



UNCOVER THE *Lover* WITHIN

Rediscovering Intimacy in Your Marriage

by *Melanie Wilson, Ph.D.*

Sometimes I wish my marriage had the passion and romance of a Hollywood movie. What woman doesn't want to be spoiled with a new wardrobe like Richard Gere gave Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*? Or to have her man gently wash her hair like Robert Redford did for Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa*? Who wouldn't be thrilled to share a kiss as passionate as Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan's in *Sleepless in Seattle* or *You've Got Mail*?

I'd like to get diamonds and roses and a surprise dinner at an exclusive restaurant. Instead, my "romantic moment" is usually a grocery-store greeting card and dinner at a fast-food restaurant.

I have sometimes felt disappointed, angry, and hopeless because my marriage didn't measure up to the movie ideal. But ten years of marriage and experience counseling dozens of engaged and married couples have convinced me that while romantic movies are fun, the perfect relationships they portray have little to do with real life.

As a newlywed, I was more interested in *being loved* than in *giving love* to my husband. I spent many frustrating years trying to get my husband to love me like I thought Richard Gere, Robert Redford, or Tom Hanks would love their wives. Slowly I discovered a more satisfying love than even these Hollywood hunks could provide, and it inspired me to be the best lover I could be.

As my focus shifted from getting to giving, I discovered more intimacy and passion in my marriage.

Our marriages will never be as ideal as the ones on the big screen, but I've found that it's possible to star in my own wonderful romance by creating a romantic setting, seeking to be an admirable leading lady, and putting my trust in the director of marriage.

CREATE A ROMANTIC SETTING

Clean Up!

Every good love story requires a romantic setting. The most intimate scene in a romantic movie usually takes place in a beautiful room with a comfortable, neatly made bed surrounded by the glow of candlelight or a crackling fire. Not many great love stories take place among stacks of laundry, an unmade bed, and a heap of clutter!

What setting is essential to your love story? Is there a space in your home that can make or break a romantic mood? When my husband and I were first married, our bedroom was a wreck. I tried to keep the rest of the house clean by cramming everything into our room, and never made the bed or hung up my clothes unless we were having company. When my husband tripped over laundry baskets and complained of stubbed toes, I realized this was getting in the way of intimacy.

I found it hard to relax and enjoy our time together, too, because I felt guilty about the mess. Worrying about clutter distracted me from feeling romantic.

I didn't realize it at the time, but my lack of concern with the state of our bedroom—our private space in a household with three children—suggested that I didn't care much about the state of our marriage either. I had counseled enough unhappy divorced people to know that I didn't want to join their ranks. My marriage was a top priority in my life, and I wanted our bedroom to show it!

One simple step I took to uncover the lover within me was to make sure my husband and I could enjoy a romantic setting. Marriage experts suggest that the bedroom should be reserved for sleeping, dressing, and sex. Removing desks, televisions, and other distractions might make it easier to talk and touch when you're together. Our bedroom is now the cleanest room in our house because I spend just fifteen minutes a day decluttering it. I make the bed and put laundry away each morning and regularly deep clean. My husband no longer complains of stubbed toes and we enjoy spending more time in the bedroom, our haven from the cares and concerns of the world.

For me, keeping the bedroom clean is essential to the freedom necessary for intimacy. Determine what space in your home is important to set the mood or to show respect for your mate and take care of it.

*** HOT TIP:** If you need help conquering clutter, check out www.FLYLADY.net.

Change Relationships that Interfere

My favorite part of a romantic movie is when the two lovers embrace and share their first kiss. The camera moves in close to capture every expression, and the magic continues as long as someone else doesn't interrupt.

Relationships with other people are important, but must not intrude upon intimacy with your husband. That doesn't just mean other men. Even a female friend or family member who requires too much of your time or is not supportive of your marriage can be one too many actors on the stage. I had no intention of letting anyone get between my husband and me, and I was sure it could never happen to us! My husband and I used to belong to separate gyms, and whenever I worked out, I visited with an attractive man who complimented me on my appearance—something my husband rarely did. One evening, he offered to take me out for a bite to eat.

