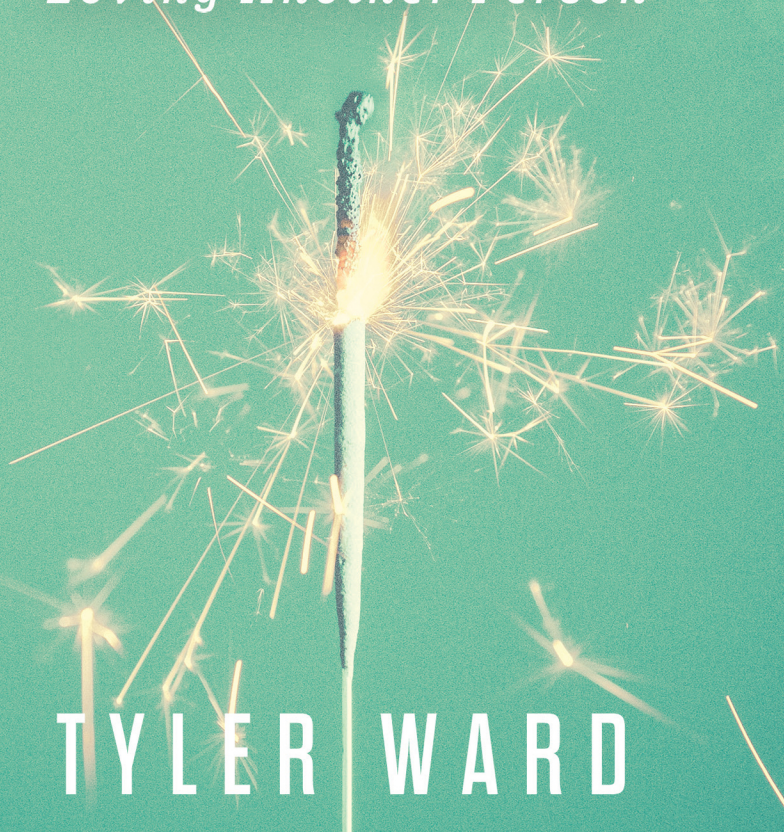


MARRIAGE REBRANDED

*Modern Misconceptions
& the Unnatural Art of
Loving Another Person*



TYLER WARD

CHAPTER FOUR

ONE + ONE = ONE

Love Isn't Something We Fall Into

“A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.”

—Mignon McLaughlin

I'll never forget the first time I said “I love you” to Analee. It was an absolute nightmare.

Some people find it incredibly easy to start professing their love for a significant other. Then there's me. Up until this point in life, I was able to avoid using the infamous three words and had no intention of dusting them off until marriage. Of course, that was before I met the five-foot-nothing firecracker I now call my wife.

It was a lazy late afternoon in Los Angeles and two influencing dynamics were in play.

First, Analee and I had just hit the six-month-dating mark—a big deal among twentysomethings—and we had made a unanimous decision to keep this exclusive experiment going. This newfound mutual commitment was like pouring gasoline on an already raging fire, which had a way of extending our lip-locking sessions and inspiring more and more time together.

Second, though we both were aware of each other's spirituality, we had not yet shared many of our thoughts about God. Even if you go to the same church or gathering, often your thoughts about the character of God can greatly differ, having dramatic implications on the way you want to design your relationship and family and life. This conversation was a massive missing piece of our relationship's puzzle.

We had recently braved this "thoughts on God" conversation and the shared perspective we found calmed any possible doubt about developing a future together. To make our newfound connection even hotter, she had just mentioned that she was halfway through a book written by one of my favorite spiritual thinkers. I asked her to read a chapter or two as we spent our afternoon together.

Analee diligently read aloud in her best narrator's voice, but the only voice I was listening to was the one in my head telling me that I had found the one I was looking for.

Then it just happened.

Before she could even finish the sentence—and about as awkwardly as you could imagine—I cut her off.

"I love you."

