

A photograph of a young couple in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is on the left, wearing a maroon leather jacket, and the man is on the right, wearing a teal jacket. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. Overlaid on the image is the title 'Team Us' in a large, white, hand-painted script font.

Team Us

THE UNIFYING POWER OF GRACE,
COMMITMENT, AND COOPERATION
IN MARRIAGE

ASHLEIGH SLATER

FOREWORD BY GARY CHAPMAN

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE 5 LOVE LANGUAGES®

CHAPTER TWO

*Goodbye Me,
Hello Us*

Marriage is a duel to the death, which
no man of honour should decline.

—G. K. CHESTERTON

IN THE WEEKS THAT led up to our wedding, Ted informed our friends, family, and anyone who would listen of his impending death.

“Death?” you ask.

Yep, death. Death, that is, to his single self.

The self that could buy a new Nord Electro on a whim. Or stay up until two in the morning on a regular basis. That guy who worked late into the evening because he didn’t have a wife waiting at home.

Some greet this realization with terror. Not Ted. He wasn’t one of those grooms who show up at the church with a white face and knocking knees. Nope. He was beaming with excitement, genuinely ready to kiss the old life goodbye and kiss me hello.

Sure, death isn't the most romantic thing to broadcast prior to one's nuptials, but Ted was right. Marriage doesn't jibe well with many of the single habits brought to it.

What I don't think he anticipated, though, was that the death of old patterns is like Inigo Montoya's infamous hunt for the six-fingered man. It takes a while.

Prepare to Die!

In 1987, when *The Princess Bride* hit theaters, I wasn't exactly a film aficionado. But back then, what third grader was? I was newly obsessed with The Baby-sitters Club books, had no qualms admitting I still played with Barbie, and, yeah, kissing movies ranked as gross in my elementary-school mind.

Yet I didn't have to be a media savvy child of the twenty-first century to appreciate what would become a cult classic. The farm boy and his kidnapped princess made a lasting impression on me. Right up there with ABC's TGIF line-up.

One of those reasons was the hot-tempered Spanish fencer set on vengeance. Even now, every time I see actor Mandy Patinkin in anything else, the words, "You killed my father, prepare to die!" echo in my head. I can't help but wonder how many times a random stranger has come up to him and quoted that line.

While Montoya's drive to avenge isn't something to emulate, I think there's a lesson we can learn from him: Often it takes persistence *and* patience to execute a death wish.

Pop quiz. How many years did he spend preparing and searching for his father's killer? One? Five? Ten? Um . . . that would be twenty. In our instant society, that's a very long time.

As gung-ho as Ted was with his death wish, his single self didn't die as easily as he hoped. In fact, certain changes have taken years. Over a decade later, he still finds himself standing *en garde* and saying, "Prepare to die!"

Take, for example, time management.

The Man Who Didn't Come to Dinner

Ted tells me he was born in Germany, but I have my doubts. I think he was really birthed in Mexico or Hawaii. You know, a place where “local time” doesn’t refer to an actual time zone; rather it simply means arriving at a given event whenever an individual’s culturally formed internal clock deems it appropriate. Could be ten minutes late . . . or maybe sixty.

I’ve heard tales of when the teenage Ted would get up early and head to the pool to swim laps or to the school computer lab to code his own games. But this is a side of him I don’t know. Apparently, my hunch that he was born in Mexico isn’t too far off. The nine months he spent there as a young adult revolutionized this once time-abiding citizen to the man I’m married to today.

Time management was an issue that first came up for us during premarital counseling after he was two hours—as in 120 minutes—late for a date because he got distracted cleaning his kitchen. No joke. When we got married, these issues didn’t suddenly disappear. They weren’t instantly better because we now lived under the same roof.

Instead, they become clearer and more frustrating for me. You see, my free-spirited, nap-loving man was fortunate enough to have a job with a very flexible schedule. If he felt like getting out of bed at nine, to the office at ten, and staying until eight or nine at night, his boss didn’t care.

There was only one person who did: me.

I grew up in a family that ate dinner together most nights. At a reasonable time too. Around five-thirty, my mom or dad would cook, while my sisters and I would set the table. Then we’d eat. All together. Before ten.

I just assumed that once we got married, Ted and I would eat dinner together too. With this expectation in tow, my

36 over-enthusiastic self would come home, after a long day of work and a full load of grad school classes, and cook.

Dinner would get done around five-thirty. Ted, he'd be home at eight, sometimes nine.