At first I thought, "What harm would it do? We're just friends." Then suddenly I felt terrified of where this flirtation was going. I refused the invitation, went home, and started talking with my husband about what was missing in our marriage. My husband agreed to give me more praise, and I agreed to avoid temptations like the one I'd just barely avoided. I joined my husband's gym soon thereafter.

If you or your mate have allowed someone else to get between you, it can be difficult to let that relationship go. In counseling couples that are dealing with infidelity, I often hear the unfaithful party argue that a continued friendship with a lover won't hurt the marriage. I disagree. Couples that completely end such relationships are the most likely to survive.

Another important choice is to preserve the time you have with your spouse, especially if that time is limited. I enjoy chatting with my girlfriends in the evenings, but that is often time my husband hopes to spend with me. Limiting the time I spend chatting with friends tells my husband he is the most important friend I have. Spending too much time sharing intimate details of your marriage with coworkers or extended family can also interrupt intimacy. If any relationship poses a serious threat to your marriage, seek the help of a marital therapist.

Find Time to Be Alone

Sometimes children can interfere with the intimacy of marriage, too. I adore my four children and believe they are one of the greatest blessings of marriage. Even so, research of couples with children consistently shows that marital satisfaction decreases after the birth of the first child and does not rebound until after the children have left home.

Usually this drop in marital satisfaction is due to the fact that children require much of the time and energy we used to devote to our spouses. When I am nursing a baby all night and chasing a toddler all day, the only thing a bed sounds good for is sleep. Arranging a baby-sitter so my husband and I can reconnect sometimes seems like more trouble than it is worth. Yet study after study confirms that a strong marriage is critical to children's emotional, social, and intellectual well-being. Noted psychologist and author Dr. James Dobson says that making marriage a top priority is the best gift we can give our children.

One reason marital satisfaction declines after the birth of children may be less time for couples to be alone together. In counseling couples, I recommend regular dates without children. People often tell me that they don't have enough money, or can't find anyone to watch the kids, or that they feel uncomfortable being away from the children. These are all legitimate concerns, but if you and your spouse are never alone together, you're unlikely to uncover the lover within!

My husband and I go on dates about twice a month. Some of the best dates we've had, like picnicking, walking, or window-shopping, were free. We arrange child care by asking relatives, hiring teenagers, or swapping free babysitting with friends. At first, being away from our children made my husband and me nervous, and we still miss them when we're gone. But we rediscover what we love about each other when we are alone. We want our children to know that we value our marriage, and we want them to value marriage, too. When we can't get out of the house, we make time alone together by putting the kids to bed by 8:30 p.m. and spending the evening together at home. Some of our friends say they prefer to spend time alone together first thing in the morning. How can you and your mate find time alone together? Maybe it's just a few minutes a day, or a couple of hours each week.

The book *52 Dates for You and Your Mate* by David and Claudia Arp has some great creative dating ideas. You and your husband may wish to take turns planning dates. If you don't know what to talk about when you're alone, consider using the discussion starters in the Arps' book, *Ten Great Dates to Energize Your Marriage*.

I also recommend that couples consider going on marriage retreats and occasional vacations without their children. My husband and I usually take one kid-free vacation a year. Even one night away from home can revitalize our love life.

★ **HOT TIP:** Plan to catch up on sleep during the first part of a kid-free vacation.

Create a Romantic Mood

Setting a romantic mood can be important to change the pace from the busy concerns of work, family, and everyday life. Think about what puts you and your husband in a relaxed, intimate, or playful mood, then see what you can do to create that in your own home.

For us, it's the bedroom ambience. Once I'd cleaned it up, I had fun adding my own romantic touch. I used bedding in a color, style, and fabric that appeals to both my husband and me, adding lots of pillows that make the bed look inviting. A candle sits near our bed (with matches easily accessible), the sheets and pillowcases are scented with linen spray, and the lighting is soft. The lock on our door completes the mood. No matter how nice a hotel we stay in, we both agree that our bedroom is our favorite place to be.

I used to wait for my husband to create a romantic mood and got angry because he didn't get around to it. I decided that wasn't working, so now I enjoy creating romance whether or not my husband responds in kind.