Analee's Point of View. *I was thinking, Am I boring him or is he just not interested in the chapter? Then out of nowhere—with no warning or tact—he blurted out those three words. I didn't know what to think. I knew he had never said those words to anyone before and part of me was obviously ecstatic to hear it. But the other part of me was like, "Now?! Sitting on my couch while reading a book? You just waited your whole life to say those three words and you couldn't even wait for me to finish my sentence?! Or perhaps a more romantic, special setting?! What do I do? Do*

I say it back?” Oh, gosh. I tried really hard to hide my smile, but couldn’t stop nervously giggling.

She had stopped reading, though her eyes never left the book. I wasn’t sure if it was the daunting words that made her uncomfortable, or just the general awkwardness of a guy cutting her off to randomly profess his love. Or worse, maybe both. Either way, she was obviously stunned speechless.

I panicked. Then my thoughts crucified me.

How could I wait my entire life to say this to a woman and let it go down like this?

On a random Sunday afternoon?!

We’ve only been dating for six months!

I couldn’t even wait for her to finish her sentence?!

Do I even really love her? Or am I just being impulsive?

Am I ready for this?

No. We’re not ready for this yet.

I’ve blown it!

Still, she sat silently. And in a matter of seconds, my mind rocketed from confidence to fear to intimidation to regret to rational reasoning—but all emotions in the end pointed to one thing: *This was a colossal mistake.*

So, I did what any relational moron would do in this situation . . .

“I’m sorry. We aren’t ready for this. Can I take it back?”

Analee's Point of View. *"WHAT?! Who does that? I felt like we were in fifth grade. You just told me you loved me for the first time in your life and now you're taking it back?!"*

I could already tell by the look on her face that it was too late.

"Of course you can take it back." She said with a smirk, "But I already know the truth."

Analee's Point of View. *And the truth will set you free!*

It's only one of the epic blunders I made while dating my wife that we still laugh about today. However, my pathetic delivery is only half the humor in the story. The arguably more humorous part is that I actually believed that what we were experiencing in that season was falling "*in love*."

Turns out, I wasn't "*in love*" with my wife at all. Not then. Not on our wedding day. And in some moments, not even now.

Analee's Point of View. *For all the rest of you hopeless romantics out there like me, just hold on. It's only wordplay! And you're about to find out exactly what it means.*

LOVE IS A VICTIM OF MODERN CULTURE.

It's a classic conclusion: "I think we're falling in love." At some point, you gather the courage to see if the sentiment is reciprocated, then, of course, you start talking long-term. And why wouldn't you talk marriage? After all, love is the foundation for marriage, right?

This was certainly my story. After a few stomach butterflies, a few DTRs (Define the Relationship), and plenty of time together, I thought Analee and I had arrived at the much-sought-after phenomenon of being in love.

Unfortunately for us and our socially reinforced illusions, love isn't something we simply fall into.

However, infatuation is.

INFATUATION vs LOVE.

First, the bad news.

We often assume the emotions we feel in dating and the early stage of marriage are evidence of love. However, these emotions are better explained by the consistent neurochemical reaction that biology calls the state of infatuation.¹

The early stage of romantic attraction and a cocaine high may have drastically different effects on a person's life, but both endeavors share quite a bit in common. Each one induces a rush of several chemicals to your brain. One of the more dominant of these chemicals is called dopamine—otherwise known as our body's reward drug. This means that when our brain tastes the chemical, it instantly dispenses a reward of positive emotions throughout our body. As Helen Fisher, an anthropologist at Rutgers University reflects, “The properties of infatuation have many of the same elements of a cocaine high. Most importantly, infatuation can overtake the rational part of your brain.”²

Now, let's not take the association of infatuation and cocaine too far. Obviously experiencing a heightened rush of dopamine is not inherently a negative thing. In fact, it is a completely natural and healthy and celebrated part of romance. Even when the Bible walks us through the stages of an epic love story between Solomon and his Shulamite bride, infatuation plays a foundational role both in the beginning and all throughout their relationship. Song of Solomon reads, “Kiss me—full on the mouth! Yes! For your love is better than wine . . . Take me away with you! Let's run off together!

