

in the beginning: a painful revelation

I* sat across the kitchen table from my wife, Brenda, and I could tell she was waiting until she had my undivided attention.

Then she looked intently into my eyes and changed my world. “I don’t know how else to say this to you, so I’ll say it straight,” she began. “My feelings for you are dead.”

Her words arrived like a fastball pitch to the solar plexus. *Dead?* My head spun. Where was this coming from? Our marriage had begun with such promise. How could I have messed things up so badly that my wife—the love of my life—now felt totally numb to me? My mind quickly searched for answers, but it would take me some time to piece things together.

SEARCHING FOR CLUES

The seeds of my marital discord were planted four years before I met Brenda. I was attending Stanford University in the San Francisco Bay area, desperately trying to make sense of my life, seeking truth in any intellectual nook and cranny I could find (I was a non-Christian, though I’d attended church many times over the years).

* Because this book focuses on Fred’s story (see the next-to-last paragraph in the introduction), first-person pronouns refer to Fred, unless otherwise indicated.

First, I dallied in the writings of Marx and Engels. Next I turned to Eastern religion, a fad that swept the Stanford campus in the late 1970s. I even accepted a flower and an invitation from the Moonies, who “love-bombed” me but failed to convince me to join their ranks. Meanwhile, I meandered up and down the West Coast, spending seminar weekends with enlightened gurus as they “merged” with the universe.

I hungered to find the Meaning of Life, but since I wasn't having much luck, I looked for solace and comfort in the arms of female companions. That was something I could understand. One year after graduating from Stanford, I had four girlfriends and was sleeping with three of them. Obviously, I was a busy man—too busy to notice that God was drawing a bead on my hungry soul.

Late one afternoon before leaving the office of my first real job, I settled my feet on the credenza to enjoy the beautiful California sunset bursting through my window. In this unguarded moment, God somehow interrupted the scene with the horrible revelation of what I had become. Detesting the sight, I felt sorrow rush over me. “Lord,” I prayed, “if You're ready to work with me, I'm ready to work with You.”

All heaven seemed to move on my behalf. Within weeks, I accepted a new position back in Iowa, where I'd grown up. I left the anything-goes West Coast lifestyle in my rearview mirror. Best of all, my quest for the Meaning of Life—for truth—was over. I had accepted Christ as Lord of my life. Finally, I had peace.

Planting my feet squarely in Des Moines, Iowa, I found a church home. In addition, I decided to attend a married couples Sunday school class—which raised a few eyebrows, since I was a bachelor. You see, I had stopped dating, suspecting I understood little about women and knowing I couldn't treat them with honor. I had heard that the pastor teaching the class would unveil the wonderful intricacies of women. He did, which only confirmed my ignorance about females, despite all the “intimate” time I had spent with them.

As the months passed, a desire grew within me to understand the lessons better. One night I simply prayed, “Lord, You’ve taught me so much about women. Can You show me someone who embodies these characteristics?” I wasn’t asking for a girlfriend or even a date. I just wanted to see such a Christian woman in real life.

One week later, my father, now married to my stepmother, called me from Moline, Illinois, and said, “Freddie, I have a deal for you! I know a family in our church with a nice Christian daughter, and I’ve arranged a double date for us. My treat.” I thought it was kind of cute that Dad wanted to double-date with me, but then I remembered the last time Dad had tried to play matchmaker. He sent me on a day ski trip with a date who wore tight stretch pants, had big hair, and used so much makeup she must have applied it with a trowel.

Despite the bad experience, I decided to play along again and make the three-hour drive to Moline. Dad meant well, and a church service capped with a free lunch seemed tame enough. With a little luck, I’d be home in time for the second NBA game on television.

The day began when I took my seat right next to Dad just a few minutes before the church service was to begin. He leaned over and whispered, “Freddie, here she comes.”

Brenda Hulett stepped into our row, and I stood up to shake her hand. As our eyes met, my heavenly Father seemed to lean down and whisper, *This is the girl you’re going to marry*. I really felt that I would become her husband! This thought, premonition—whatever you want to call it—struck me as funny, which caused me to giggle throughout the service whenever I glanced at her.

Naturally, Brenda was annoyed by my behavior, wondering who this weirdo was sitting next to her. Later that day, I naively told her why I’d been chuckling all during the church service. Now she really wanted to run! Miraculously, she resisted the urge. I was vindicated seven months later on our wedding day.