Creating the mood isn't just a bedtime event—my marriage and family instructor in college emphasized the importance of all-day foreplay. Hiding love notes, making a special meal, and giving unexpected kisses and hugs during the day helps both of us get into a romantic mood. There are other good ideas in the book, *1001 Ways to Be Romantic* by Gregory J.P. Godek. Now, when my husband makes romantic gestures in return, I am pleasantly surprised!

★ **HOT TIP:** Spruce up that special place in your home so that a romantic mood is always at your fingertips!

BE AN ADMIRABLE LEADING LADY

Cultivate Self-Confidence

The lead actress in a love story is almost always physically fit, beautifully dressed, with her hair styled, and face made up. While you and I may never measure up to the leading lady standards of Hollywood, we can most certainly create our own.

Feeling attractive may take on different definitions for different people, but the common denominator is taking care of your appearance so that you can carry yourself with a confidence that translates itself into beauty. When you don't feel good about what you weigh or how you look, passion wanes. A second step in uncovering the lover within is to feel good about how you look.

As a newlywed, I struggled to maintain my weight. I also exercised inconsistently and, as a result, was self-conscious about my appearance—especially because my husband was physically fit. My self-consciousness diminished my desire for physical intimacy and disappointed both of us. I tried every kind of diet and exercise plan I could find, but nothing worked for long. In desperation, I asked for God's help and in time I was freed of overeating and found the self-control I needed to exercise on a regular basis. Those positive changes gave me self-confidence and increased my sexual desire—both of which made me more attractive to my husband.

After marriage, both men and women often take less care with their appearance. Early in my marriage, I often did not do my hair and makeup and I stayed in my sweat pants all day. At the time, I didn't realize that my uncared-for appearance communicated that I took my husband for granted. Now I style my hair, apply makeup, and wear attractive clothing every day—even if I don't plan to leave the house.

Caring for my appearance tells my husband that I want him to notice me and to be proud that I am his wife. It's not important that you look like a movie star, but it is essential that you feel good about your body and be able to carry yourself with confidence. If you want some practical tips on weight loss or self-control, call 1-800-876-9880 for more helpful resources.

★ **HOT TIP:** Relieve a stressful morning routine by setting out tomorrow's clothes each evening.

Make Time for Yourself

Although the lead actress in a love scene probably has times when she is "not in the mood," the audience never sees that. A good leading lady not only feels attractive, but is able to give herself to her role emotionally.

Since becoming a mother, I have often found it a challenge to be a passionate lover. I become tired and frustrated about not having any time for myself during the day. At these times, giving to my husband feels like just another obligation to fulfill.

I have learned that when I am too exhausted or cranky to want intimacy with my husband, I am not doing a good job of taking care of myself. Now I take frequent breaks throughout the day to do things that are relaxing for me: read magazines, surf the Net, chat with girl-friends. Attending a small-group Bible study, scrapbooking, and taking a nap while my husband watches the kids also revitalize me so I can be a better lover. It's tempting to blame my husband when I don't have time for myself; now I am responsible for seeing that I take this time.

If you feel frustrated by not having any time to yourself, look for ways to take some breaks. What is relaxing to you? Do you need more time alone every day, every week, or longer breaks that are farther apart? Caring for your own needs can improve your marriage, so consider with your husband whether hiring a housekeeper, a babysitter, or a grocery delivery service might be good for both of you.

★ **HOT TIP:** Arrange for a two-hour getaway each week for the next month so you can recharge.

When to Get Help

If you and your husband are consistently dissatisfied with your level of desire or the quality of sexual relations, discuss the problem with your doctor. Certain medications and health problems can interfere with sexual desire.

Depression or anxiety also may be the problem. One symptom of depression and anxiety is lack of sexual desire. Depression can keep you from being motivated to make positive changes, and anxiety can keep you from relaxing or focusing energy on your marriage. A history of sexual abuse or rape can also interfere with a normal sex life and with your ability to trust your husband. Some women try to forget or ignore such traumatic events but find that it continues to affect their current relationships. Your physician can help you determine whether professional assistance is necessary.

