men
- Women are more likely than men to see problems in their marriages
- Women are more likely to initiate divorce (women ask for divorce two-thirds of the time), and are more than three times as likely as their former husbands to have strongly desired the divorce ²

I don't want you to turn around someday and say: *Man, I wish someone had woke me up. I was asleep at the switch. There was a storm going on. . . . I just didn't see it.*

Here are a few more things that might happen in an “okay” marriage:

- You were invited on a marriage retreat, but you blew it off because you knew it would cost money and take time away from work. Your thought was, *Nah . . . we don't need that stuff. We're doing just fine.* You knew your wife wanted to go, but you passed. Refused to seriously consider it.
- For Christmas, your dad gave you a book about how to love your wife. You thanked him politely and then put it on the shelf beside the family Bible and the Encyclopedia Britannica. Other guys have suggested books to you. You don't even write down the titles. You don't need that crap; you're doing fine.
- You're so confident in your wife's love that you're ignoring her, putting everything into your work. For a little while, that was fine. But it's become standard. And you're into your work because you're getting strokes, bonuses and promotions. She likes the money part for sure, but if you asked, she'd rather have more of you. Because you're so confident in how great things are and you're afraid you'll have to do something different, you're not going to ask.

This is the stuff guys do when they see their marriages as “okay.” And I'd like to think this is where most of us are . . . right in the middle. But the divorce rate is 57%, and I keep getting blindsided by friends whose “okay” marriages are blowing up.

I want to shake you out of “okay.” To wake you up. To show you how to avoid being stunned someday when “okay” is replaced with “goodbye.” Let's take it the other way. Let's raise okay to *outstanding*.

3. Your marriage is a struggle . . . or worse. There's friction and frustration almost daily. You argue over big things and little things. The "d" word (divorce) comes up . . . a lot. Both you and she spend time thinking about what life might be like with a fresh start. You're struggling and have been for a good while.

It might have come to a head all at once, when she found out you were having an affair. She hates you. You've come to your senses, broken it off and realized what you have (or had). You want her. Bad. But the bridge is so burnt it appears impassable.

Or it might have been her affair that blew it up. Yes, she confessed to you. Yes, she broke it off and came crawling back. But can you ever trust her again? Can you ever love her the way you used to? She's "all-in" now, but can you "win her" so she never wanders off again?

Maybe it's over, but nobody's admitting it. You "grew apart." Her career has taken off . . . she's pouring more and more into her work, plus she's started taking courses at the community college and she's feeling "alive again." Maybe she's a stay-at-home mom who's decided she doesn't want to waste the years she has left doing your laundry and cooking your food. You've smothered her. She wants to breathe. Every day, there's more and more silence. Fewer friendly conversations. More anger. More frustration. Less patience. Less agreement — *on anything.*

So . . . how are you feeling? Uncertain? Uncomfortable? Overwhelmed? It's pretty hard for guys to step back and clearly see what's going on in their marriages. And it can be scary, even terrifying. But isn't it smarter to wade into your problems than to stick your head in the sand? Or run? Or get blindsided?

More big clues: You and your wife keep clashing over the same things . . .

- **Money.** Why can't she see what she's doing to you? To the two of you. So much debt you can't breathe. No appreciation for how hard you're working. Never satisfied. Never grateful. No encouragement. Never enough.
- **Sex.** Well, that's a sore subject. It's gotten less and less frequent. And more and more routine.
- **Friends.** Yours are yours. Hers are hers. You don't trust hers. You don't think they like you, and you're not sure they're good for your marriage. You wonder if they're advising her to leave you. You know yours are coaching you that way. *You're wasting your life, man, they say. Find somebody else. You guys just aren't happy. Get it over with and move on.*
- **The past.** Your ex-wife. Her ex-husband. Something from the past "owns" you. She won't forgive you. You can't forgive her . . . or yourself. Either way, the past keeps coming back to steal the present. And paint a hopeless future.
- **Other people.** There are some you don't want to disappoint — your parents, mentors and a few church friends. But most of your married friends will understand if you break up. They've seen things decline between the two of you. They want you to be happy, but wonder if you should stay married to each other.
- **Other women.** Maybe that's where things have really fallen apart. You've met somebody who's everything your wife isn't. You may not have moved on it yet, but you've had enough conversations to be emotionally connected to her. You can't wait to get free so you can really hang out with her. It's going to be complicated, no doubt. But it's going to be worth it to finally be happy again.
- **Other men.** You may be suspicious she's talking to someone else — or more than talking. She sure isn't talking to you. Nor is she the least bit interested in "physical" activities. She's cold as ice, but you know she's

not a cold-as-ice woman. You just know there's no heat coming in your direction.

- **Boredom.** You love her (yes, you do), but it's the same old, same old. You're getting older. She's getting older. You look around and see no heroes in your world, nobody whose marriage you envy. You don't know what you want or what it will take, but you're tired of this and you're ready to do something else, even if it's wrong.

I don't know which of these you may be experiencing. Any one of them can cripple or even kill a marriage. You're feeling you need to do something, even if it's wrong.

On one hand, you've tried for a long time and you're tired. She's not going to change. She's all but told you that. She's showing little or no interest in anything you offer. She's written you off, either consciously or unconsciously.

On the other hand, you're not a quitter. What about the kids . . . your families . . . hers and yours? There's the hemorrhage of money a divorce will cost, not to mention child support for the rest of eternity. You have all this history with her, and it wasn't too bad at first. It's not like you totally hate her. You're just tired of the battle. Tired of the disappointment. Tired of the criticism. Tired of feeling like a stranger in your own house.

SO . . . WHATCHA GONNA DO?

If I had picked up this book 32 years ago, my response would have been, "adios." I'd have put this book away, put the whole deal out of my mind (again) and gone to bed. But 31 years ago, after it all "hit the fan," I'd have lapped up every word. Why? Because my world was turned upside down, and I didn't have a clue what to do. I realized I was in deep trouble, and I had to do something drastic if I was to save my marriage and find happiness. "Business as usual" was not going to cut it. I was disrupted. Seriously disrupted.

Since people don't buy solutions to problems they don't have, most of us won't change until we recognize a problem . . . until something or somebody turns up the heat. If you're not a little bit disrupted, a little bit shaken from your "homeostasis," you'll keep doing what you've always done and your marriage will stay where it is. My hope is you've read these snapshots and something's jacked you up! Whether out of fear or desire, you're ready to move. Ready to take responsibility and step up to win . . . and keep . . . your wife's heart.

It starts by going "on record" and letting her know that you're totally and irreversibly committed to her.

You may think it's silly.

But I'll bet she won't.