SEEKING A MOTHER'S BLESSING

So God arranged your marriage, huh? Everything must have gone perfectly for you after that. Hardly. Our courtship progressed strangely that spring and summer, beginning with a request that I made to my mother after our engagement. “When can I come to Cedar Rapids to see you?” I asked. “I want you to meet my fiancée.”

An icy silence ensued. My mom and I were very close, and the thought of her only son marrying some girl she'd never met was not well received. Maybe she was thinking of her own marriage, which broke up when I was eleven years old. After my parents finalized their divorce, life became an emotional and financial horror for Mom, my two sisters, and me. The pressures of single parenting nearly leveled her, but Mom tenaciously fought through it. Working two jobs, she'd come home from her receptionist job, touch base, and grab a bite to eat with us, and then head out to sell grave plots.

Mom was easily the bravest person I knew. As she battled on, my young heart ached for her, and I vowed I'd never do anything to make Mom cry. I shouldered the mantle of manhood as best I could, and we all became closer as we passed through the trials together. That's why her silence following the news of my engagement caught me off guard. I didn't realize that my mother wanted to meet the girl *before* her son decided to marry.

Against this backdrop, Brenda naturally felt the pressure to make a good first impression upon my mother and sisters. Wearing her best sundress, Brenda fixed her hair into a wonderful cloud of curls, and she couldn't have looked nicer. Alas, at first glance my mother and siblings immediately pegged Brenda as a “sorority chick” who would never fit in with the family. No blessing was forthcoming that day, especially after Brenda accidentally stepped into a flat of fresh strawberries my mother had lovingly picked for me.

I hoped our autumn wedding would end the relational tailspin, but first impressions turned into a lasting impression. And marital adjustment turned out to be difficult for Brenda. Her father had died two months before the wedding, and although his passing was expected, his death nonetheless

brought immense grief. Guilt piled on top of Brenda's grief because we were living three hours away from her childhood home in Moline, Illinois, leaving her mother alone to deal with her pain.

We settled in Des Moines, but Brenda couldn't get her bearings there. Brenda had been born and raised in Moline, had always attended the same church she'd been baptized in as a young child, and had cultivated deep friendships there. After college, she had returned to Moline to work as a registered nurse, a career that gained her respect among her peers. Now in Des Moines, Brenda had no friends for support.

To make matters worse, her new job at a local hospital was an unpleasant, vulgar work environment. Worst of all, she was living with me, a veritable stranger who had lost his temper on her wedding night and erupted far too often since. She was overwhelmed. Because of this, we often spent more time with Brenda's family than with mine when we returned to Moline for a visit. Though logical given the circumstances, the relationships with my family deteriorated further. Storms rolled in from every direction.

Trying to mediate both sides was no fun. Where I come from, the louder you were, the righter you were. So every few nights, I received another railing phone call from my family regarding this "insensitive woman" I had married. They kept asking:

"How can she be so selfish with your time?"

"Why do you let her be so self-centered?"

"Don't you still love us?"

We lived in a small apartment, and Brenda could hear it all. Enduring a few tempestuous holidays with my family as well, Brenda soon grew frightened by their volatile outbursts. She felt nauseous for three full days before any visit to their homes.

And why not? The holidays were nothing but trouble. My family, already seeing us less than they desired, demanded a full day's visit. Frightened by their explosive tempers, Brenda preferred an afternoon schedule, somewhere in the one-to-four-o'clock range. With a bit of brokering, I'd negotiate a noon-until-six schedule. Upset with nerves, Brenda dawdled till the last minute,

and we often arrived late. This annoyed my family to no end. Of course, the roles reversed in the afternoon as they demanded we stay until the very last minute, while Brenda ached to return to the safety of our car at the first possible moment. Everyone watched the clock all day. It drove me nuts.

Was I frustrated with my family? Sure. They were wrong about Brenda and made impossible demands on me. But I was even more frustrated with Brenda. We were teammates, and I expected that we would pull from the same rope. I felt she should be more flexible in the negotiations to help me bring us together. I began calling her names, like “big baby” and “spoiled brat.”