Seek to Understand

A good leading lady has spent time getting to know her leading man. She cannot expect to have a realistic love scene with someone she doesn't know at all. Yet, sometimes we don't really know our own mates. Your husband is unique and one of the joys of marriage is to learn all you can about him. If you often feel frustrated by your husband, try approaching your differences with curiosity about how he sees things. That change in attitude can defuse a tense situation immediately and might make what's different about him fun for you!

I've always known my husband sees the world differently than I do, but for a long time I didn't really know why. Then I learned about different personality types and discovered that much of my husband's behavior is characteristic of his personality type, which wants to be in control.

That explained why he wanted to go over the phone bill at midnight, and kept checking my roast to see if it was cooking the right way. Learning about personalities convinced me that my husband wasn't trying to drive me nuts by doing these things, it's just who he is.

I also get to know my husband just by paying attention to what he does. For example, over the years I've realized that he expresses love most often by doing things to lighten my load, like volunteering to watch the kids so I can get out and exercise, or by making dinner. I have also learned that he will become irritable if he hasn't spent enough time with friends or if he's worried about money. Understanding more about how my husband sees things is part of the joy of spending our lives together.

Some of the things my husband does that irritate me are normal guy things, and recognizing that makes it easier for us to get along. For example, when I read John Gray's book about gender differences, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, I understood for the first time that when I talked to my husband about my problems, he felt like I was asking him to solve them (I just wanted him to listen and be compassionate). I realized that when he was having a hard day, he liked to read the newspaper or watch sports on television to cope (I preferred to talk about it). Now I tell my husband—before giving a detailed description of my latest frustration—that I don't want solutions, I just want him to listen.

I also know that the best time to talk to him is not when he's engrossed in TV or the paper. Think of a few things your husband does that sometimes irritate you. What do those actions suggest about how he sees things differently than you do?

*** HOT TIP:** Learn more about gender and personality differences. Check the resource section for ideas.

Give Up the Urge to Control

The most beloved leading ladies have generally not been controlling women. Yet, without being aware of it, I have sometimes undermined my husband's confidence by trying to dominate. Laura Doyle, author of *The Surrendered Wife*, explains that constantly questioning your husband's decisions and insisting on your own way inhibits intimacy.

Although I'm not much of a controller, Laura Doyle helped me realize that saying things like, "You're driving too fast!" and "Let me see what clothes you're bringing on the trip," suggest that I don't trust my husband. I have come to understand that my husband makes mistakes (as I do), but that he is a responsible adult and doesn't want or need my supervision.

Giving up the urge to control is difficult in some situations. When I respect my husband's freedom to make his own choices, we come out feeling like partners rather than adversaries. Responding to our husbands rather than trying to control them contributes to the feeling that we trust and even admire them. As a result, our husbands are more likely to want to treat us with kindness and respect in return.

*** HOT TIP:** Mentally replay your conversations with your husband from this past week. Were your comments primarily encouraging or discouraging?

TRUST YOUR DIRECTOR

The Grand Plan Is Love

The director of the movie is the most important person involved. He has carefully chosen the actors and the story, and oversees every detail as it plays out. The best directors can inspire the actors to do their best work. A third step in uncovering the lover within is to trust your director.

When we were first married, I acted like a spoiled actress with a big ego. I not only wanted to star in my marriage, I wanted to direct it, too. I had believed that if I tried hard enough and learned everything I could, I could solve my problems with overeating, lack of self-discipline, and poor housekeeping, and organization. I also thought I could repair my marriage. But despite years of heartfelt New Years' resolutions and doctoral training in psychology, I still couldn't solve any of these problems. I felt so defeated that I just gave up. I figured if I couldn't help me, no one could.

I had heard other people talk about God helping them, and I did believe there was a God. I just didn't trust Him to direct me. I certainly didn't think He could love me unless I really cleaned up my act.

After my husband and I started attending a church and studying the Bible, I learned that love and acceptance didn't depend on me. God was the source of unconditional love, and He didn't expect me to have all the answers. He loves me as I am, in spite of all my imperfections. This was the love I had been looking for!

Over the years I have learned more about God's unconditional love for me, and it has changed the way I see my life and my marriage. I have come to believe that marriage was created as a gift for us. It is one way God helps us learn to love and be loved without condition.