An elopement with my King-Lover! We'll celebrate, we'll sing, we'll make great music. Yes! For your love is better than vintage wine. Everyone loves you—of course! And why not?"³

Analee's Point of View. *Whatever you want to call it, I love infatuation! I am so thankful God lets us have the love-drug high and I don't believe it's off-limits throughout marriage. I sing "So-ber" by Little Big Town often as I dance around my kitchen: "'Cause I love being in love. It's the best kind of drug . . ."*

Infatuation doesn't lack virtue or purpose. It is a beautiful and powerful dynamic in a relationship. However, it's our modern tendency to confuse this chemical reaction with being in love that can be damaging to our marriages.

Why? To begin, science has proven that the intensity of this neurochemical reaction doesn't typically last longer than twenty-four months at a time.⁴ This "in-love" sensation ebbs and flows throughout a relationship. In the early stages, it fills a deep emotional need to be cared for and appreciated by another. But in time, the intensity of this chemical "high" inevitably fades.

The damage ensues when we closely associate this important but short-lived season of infatuation with true love—only to find ourselves two weeks, one year, or three anniversaries into marriage without the same butterflies we once felt. The trap is when we're left to assume, as many have, that somewhere along the way we've fallen *out* of love, and perhaps are left questioning if our love was ever real in the first place.

By mistaking infatuation for real love, we've equated the defining reality of marriage as little more than an emotion we can take a hit of to get a twelve to eighteen month high. And somehow we still

act shocked when 50 percent of people leave their relationships as the feelings fade in search of the next fix.⁵

We'll take a closer look at this shortly, but let's be clear. Our common understanding of being "in love" is often not the kind of "love" marriage was designed for.

The good news? The brand of love marriage was designed for is far better than being drunk on dopamine.

LOVE IS A JOURNEY—NOT A FREE FALL.

As products of an instantly gratified society, we are increasingly drawn to microwaving everything in life. We prefer our hamburger drive-thrus and our personalized Netflix queues. As we discussed in the last chapter, many of us come into marriage with a sense of entitlement, wanting what we want from this relationship for free. But there's another common misconception many of us come strapped with to the altar. We tend to expect the benefits of marriage instantly as well.

But expecting everything at the click of a button hasn't set us up well for true love.

I'll be the first to admit that I brought this microwave mentality into marriage. It wasn't that my motivations were wrong. I wanted a real companionship—fully loaded with emotional support—a safe and trusted friendship, and breathtaking sex. And as social research has shown us, all of these things are very real benefits of marriage.⁶ Where I went wrong is that I subconsciously expected all these benefits on day one.

Anyone who has experienced marriage knows that true companionship comes from years of conversation. A real emotional connection requires trust-building circumstances over time. And

brehtaking sex? Well, it can take time to learn each other physically too.

Analee's Point of View. *I definitely had a few of these misconceptions coming into marriage. However, most of them were things that I assumed without realizing it. I assumed that easy capizzi would be the way of life for us. I assumed that Ty and I would have meaningful connected conversations all the time—the kind of oneness where the other person felt so safe and alive because we could practically read each other's minds. Ha! Wrong-o!*

Unfortunately, a microwave mentality seems to be a dime-a-dozen in modern marriages and is only perpetuated by the previously mentioned illusion of falling “in love” with our spouse. Our marital responsibilities then subtly become about little more than maintaining this state of love—and we’ve all seen where this rabbit hole can lead.

Inevitably the challenges of marriage come knocking, and because we think we’ve already “arrived” in love, any level of conflict can have a way of putting this love on trial.

Fortunately, this instant brand of love that you simply fall into is not what God had in mind when creating man and woman.

Gary Thomas spoke brilliantly about this when I interviewed him. “A good marriage isn’t something you find and fall into,” he said. “It’s something you make and remake many times over. See, in the Hollywood view of ‘falling in love,’ it’s all about finding the right person and then it’s supposed to be easy. Unfortunately, this idea ignores the fact that we become different people. It ignores the fact that we usually want different things out of life. It ignores the fact that really, about 80 percent of us are going to marry almost our exact opposite. It assumes that we’re static individuals and

we're not. Life changes. People get sick. Their parents die—that changes us. They get cancer—that changes us. They get fired—that changes us. They might succeed in their business far more than they imagined—that changes us. If we don't pursue intimacy, we lose intimacy. I have to keep pursuing my wife or I'll become a stranger to my wife.”⁷

So knowing all this, I asked, how can a person choose a spouse wisely or marry well? I loved Gary's answer: “Marriage is not about finding ‘the One’ and falling in love. It's about choosing one and, over time, *becoming* the ‘right couple.’”

