



the journey begins

This story began at a time in my life when God chose to teach me about spiritual maturity. You see, He was ready for me to grow in my character and went about capturing my attention in a very interesting way. I had been in America for about three years. I was pursuing my master's degree in business while serving as youth pastor for a church in San Diego, California. As far as I was concerned, life was wonderful. I was enjoying school, but most of all I enjoyed my role in ministering to young people. Little did I know—my life was about to drastically change.

One day while studying, a young lady ran up to me, crying. "You don't know me," she began, "but I know you. You're the youth pastor at our church. I just lost my thesis when the computer crashed. Could you pray for me?"

"I'd love to; let's pray," I replied. After all, I was a youth pastor at the church, and it was my duty to support any member during such an anxious time. That prayer began an interesting relationship between us. We started talking more at church, as well as spending time together outside of church. It wasn't too long before we became very good friends. She was a sweet young lady who loved ministry. We had great conversations. We laughed

together, ministered together, went out on dates, and took trips together. She became an integral part of my life. I enjoyed her personality and her company; it was great being around a young lady who genuinely loved God.

Because she was a servant by nature, she often helped me finish papers for school. If I needed her to run an errand, she would do it. She would either bring me food or cook for me if she thought I was hungry, and she would even do my laundry without my asking. Whatever I needed, her main goal became to satisfy and serve *me*. It was not too difficult to see that I was the primary benefactor in our relationship. For a while, I considered whether she was the one for me, but I couldn't make up my mind. I was undecided and scared and did not want to make a mistake. Quite honestly, our friendship was great and very comfortable just as it was, so I never felt any urgency to make a decision. Deep down, it felt good to be around someone who really cared and had so much affection for me. I also knew that she respected me as a leader in ministry. However, I was too young, too selfish, and too prideful to even consider that her emotional investment in our relationship was far greater than mine.

A year and a half later, after consulting with mentors and spending a lot of time in prayer, I felt the call of God to attend seminary in Texas. A few of my friends, this young lady included, flew with me to Dallas to help me get settled. When they were leaving to head back to California, I pulled her aside and began talking with her. I knew that if I was struggling with the direction of the relationship when we were in the same city, there was no way we would be able to maintain our relationship while we were apart. As a result, I had decided that it would be best for both of us if we just went ahead and ended the relationship.

"I don't think we can have a long-distance relationship," I said.

She responded, "What do you mean? I thought it was just a

matter of time before we got married. We've spent so much time together, and we've gotten to know each other so well." I could see the hurt in her eyes and hear it in her voice. But I continued.

"No," I replied. "I think that God is calling me in another direction, so I'm just going to follow Him." I tried my best to be sensitive and even justified my decision with God's leading. Surely she could understand.

After what seemed like an eternity of awkward silence, she spoke. This young lady, whom I had known to be so gentle, tender, and caring, spoke a very bold statement to me. She looked me square in the eyes and said, "God's got great plans for you, but if you don't fix this issue, it's going to derail you." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Instead of being overtaken by emotion, she was calling me out! She was basically saying that the way in which I was choosing to deal with our relationship was a warning sign. If I didn't learn how to relate to women in a healthy way, I was going to run into big problems for the rest of my life. I appreciated her concern, but I didn't think much of it beyond that.

I thought that was the end of it; however, several months after she left Dallas I received a phone call from her.

"Conway," she said. "I care about you too much to leave this problem unchecked." I didn't know where she was going with this, but I wanted to hear her out.

"All right; then let's talk about it," I responded.

"No, I don't think you'll listen to me if we talk one-on-one about this issue." Again, I didn't know where her thinking was, but I could not have imagined what came next.

About a week later I got a call from one of the elders at my former church. He said, "Conway, I can't believe what I'm hearing about you from this young lady. We want to fly you back to San Diego and hear your side of the story." I was absolutely shocked and thought, *Has she gotten the elders of my church involved?* Was it that serious? I mean, I knew that I could have handled it better,

but this seemed a bit extreme. I couldn't believe they were going to fly me from Texas to California just to have a conversation about a relationship.

I decided to consult some counselors from school and at the church I was currently attending. I asked them if they thought I needed to go back to meet with my former elders. Of the ten people I consulted, nine said the San Diego church was no longer my authority. Therefore I was under no obligation to go back.

But one person said, "You need to return." The Holy Spirit used that individual to convict me. I was being led to go back even though I was not looking forward to it.

My former elders paid the plane fare and flew me back to San Diego. Seemingly in a matter of seconds, I found myself in a room with ten elders from the church. The worship leader, who had been a spiritual mentor for me, the young lady, and her best friend were also in attendance that day. I still wasn't quite sure about what was to transpire, but it was suddenly clear that my charm and charisma weren't going to help me in this situation. It felt like I was about to be interrogated by a congressional committee.

The elders started by asking the young lady to share her story. Over the next hour and fifteen minutes, she told about everything that had taken place in our relationship. Virtually every interaction, conversation, and act of service she afforded me came to the light. Hearing her perspective was startling. She remembered the events in grave detail. Almost every date and every trip we had taken had all been etched in her memory. Although I had never had sex with this young woman, I had gone as far as I could go. In other words, I pushed the envelope regarding physical intimacy.

As she spoke, she shared her heart and deep hurt. By the end of her story, there was not a dry eye in the room, including mine. I was blown away as I listened to her describe our interactions. She bared her soul and talked about how she had expected and anticipated marriage based on the nature of our relationship and

my actions toward her. She told everyone in that room how she had trusted me and looked up to me as a boyfriend and a ministry leader, and then she told us all how I had shattered her heart.

With tissues being passed around the room and everybody drying their tears, I was asked if I had anything to say.

“No. Everything she said was true,” I managed to respond.

In a word, it was devastating. I had never before understood that my behavior was so irresponsible, and I definitely didn’t anticipate how it could adversely affect a woman’s heart. The potential impact of what one man’s casual actions can do to a woman’s heart is astonishing. I had never realized how different the emotions of women are from those of men or how easily they trust us. The weight of what it meant to be a responsible man who loves God came crashing down on me.

The elders of this church are some of the most godly men I know to this day. One of them said to me, “Conway, here’s what we need you to do. We’ll pay for Christian counseling for you, but we need you to understand that you are responsible for your actions when you approach one of God’s precious jewels. We don’t want this to happen to another woman, not by your doing. Here’s a calling card. Anytime you need to talk, call us at our expense because we care for you; we want to prepare you for what God has in store for you.”

When I left that room, my mind was heavy with questions for which I had no answers. How in the world was I supposed to make this right? I cared about this young lady and had never meant to hurt her—but I did. I had wanted us to be able to enjoy a special friendship without the pressure of commitment—but this wasn’t possible.

How does a man who’s truly in love with God handle this gift called “woman” in such a way that protects her heart and refrains from hurting her in the dating process? Can a man and woman truly just be friends? What are the positive things that a man can

do to encourage a woman's emotions in a healthy way?

This experience was the springboard to an extensive personal journey that God was about to take me on so that I could learn the answers and share them with every unmarried person I know. I couldn't even imagine how many men had no clue how their casual behavior could have such a painful impact on women.

Over the remaining chapters, I will share the principles God brought to light during my journey. He showed me how important it is to know myself, know who I am becoming, and how a godly man should interact with women in a way that brings honor to God.