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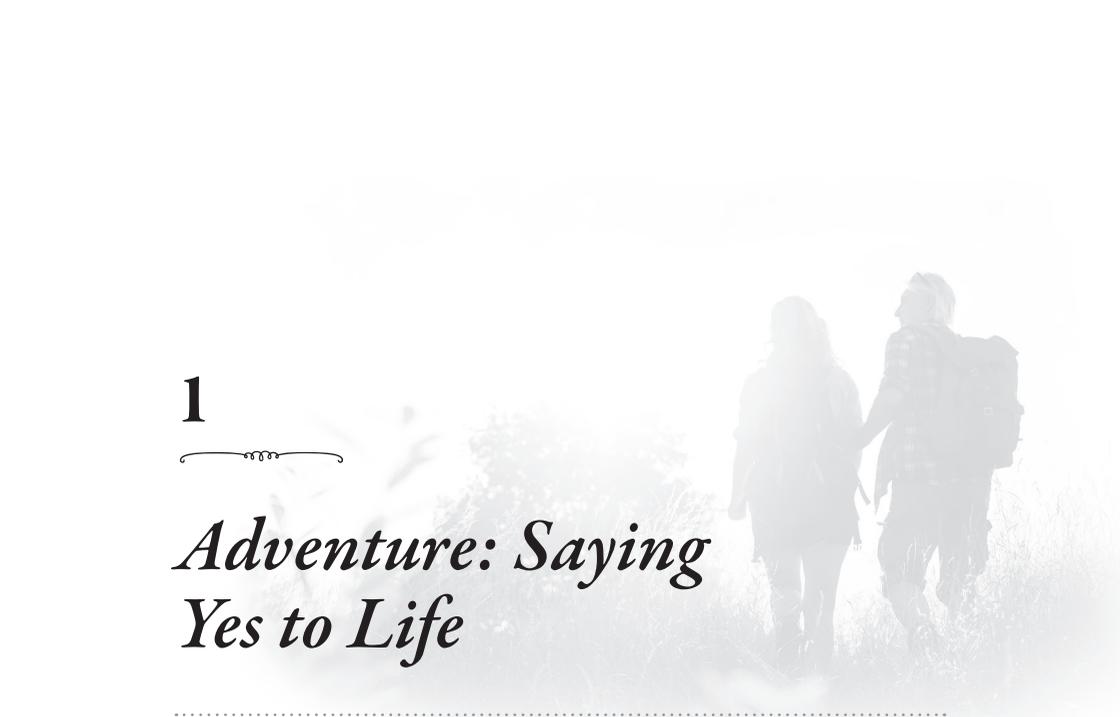
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Adventure: Saying Yes to Life

A young woman darts into a Paris café and catches a man's eye . . . a rich girl and poor guy fight off villains . . . lovers flee through the jungle to a cliff's edge. In the movies, romance means adventure: the thrill of danger, discovery, chase, and new love. Everything is exciting, exhilarating, and alluring! But Hollywood rarely associates adventure with marriage. Neither do we. If anything, we see it as quite the opposite. We say, "Why doesn't she get married and settle down?" Hollywood really doesn't associate adventure with the mature among us, with the notable exception of Dame Judi Dench finding love in India in the *Best Exotic Marigold* films.

But adventure *matters*. Adventure matters because for many of us, the temptation is to settle down and stay there. The "Marigold" movies resonated because they touched on questions so many of us ask, like: Who am I? Who are we? And what are we going to do in the time God gives us? What is the *more* that we may be missing?

We smiled at a friend's description of a recent moment in her marriage:

The older we get, the less patience we have with the Northern winter. One way we break up the bleakness is by visiting friends of ours with a home on an island off the Florida coast. Manatees, pelicans, palm trees, and the elemental feeling of warm salt water lapping your toes are truly balm to the frozen soul.

Best of all is the joy of hanging out with dear friends, just as we are, totally relaxed.

One evening, after a great meal, we were all chilling in front of the TV watching basketball. Everyone, including the two Labs, was in some stage of reclining. Ah, this is the life!

The next thing I knew, I was blinking and shaking off the fog of sleep. I'd nodded off and so had everyone else. Some late-night talk show was droning on. One husband was asleep on the couch. Another husband, asleep sitting up. A wife, curled up and snoozing. And both dogs were sprawled and snoring.

I loved the peculiar vulnerability of it all! When do our friends see us asleep? I was glad my husband and I weren't the only ones who "conk out" in front of the tube, mouths agape. It was all so comfy and cozy . . .

"FRESH TURNS AND NEW SURPRISES"

Comfy and cozy is great, but when are we *too* comfortable? When do we need to get off the recliner and make some changes?

Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier, in *The Adventure of Living*, writes that we never find fulfillment except by living in a spirit of adventure. He specifically applies that to all seasons of marriage: “To make a success of one’s marriage, one must treat it as an adventure, with all the riches and difficulties that are involved in an adventure shared with another person.”

Depending on your personality, “adventure” means many things. For some who are wed to their routines, it could mean taking a different route to the grocery store. But there are great riches for long-married partners in having something *new* to bring to the marriage: new ideas, new conversations, and new people to know. Newness and change, however modest, wakes up the brain, even carving new neural paths. It’s good for our marriages and good for our health.

But newness is not necessarily the same thing as novelty. Many of us have known couples whose later years seemed to consist of an empty pursuit of pleasure. Yet neither do we want to remain stuck in our comfortable rut. Listen to psychiatrist Tournier, who writes that all through life we need fresh adventures and that we find shared purposes in them by “waiting on God for a new beginning.”

Here is his marriage prescription: “The surrendered life is an adventure because it is always on the alert, listening to God, to His voice and to His angels! It is an absorbing puzzle, an exciting search for signs of God.” Tournier describes the adventure of faith as “exciting, difficult, and exacting, but full of poetry, of new discoveries, of fresh turns and new surprises. Saying ‘Yes’ to God is saying ‘Yes’ to life. Marriage can be turned into an adventure again, even when it has become a mere institution, a habit, or even a bore.”¹

LESS SPACE, MORE MARGIN

Many empty-nesters wonder about selling the big suburban house and moving to a quaint country cottage or sleek city apartment in a walkable neighborhood. We read those endless “Top Places to Retire” lists online and wonder how we would fare in, say, the Carolinas. But Paul and Becky actually did more than think about it.

The couple recently moved from the farthest reaches of exurbia to a city condo with an incredible water view, trading Paul’s grinding two-hour commute for a twelve-minute jaunt on the bus to his downtown job. In the morning the sunrise floods their bedroom and sparkles off the water (although, Paul says, without shades “it’s like 125 degrees in here when the sun comes in”). They walk everywhere, actually talk to their new urban neighbors, have found a church with many young people, and in general feel much more relaxed.

For Becky and Paul, the move to the city is actually a homecoming of sorts. They began their married life in the city and vowed that eventually they would return to the city.

But first they wanted to raise their large family in the suburbs. “It was Paul laying down his life for his family,” Becky said. “When I would come into the city, I would wonder, ‘How is he able to do this?’”

“I was always exhausted,” Paul said. “You become obsessed with sleep. I kept asking, ‘If I go to bed at such-and-such a time,

“I thought, ‘if we’re this separated at fifty, what will it look like when we’re seventy?’”

how many hours will I get?’ Becky and I were living very separate lives. I thought, ‘If we’re this separated at fifty, what will it look like when we’re seventy?’”

When the kids were grown and Paul was promoted, it seemed the right time to move. Then, their eldest daughter came home for a visit, looked at her father, and said, “if this keeps up, you are going to be dead. I want my kids to have grandparents.” And she “ordered” them to move to the city.

Now it was time for Becky to sacrifice. “It was very difficult for her to shut down her life so we could have a joint life,” Paul said. “But for us to have that joint life, it was necessary.”

“And part of this new season is that we’re each more in touch with what the other is going through,” Becky says.

“WE WERE WORKING TOGETHER AT SOMETHING”

Kevin and Karen are adventurers too. They don’t fit the typical image. Both serve on the staff at a local church. They don’t take exotic vacations (unless you count a trip Kevin took to visit a “sister” church in Nigeria a few years back). They’ve lived in the same house for a long time. But Kevin and Karen have found adventure and renewal in pursuing a “shared purpose.”

Kevin and Karen made a marriage-changing discovery when their two children were small. They had been leading a church youth group in which the kids were so rude they wanted to quit. It strained their relationship, yet the discouragement also forced them to talk more to each other.

Here is what they discovered:

“The biggest surprise was that something good was happening

to our marriage. We were working together at something. What a puzzle! That youth-group ministry, which by all rights should have pulled our marriage apart, actually bonded it in a new level of intimacy.”

Their “working together at something” became more than a shared task. They wrote a book titled *More than You and Me*, which summed up their vision of marriage as a means to serving others.

Since leading that youth group decades ago, Kevin and Karen have experienced heavy personal challenges: difficulties with kids, hard times in the life of the church, even chronic physical pain, but they still reach out as a team to help others. Recently they asked four younger couples to meet at their house to talk about life issues. “These are couples heavily involved in the church and wanting to grow. Helping other couples is a thing we love to do together.”

Now Kevin has taken a new job, returning to the publishing world he joined thirty years ago. But, always the pastor, he will continue to be involved at the church where he and Karen serve. And amid all their busyness, it’s safe to say that they will continue making their marriage something that serves others, and having adventures along the way.