Perhaps we can internalize this idea a bit better if we change our language—starting with this idea of oneness.

BECOMING ONE.

The Bible never seems to mention the idea of “falling in love.” It does talk, however, about the process of “becoming one.” It says (emphasis mine), “A man [*leaves*] his father and his mother, and shall *cleave* unto his wife: and they shall *be one* flesh.”⁸ As practical as this seems, many scholars believe that this process of becoming one is far more than a wedding, moving in together, and merging bank accounts. The reference actually speaks to a spiritual, emotional, and material journey of two people learning how to love each other and integrate their lives together. As we look closer, we'll find that this simple verse happens to capture a beautiful picture of a marriage worth fighting for.

Throughout history, many have studied this journey of two becoming one. My favorite take on this comes from Mary Anne McPherson Oliver in her book *Conjugal Spirituality*. She explains, “The joint life of a couple [is built] throughout three stages that aren't strictly

chronological, but are ongoing and alternating aspects of [two becoming one].”⁹ Let’s take a look at the different stages.

1. The Leaving Stage: Creating a New Reality

British novelist and fellow Inklings member Charles Williams calls this early stage of marriage “a mutual invasion, where both selves are broken down so they can be transformed by the love they both receive.”¹⁰ Emile Durkheim, the father of modern sociology, suggests similarly that this stage is “a dramatic act, in which two strangers come together and match differing definitions of reality.”¹¹

Most people associate this stage of “leaving” with the departure from one’s family of origin in order to begin a new family. This is certainly part of the leaving stage, but only the beginning.

The initial stage of marriage—that can last up to fourteen years—is entirely about learning how to merge two separate realities to create a new one, both internally and externally.¹² And this means more than changing last names and zip codes. Throughout these years, every aspect of each individual’s reality will be reevaluated.

There’s no question that this is the most unnatural and challenging stage of becoming one. The forming of a new reality means letting go of our former one—whether we want to or not. This process requires both parties developing the maturity over time to negotiate a reality that both are excited to live in.

Even on a basic biological level, it takes the brain ten to fifteen years to change its previously developed neurological tracks or patterns of thinking.¹³ This process, called neuroplasticity, helps explain why the first few years of becoming one can feel incredibly unnatural. Sadly, many of those who choose to divorce in this stage don’t actually give themselves a chance to experience the real payoff in marriage.

This season of leaving requires that we learn—through trial and error—how to communicate with one another and channel the long-forgotten virtue of patience.¹⁴ However, such patience is not without payoff. In the midst of this wrestling into a new reality, we are given a beautiful hope: if we stay loyal to the everyday choices to love our spouse, we can create a culture, a new reality, in our marriages where the wild benefits of true love do exist.

2. The Cleaving Stage: Life as Partnership

Life is scientifically defined as the ability to produce new cells, but it is just as important to structure those cells inside a functional system.¹⁵ This second season of marriage is all about focusing this new reality and the discoveries of the leaving season to optimize a couple's partnership in life together.

“Renunciation and creation are supplemented by the courage to continue widening the self, the curious probing to understand the spark of Divinity in the other, and patient prioritizing to maintain the equilibrium which has been achieved,”¹⁶ Oliver says. In other words, this season is all about using life to grow closer and using your closeness to succeed in life.

This involves learning how to keep a connection with one another while incorporating and harmonizing the daily rhythms of each other's career, family, and life responsibilities. Because of this season's demand for perseverance and diligence, couples can find themselves disconnected during these years if they don't remain intentional.

A conversation I recently had with Ray Ortland, a brilliant pastor and a husband married for over forty years, seems to capture the virtue of this stage of marriage well.

“My wife was given to me to enrich me,” he said, “to make me wiser, a better man, a better professional, and a better father . . .