At first, I would call him. "Hey, I'm making dinner. It'll be done soon." I thought surely that would draw my man home. Yet, well-meaning as he was to put work aside and join me, he often lost track of time while finishing up the day's responsibilities.

After years of this type of schedule, which when he was single wasn't bad in and of itself, change was hard. Pulling himself out of bed earlier didn't come naturally. As much as I wanted him to master this discipline and self-control immediately, overnight success didn't happen.

So I had a choice. I could wage the civil war, Slater-style, over what I perceived as his lack of consideration for me . . . or I could choose patience.

I went with the second option. There was less blood involved—metaphorically speaking, of course—and in the long run it equated to a much happier home environment.

This didn't mean that I simply let this issue go. It was affecting our relationship in a negative way, so it needed to be addressed. It took me a while to work up the nerve to broach it with more than mere comments here and there (as I've already mentioned, conflict wasn't my thing), but I eventually did. In the end, we discussed it. Ted determined to be more purposeful in the hours he chose to work. And I didn't get all bent out of shape when his efforts weren't successful.

Not only that, but I adjusted. Rather than one of us making a complete 180, we worked at taking both of our schedules and finding a balance. We didn't have to eat dinner at five-thirty as I was used to, but we also didn't need to wait until nine or ten to accommodate Ted's "fly by the seat of his pants" nature. We started aiming for around seven-

thirty. Eventually, we pushed that back to six. And just so you don't think this came easily, it took us years to find this common ground. Years of him striving to do better. Years of me attempting to be gracious. Even now, it's not an area we've checked off a list as "fixed." You know what they say: old habits die hard. To which I'd like to add: especially when they involve sleeping in.



Ted says

Looking back now, I'm embarrassed at how careless I've been with Ashleigh. How poorly I've facilitated the integration of our lives. But I'm also encouraged that I have gotten better. I look forward to looking back in ten more years, heartened that I've gotten better yet.

The Guitarist and His New Wife

Ted and I aren't the only couple who've struggled to make the transition from the single life to the married years. Our friends Clark and Salina can relate. Although for them, the issue was more complex than whether Clark made it home for dinner at a reasonable hour. Salina recalled:

When I met my husband, he had five other women in his life—Jewel, Ruby, Rosie, Honey, and Poison Ivy. They were his guitars, and before I came along, they were his closest companions.

It was a blessed existence really. Every three or four days, Clark would briefly emerge from his sound lab for water, gigs, and Mexican queso dip, before resuming his post-performance ritual of sci-fi thrillers and Radiohead. Most importantly, he would spend hours of uninterrupted time rehearsing, creating, analyzing, and composing complex music.

The payoff for all of that queso and proficiency was a successful career as a touring and studio guitarist. He had become so well-respected among professional musicians that by the time I met him, one of his bandmates pulled me aside and said, “If you don’t marry him, I will.”

If music had merely been a hobby for Clark—simply a time-consuming habit from those single years—the balance that marriage required might have been more cut and dried. But it wasn’t. As Clark shared, “Music is not only my untamable passion. It is my job.” This left the couple struggling to figure out how to integrate the two. Salina remembered:

Unlike most musicians who starve according to the motto “Quit Work. Make Music,” Clark worked insanely hard at his craft with a hefty day rate to prove it. I was a proud and supportive wife, and yet, as much as I appreciated his artistry and professionalism, the well of his musical passion ran much deeper than even I could ever hope to access.

Suddenly, the consecutive hours and days of what seemed like creative indulgence began to rival our newlywed intimacy. It wasn’t as though I had married someone who was addicted to gaming or worse—golf. This was his *job*. Nevertheless, I was not jibing with his divided time and interest. One night, I stormed across our apartment and blurted out, “Is music your *mistress* or something?!”

After tears and making up, we pulled out the checkbook and the calendar. In our case, both would have to reflect the level of priority we had agreed to give music so that neither of us felt cheated by or resentful of the other person. We created a music line item in the budget for records and gear and live shows and more gear. We designated “practice time” in our

joint calendar. We even gave “the ladies” their own room in the house—a creative space for Clark to keep his guitars, rehearse, write, and entertain the muse.

Clark and Salina have found that these practical elements of their compromise definitely helped. However, even years later, they still have to be intentional in this area. Clark confessed, “There is an opportunity cost to marriage that you have to factor in. In order to do things ‘well,’ you have to find the balance.”

Grace for the Old

Yep, the fact remains that even when we do make daily, conscious efforts to change and do better than yesterday, we don’t succeed 100 percent of the time. On a good day, I’m well under that.