Did Brenda agree? Not on your life! She felt that I loved my family and relatives more than I loved her. “After all,” she said, “I don’t hear you calling them nasty names.” She felt that I should defend her and halt their demeaning tirades. My temper became sickeningly manifest. Often, I’d stand toe to toe with Brenda and shout until she cowered. I twice broke holes in the Sheetrock walls with my bare fists. During one of my many tantrums, I threw a pot of bean soup across the floor. But I felt justified.

From my perspective, she was simply stubborn and wouldn’t help.

From her perspective, she *couldn’t* help.

WATCHING THE LOVE GROW COLD

The poison of in-law problems seeped into every aspect of our relationship. In the early days, my heart skipped a beat every time I saw Brenda walk across a room. Not anymore. More often than not, our evenings ended the same way: After hitting the light on the nightstand, I’d settle my head into my pillow, only to hear these sickening words in the darkness: “Fred, we have something to talk about.”

On Valentine’s Day, I went to buy a card. Fingering through the cards and reading the texts, I returned them one by one to the rack as “too mushy” or “too contrived” or “too romantic.” Little by little, panic settled in as I faced the truth: I couldn’t give any of those cards to Brenda with any measure of sincerity.

The onslaught of our in-law problems resembled what the Allied air forces inflicted upon enemy cities in World War II. Our pilots dropped their bombs and then returned to base where life was pretty normal—eating, sleeping, playing cards, and preparing for the next sortie. But for the people back in the burning rubble of the bombed cities, normal life was impossible.

So it was with us. My family dropped their bombs over the phone and then, with the click of the receiver, returned to “base” and their normal life with friends and family. But for Brenda and me, our marriage was crumbling, with rubble smoldering all around us. There was no safe haven—only desperation. And, sadly, Brenda sensed she was living with the enemy because I continued to defend my family during our arguments. Besides, I was just as volatile as they were. I’m sure my scowl reminded her of them.

All this laid the groundwork for Brenda’s sorrowful statement: “I don’t know how else to say this, but my feelings for you are dead.”

Now it was my turn to feel nauseous! Long ago, when my parents’ divorce loomed over my life, a merciless question swirled over and over within my frightened heart. *What are we going to do?* I asked myself. *What are we going to do?*

Brenda’s words brought the question sweeping back, with an even more personal twist: “What am *I* going to do?”

Her declaration took me by surprise. This is the girl God Himself chose for me. This is my wife...and all my hopes and dreams are tied up in her. I’d do anything for her. So how is this happening? I still love her! Sure, the romance is gone, but she’s my best friend. We can still talk to each other. I love our walks.

I asked Brenda a few questions. “Honey, what about it? Do you still love me?”

“Yes,” she said. “I still love you.”

“If the love is still there, then how come your feelings for me are dead?”

Brenda couldn’t put it into words, which left me writhing in grinding confusion. Waves of panic washed over me for days, buckling me in unguarded moments. This isn’t right. *What am I going to do?*

AVOIDING DIVORCE COURT

One day, as I stepped into the kitchen for a glass of milk, tears pooled in my eyes once again. I fought down a searing pain in my heart. Opening the refrigerator door, I listlessly grabbed the milk carton and aimed at the glass in my hand. Returning the carton to its place, I shut the door and stared for a long time at the refrigerator through tear-filled eyes. Then I pointed to heaven, declaring, “God, I don’t care how much gravel I have to eat, but I am not getting a divorce.”

That’s how desperate I was. I’d eat rocks if that would save my marriage. I knew it was time to pay a real price, a much deeper price. God said in Ephesians 5 that I must lay down my life for my marriage, just as He laid down His life for His bride, the church. I hadn’t even approached such sacrificial love.

I lifted up that desperate statement to God nearly twenty years ago. Recently, a deacon said to me, “Fred, I know only two couples who enjoy a level of intimacy that allows them to talk to each other about absolutely anything—even their sins—without fear and with total love. You and Brenda are one of them.”

I smiled and thanked that deacon. How did we get from there to here? What you’re about to read is our story.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As honestly and fully as you can, describe your own journey in encountering any of Fred's experiences and discoveries as presented in this chapter. How much can you identify with him?
2. Which part of Fred's story can you identify with most?
3. Have you ever come to the point of making a significant and memorable decision to save or strengthen your marriage? If so, what brought this about?
4. How would you express your personal goals or expectations for your marriage from reading *Every Woman's Desire*?