Once I stopped being so stubborn and learned to use our relationship and her voice as the asset that it is, everything changed.”¹⁷

According to Ray, as well as many sociological studies, the payoffs in this season are spiritual, relational, sociological, and economic.

3. The Oneness Stage: A Celebration

The road to oneness is long and not always easy, but the outcome is something to be celebrated. Oliver explains, “As two mature individuals turn obstacles into trampolines and continue in mutual conquest and surrender, an easy and real creative union of mind, body and heart will take place.”¹⁸

“As love grows older,” says Chinese-American “Artist of Life” Bruce Lee, “our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep-burning and unquenchable.” In this season, couples enjoy “comfortable companionship and mutual affirmation,” as Oliver describes it.¹⁹

The Bible also offers another portrait of oneness worth celebrating. In the context of the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—oneness simply means living in perpetual celebration of one another. This is the goal of marriage as well. Imagine a lifestyle of deep celebration of each other—despite both of your dysfunction, wounds, and blind spots.

It is within this celebration of one another that our greatest human potential emerges. In the presence of this kind of love, we’re given the chance to become the best versions of ourselves for the world.

MICROWAVES ARE FOR DINNERS.

This journey into oneness speaks to a simple idea that dramatically confronts our modern instant brand of love. The beautiful truth is that Analee and I weren’t celebrating our arrival into love on our

wedding day. We were simply—and profoundly—committing to a lifelong journey to become one by choosing to love each other.

Being “in love” isn’t an *instant* destination we find while dating. Love isn’t something we happen to stumble into—it’s far more active and powerful than that. Being “in love” is a new reality of oneness in our marriages formed through a pilgrimage of everyday choices to put each other first. Such a dramatic new reality takes time, diligence, and plenty of patience to create.

But then again, that’s a relational reality worth fighting for.

My friend Jared Black recently told me a story that captures the problem with a microwave marriage.²⁰

He and his wife, Stephanie, were visiting with a group of new friends. In their introductions, Jared casually mentioned that he and Stephanie had been married for five years. Without missing a beat, one woman shot back in her Southern drawl, “Five years of marriage? It’s like y’all are in kindergarten!”

It was an awkward comment, but the truth behind it deeply impacted Jared’s perspective. In retelling the story to me, he reflected, “Until that moment, I had never considered marriage—our marriage—through the lens of a developmental cycle. I guess I had somehow just assumed that marriage was an event that happened on a specific date, in a specific year. As far as I was concerned, I was married . . . end of story. However, the thought of a kindergarten—full of potential, full of questions, and a developing future, not to mention all the tantrums, immaturity, and poor communication—seemed to be a better description of what my wife and I had been experiencing from day to day.”

According to Jared, this simple offhand comment put his first four years of marriage into clearer focus. Of course he and Stephanie

struggled to communicate and make decisions together—they were just beginners at this crazy thing called marriage!

Jared continued, “Being able to view our marriage during those times as if we were, say, a three-year-old child helped ease the pressure of supposedly knowing how to be married. A three-year-old can’t be expected to act and communicate like an adult. So why would we, a newly married, three-year-old couple know any better?”

His story was liberating to Analee and me as well, allowing us some extra grace for the “leaving” stage of our marriage that we are currently navigating. Yes, the hope for a kindergartener is to grow out of the immaturity of vying for attention, temper tantrums, and selfishness, to become a fully functioning, mature, capable adult. But that doesn’t mean we expect them to act like an adult today, either.

I love how Jared described this tension: “Marriage isn’t something we accomplished the day we said ‘I do.’ It is an ongoing action discovered with our spouses—a development cycle. The day of marriage simply creates a brand-new infant couple, pledging to learn the art of marrying their individual lives into one combined, maturing life together.”

As Jared suggests, let’s abandon our microwave mentalities. Let’s give our marriages (and spouses) a break—since we know we’re all still three-year-olds throwing tantrums and barely able to dress ourselves. Instead of demanding all the promised perks of marriage today, let’s consider that oneness is a beautiful, but long journey together.

Now for the practical. Here are a few suggestions I’ve found helpful in curbing my tendency to microwave my marriage.



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