Does this mean I’m not making progress? When Ted misses the mark, does it signal that he’s given up? I sure hope not.

You’ve heard the cliché “Practice makes perfect.” Ted realizes that’s just not attainable, so he prefers to say, “Practice makes progress.” And that’s been our goal. Our aim is, as Inigo Montoya so dramatically illustrates, to be persistent and patient on a daily basis with our self and each other. Naturally, it requires teamwork as we commit to killing ingrained habits that steal joy from our marriage and extend patience as the other does the same.

For us, this has translated into flexibility. We don’t force the other to transform in a snap or face our disapproval. Ultimatums aren’t invited to play. We’ve come to see that those foster competition, not unity. It’s like Shakespeare wrote in *Othello*, “How poor are they that have not patience! What wound did ever heal but by degrees?”⁷ The path to wholeness takes time.

So as Shakespeare might ask, “What sayeth thou?” Are you excited to see incremental improvement, even if it’s sometimes sporadic, or do you get frustrated when your spouse’s growth isn’t progressing quickly enough? And to clarify, I’m not talking about sin patterns where there’s absolutely no change or desire to improve. I’m talking about those areas where your spouse knows they need to do better, but the pace may be slower than you’d like.

The thing is, I’ve come to see that how I respond to Ted as those old habits sputter can make a huge difference in the quality of our daily married life.

When I’m having an especially hard time responding with patience, sometimes I take a moment to think back to the last time I confronted Ted in a not-so-nice way about a behavior I didn’t like. Perhaps he slept in later than I preferred. When I reflect on the ways my impatience in that moment affected our relationship over the next several hours or even days, I realize my knee-jerk reactions aren’t worth the cost.

What we’ve discovered is worth the cost is to respond in a team-building manner even when one of us would rather throw in the towel. How do we do this? Here are four practical ways we’re learning to practice patience for the old as we work together toward the new. You may find them helpful too.

1. We Pick Our Battles

I’ve come to realize that not all of Ted’s old habits are necessarily sinful. Now, before I address a behavior of his, I first stop and categorize it.

Sin means to “miss the mark.” So I ask myself: Is Ted missing God’s mark? Or is he simply missing mine? Is it a quirk I find grating, or is it offensive to God and hurtful to our relationship? If it’s a matter of annoyance, not destruc-

tiveness, then maybe I—and not Ted—am the one who 41
needs to change.

Ted says

Reading Ashleigh's thoughtful and gracious words, I find myself freshly challenged to invite her to tell me about things I do that annoy her. I feel like it'd be safe to do so. I anticipate that the ensuing conversation will feel intentional, almost clinical—a good deal like cooperation and not at all like nagging.

Take, for example, my pet peeve when it comes to the mail. It bothers me when incoming mail is placed on the kitchen counter where I prep food, or on the table where we eat. I mean, seriously, those letters and fliers and magazines have been touched by how many different hands? They've been on how many different counters? Not to mention the number of planes, trains, and automobiles they've ridden around in. It's not like I can bathe them in hand sanitizer or throw them in the dishwasher. I sometimes wish I could.

Yeah, it's a bit OCD, I admit it.

This doesn't seem to bother Ted, though. Not in the least. I don't know how many times he's come in and set the mail in one of these sacred spots. For a while—as in years—I'd correct him. A comment here. A bit of sarcasm there. Now, for the most part, he accommodates me. I've had to chill and realize that my husband isn't putting the mail there to spite me. I'm learning to hold my tongue, simply move the mail (and not in an exasperated manner, mind you), and not allow it to cause dissension in our relationship.

Sometimes the bothersome things simply aren't worth the battle. Often when I choose to move a bothersome thing to the conversational front burner, it doesn't improve my

- 42 marriage, it simply feeds my need to have things a certain way. The majority of the time it's better for me to apply the wisdom of Proverbs 19:11 here, which says, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

2. We Have a Realistic View of Ourselves

Sometimes my habits don't seem as bad as Ted's do. There are instances when I'm inclined to give myself a break, but not so quick to give him one too.

Remember how I mentioned that my "walking dictionary" can become surprisingly uncreative with his language when upset? Well, I often fall prey to the emotional vent. Okay, so maybe "fall prey" attributes too much innocence on my part. The truth is, I often jump, feet first, into ranting my emotions—good, bad, and sometimes ugly—about a situation or individual to Ted.

For years, Ted's frustrated "cries" would make me inwardly cringe. After all, didn't he realize what Paul says in Ephesians 4:29 about "corrupting talk"? My venting was nowhere near as bad as his "corrupt" words.