“WHEN WE LOST MOST OF OUR RETIREMENT, THE CHOICE WAS OURS”

Making marriage an adventure rather than a bore takes two people, and sometimes those two people are very different. What about individual talents, preferences, and drives? How

does a couple embrace a shared purpose when they are male and female, “Mars and Venus,” unique individuals?

We found Ted and Linda’s experiences relevant to those questions. Right now they’re living a fairly unique adventure. They decided to live on a boat. No, not a big houseboat but a very small boat with only 350 square feet of living space. How did they end up on a boat? A few years ago the Great Recession wiped out the equity in their home. The next year the Securities & Exchange Commission (SEC) called, informing them two men they trusted were actually running a Ponzi scheme, defrauding them out of their life savings. The men ended up in prison, and Ted and Linda ended up no longer able to afford a house or rent payments.

They had few options.

“We’d always sort of wanted to live on the water,” Ted says, “so it wasn’t much of a stretch to turn the financial downturn into the opportunity to create an adventure. We set our sights on a boat.”

It became a long adventure on a small boat! In those tight quarters month after month, how do two very different people cope? Early in their marriage they each crafted a personal mission statement, and they also crafted one as a couple. Now this intrigued us. They implemented their personal statements, yet mostly ignored the combined one.

Why did the mutual mission statement gather dust? Here’s what they told us: “The individual statements of purpose were what helped us blend as a couple.” That may seem contradictory, but it says this, that mutual respect for what the other brings to a marriage is essential.

Yet after decades of marriage, new dynamics created new

tensions, such as absorbing the emotional impact of their financial losses.

“When we lost most of our retirement, the choice was ours,” Ted says. “We could become woeful in our loss, or we could see what life could be like in a completely different environment. Trusting God for provision is a real thing for us. So is our gratitude for it. Many times we ask, ‘What’s next? How will He provide? Will we move into a real house where the grandkids can visit more often?’ We come back to this: we get to live on a boat, fulfilling a dream, learning to trust our Master for next steps.”

UNDERSTANDING “THE OTHER”

A touch of wildness, a sense of purpose and adventure, and a commitment to shared goals, these energize and deepen a marriage. It means empowering a mate’s gifts and growth year after year. It means not slipping from comfort into stagnation. Often it means sacrifice.

The other. The only way for marriage to flourish at whatever age is for the “other,” that most important person in our lives, to be understood, included, and listened to. If a marriage is to last, the partners must be on the same page, especially at major crossroads. Mates may share values but sharply disagree about which path they should take.

Like other couples, long ago Jeanette and I (Harold) made choices that now define our lives. On three very big choices, it was Jeanette who insisted we make those choices in full agreement.

At her initiative we had become foster parents, and eventually a little boy named Ricky needed to be adopted. However,

our plates were more than full with our three older birth children and heavy pressures at my work. We were far past the usual age to adopt.

We prayed and repeatedly discussed this huge fork in the road. Jeanette was adamant in saying, “No way should we do this if you aren’t fully making this decision with me.”

Three times we were confronted with the clear need to adopt a child. Three times we mutually, after much prayer and discussion, said yes.

Tough times always come, and to us they came in severe measure. Jeanette’s insistence that we be of one mind on the adoptions was proven right. How easily the blame game can start! “If only *you* hadn’t . . .”

In action movies, when partners lack agreement and one wanders off, it usually spells disaster. In contrast, determination to find common ground, or to fully affirm a mutual choice, makes relevant this scriptural wisdom, “Two are better than one . . . if one falls down, his friend can help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9).

SPENDING YOUR “BONUS YEARS”

Demographers tell us there’s a new thing under the sun: twenty or thirty or more “bonus years” of life expectancy. Psychologist Erik Erikson termed this a time of “generativity,” when seasoned adults can pass on wisdom and values to the next generations.

The extended time of “generativity” is being well used by many couples who see it as a gift. Joe and Marilyn, whose house is a thoroughfare for grandchildren and international visitors,

travel often to Brazil to help their daughter and her family in the ministry to street children in Sao Paulo.

Their natural instinct for adventure started early. Joe, a high diver, first noticed Marilyn when she broke from a group of girls as the only one to brave the high dive at a pool. That began a marriage without borders. With their small children they drove and camped for six weeks from Scotland to Beirut, where Joe began teaching. Three years later, when settled back home in the Midwest, an unexpected opportunity came to teach in Nigeria. Although their children balked at moving again so soon, Marilyn asked, “Why not go?” They did.