The problem was, though, drawing comparisons like this masks the reality that I'm no better than he is. While, yes, some behaviors are more destructive than others, we can *both* use growth.

I've come to realize that my venting can be just as harmful. In fact, when I stopped to really think about it and look at Scripture, I found that my unkind words are corrupt too. They certainly aren't, as Paul goes on to say, "good for building up" and they don't "give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

When I put my own behavior into perspective, it gives me more patience for Ted in the areas he struggles. Maybe he cringes at my venting just as much as I do at his sometimes limited vocabulary. It's made it easier for me to go to him

with an attitude of humility and say, “Hey, I know my venting can get out of hand. I’m sorry. That’s something I’m going to work on. Can you also continue to work on what escapes your mouth when you’re frustrated?”

3. We Sandwich Our Criticism

Ted and I both earned master’s degrees in communication. Mine in television-cinema; his in international communication. Did we focus on this discipline because we were especially strong in it? No, not exactly. Ted likes to say it’s because we realized our need for improvement.

One of our favorite techniques we picked up in our studies is what’s termed the “communication sandwich.” For those of you unfamiliar with this, it basically boils down to using praise and affirmation to sandwich criticism.

Remember Ted’s work schedule? I could have pointed fingers and attacked with, “You’d rather sleep in and stay late at the office than get up, make it to work at a reasonable hour, and have time for me at the end of the day! You only think of yourself!” Or I could try the sandwich approach. It might go something like this:

Praise/Affirmation

Ted, I sure do appreciate how hard you work every day. You do a lot to provide for us. I realize that sleeping in is one thing that helps you relax and get away from the pressures of your job. I know that’s important . . .

Criticism

But I’ve been feeling like it’s getting in the way of our time together. It would mean a lot to me if you could be home from work earlier in the evenings. Are there ways we can move toward this? Maybe we can both go to bed earlier? . . .

Praise/Affirmation

I'm really looking forward to figuring out a good balance in this area. I can't wait to spend more time with you.

In this example, I've shared with Ted how I'd like him to change, but I've done it in a way that doesn't put him on the defensive. Not only have I spoken well of him, pointing out the ways I recognize and appreciate him, but I've also made it about me. I've focused on a "this is how I feel," rather than a "you did this" approach.

Sometimes when it feels like a conversation is taking a turn for the worse, I ask Ashleigh to make me a sandwich. That usually helps.



Ted says

4. We Focus on Progress, Not Perfection

Nowadays, Ted doesn't buy a Nord Electro on a whim. He also doesn't stay up until two in the morning on a regular basis. But time management is still an area under construction, especially now that he once again has a flexible work schedule. I could easily be frustrated that we've had many recent nights when he doesn't walk through the door until almost seven at night.

But I've determined not to focus on his failings, rather on his successes. It goes back to "practice makes progress." When frustration sets in, I have to stop myself and focus on all the ways Ted has grown and improved in this area over the years. It's hard to be angry when I realize just how far he's come.

I've also continued to look for ways I can meet him in the middle, rather than expecting that he alone change. Now

that I work from home, rather than head into an office too, our time together isn't confined to evenings. We can also catch up in the mornings over coffee while our kids play or watch *My Little Pony*.

At times it's seemed inconceivable that some of those pesky single behaviors Ted and I both brought to our marriage would change. But just as Inigo Montoya's quest for the six-fingered man ended with success, we're finding that we can kill old habits with time. Ted's not where he was ten years ago, and I know he won't be where he is now in another decade. He can say the same for me.

Us Time

Now it's your turn. Read over these questions and find some time to chat with your spouse about those pesky old habits.

1. When you got married, did one or both of you realize marriage would require change? What took you by surprise? Chat about the habits you thought would die quickly, but haven't.
2. Is there an area that's caused conflict in your marriage that you could solve by striking a balance? Talk about practical ways you can do this. Make a plan to work toward it this week.
3. How do you handle your spouse's grating habits? If you were to sit down and evaluate your attitude and behavior in this area, would the scale tilt more toward Shakespeare's degrees or a certain fickle Goldilocks's posture? You know, an annoying discontentment that things are not "just right."
4. Take time to apologize to one another for battles you picked recently that you should have over-

looked. Commit to doing better at overlooking offenses, and pray together for help in this area.

5. Mentally make a list of one or two ways you've noticed that your spouse has made progress in an area. Together, take time to affirm and encourage each other in the changes you've seen. Applaud the other's growth.

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