We asked how they worked out their differences, and they could remember only one heated argument. Joe was teaching at the American University in Cairo and would eat lunch with a mostly Muslim group. Out of courtesy, he decided to fast with them during Ramadan, and Marilyn strongly disagreed. She admitted to being mad at him.

“How long were you mad?” we asked.

“All through the month of Ramadan!”

But despite the challenges of crossing borders and cultures, Marilyn and Joe would have it no other way. “Without adventure, life would be boring,” Marilyn says. “It puts spark in your life.”

“GOD HAS MUCH MORE FOR US”

Yet not every couple is ready, or able, to fly to Brazil or move to an urban high-rise. Shared purpose and a spirit of adventure will look different for everyone, depending on personalities and the realities of health and finances.

One couple agreed to take care of their married daughter's pets for a season: the dog, fish, and birds. They acknowledged that the experience enlivened their home. "It broke our routines and forced us to care for other creatures. You can get really in-grown as empty nesters, with your tidy house and careful little routines. Neither of us is wired to be big risk-takers, and we've come to terms with that, but we're always thinking about where *is* the adventure for us. I like coming home to the squawking of the parakeets and the dog's chew toys left strewn all over and the fish wriggling to tell me he's hungry. I think it's good for us."

This same couple recently moved to an Anglican congregation. They say the adventure of a younger, larger, more liturgical setting has been a needed change. "The worship is very joyful, very creative, and yet ancient and solemn at the same time. We like the Bible-based, strongly relevant preaching. We can each see how the other has grown spiritually. We used to bicker on the way to church. Now we go to bed on Saturday nights excited about worship the next day. We talk about how we can contribute. It feels new and energizing. We believe God has much more for us."

**Each of us is responsible
for living with a spirit
of adventure.**

PLUNGING IN

One husband said, "I look back on years of fast-track everything: work pressures, kids in school and tons of activities, always being stretched, and wondering what was coming next. Yes, it was an adventure, and everything is different now. Yet in

a sense, it's the same, always a new day with choices to make and people to love. That will even be true if my health fails and I'm flat on my back."

Jerry and Shirley Rose in their book *Significant Living* challenge us as we age "not to back off from new adventures when God is just as dependable as ever." To illustrate, they use their white-water rafting experience. "The river," they write, "was an adventure with rough spots and awesome, truly majestic scenery." They had to submit themselves to the will of the river, knowing they wouldn't get lost, and would experience adventures along the way. Referring specifically to the second half of life, they conclude, "We can experience more thrills, bear more fruit, and live significantly by plunging in and getting in God's flow."²

HOW TO BUILD AN ADVENTUROUS MARRIAGE

Adventure doesn't mean you have to do something as drastic as living on a boat. Adventure may be trying a different restaurant, or going to a high school football game to watch the grandson of a friend. Then on Monday send him a note and tell him how much you enjoyed watching him play. Adventure can also be a ministry.

Not all adventure is a shared experience. Each of us is responsible for living with a spirit of adventure. I (Gary) am a morning person. I enjoy spending an hour in the wooded area behind our house cutting kudzu vines (if you don't live in the Southeast, you will not know what kudzu is). It is a large, leafy, fast-growing vine that climbs trees, and ultimately kills the tree. So, I guess you'd say I'm a tree hugger. When I cut the vine at the ground level, it dies and eventually falls from the trees. I love the adventure I

experience while working in the woods. My wife, Karolyn, is a night person. She will never venture into the woods with me in the early morning hours, even if she were a morning person. She's far too concerned about snakes, ticks, and poison ivy. Yet she enjoys hearing about my adventures when I share with her the sights and sounds I experienced in the woods.

On the other hand, Karolyn is a symphony lover. I really wish that I could hear the sounds and distinguish the instruments as she does, but I am not a musician, and my mind is not wired to hear all the distinguishing sounds. To her, attending the symphony is an adventure. When she returns from attending the symphony with some of her close friends, I enjoy hearing her tell me about what she experienced. My joy is in seeing the spirit of adventure still alive in her heart and eyes as she shares with me.

Giving each other the freedom to develop the spirit of adventure in different venues is one of the keys to having an adventurous marriage.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STIMULATING ADVENTURE IN YOUR MARRIAGE

1. Take a ceramics class together.
2. Encourage your creative spouse to take art lessons.
3. Visit each other's hometown. Show them where you were born, went to school, church, etc. Make the trip even livelier by taking the grandchildren.
4. Volunteer to work together at the local soup kitchen.
5. Revisit your honeymoon destination.
6. Volunteer for a mission trip, at home or abroad.

MARRIED AND STILL LOVING IT

7. Once a year visit a different church in your city.
8. Take a train ride to somewhere.
9. Go to your high school or college reunion.
10. In June, go shopping for Christmas presents.

We encourage you to make your own list of things you would like to do, as individuals or as a couple.