*** HOT TIP:** Consider joining a small group of people who are seeking God's help with similar problems.

Controlling Your Husband: Impossible!

The director's job is to see that everyone plays his role properly. I am on a drama team at my church and one of the first things our director told us was that if we wanted to see change in another actor, we should tell her, the director—not the actor. I have to admit that on the drama team and in marriage, I have sometimes wondered if the director sees things as clearly as I do!

Sometimes it feels like I am trying so hard to make our marriage work that it seems our problems are all my husband's fault.

A quote from the biblical writer Matthew helps me fight this temptation. "How can you say to your [husband], 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your [husband's] eye" (Matthew 7:4-5).

One afternoon I was feeling so angry and disappointed in my husband and in our relationship that I complained to God. "My husband hardly even thinks about me. He rarely praises me. He almost never spends time alone with me!" As soon as I had said it, I realized that God, and my husband, could make the same complaints of me. When I am really honest, I must admit that I am not the perfect spouse. I am hard to live with sometimes, too!

Focusing only on my unhappiness and my husband's faults is the kind of selfishness that can quickly destroy a marriage! When I realized how self-centered these complaints were, I admitted my selfishness to God and asked to Him to forgive me. I know that He does forgive, because He has promised to and made His promise real in Jesus Christ. This love and forgiveness in Jesus enables me to admit my weakness to my husband.

As difficult as it is, I try to trust God to help my husband change for the better. I've never been successful at changing my husband anyway. I have nagged, reminded, begged, pleaded, and yelled at my husband, but he's never made long-term changes as a result of my efforts. In my marriage and as a professional counselor, I have learned that we can express our concerns to our mates, we can encourage and praise them, and we can pray for them, but I truly believe that God is the only one who can help our husbands become the leading men they were meant to be.

Forgiveness: Possible!

An actress who has had a bad experience with a leading man in a previous movie can carry a grudge with her that will kill the chemistry between them. When we harbor resentment against our husbands, we destroy the opportunity for intimacy.

The biggest problem I have had in my marriage is anger—not the kind that causes physical injury or destroys property, but the kind that destroys intimacy. When I am angry with my husband, I have no desire for my husband and he has no desire for me. I think my husband would agree with the biblical proverb that it is “better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife” (Proverbs 21:19). Though my husband hasn't liked my ill-tempered nature, I often feel justified in being so angry.

I have heard many a wife justify her anger because her husband didn't help around the house enough, didn't pay as much attention to the children as he should, and didn't romance her as she felt he should. Why do we get so angry? One reason might be our desire for fairness. At times I fear that I will be taken advantage of if I don't watch to see that my husband does his share. I spend a fair amount of time “keeping score.” Not only is this a waste of energy, but I'm not even an impartial judge!

I sometimes fail to see the value of my husband's contributions to our marriage (e.g., earning the most income, mowing the lawn) in comparison to my own (e.g., caring for the children, housekeeping). Suspecting that my husband will abuse my generosity spoils the chance for intimacy. Talking with my husband about what I need and asking God to help me trust my husband keeps me off scorekeeping duty.

I also find peace in believing my husband and I have different but complementary gifts. I have accepted my husband isn't as concerned as I am that we have time to talk; my role is making sure we have this time. I have also accepted my husband isn't as concerned with having a house prepared for company as I am. I used to be furious at his laid-back attitude before a party, but I now choose to honor us both by using my gift for hospitality without complaining. Do you face similar frustrations with things that are more important to you than they are to your husband? Consider if changing how you look at it might be the best solution in some cases.

My long list of terrible things my husband had done to me also contributed to my dissatisfaction. I used my list as a weapon in the midst of arguments and reviewed the list with friends in an effort to prove how saintly I was for enduring his behavior.

Ed Wheat and Gloria Perkins, authors of *The First Years of Forever*, would say that I had failed to forgive my husband. Forgiveness is not given because the other person deserves it or because you have a forgiving feeling. Rather, the authors argue, it is a choice. Forgiving my husband means choosing not to keep rehashing an incident with him, not telling other people about it over and over, demonstrating forgiveness with loving behavior, and not spending time thinking about it at all.

I have learned I am not capable of forgiveness using that definition. I need God's help to find freedom from anger. When I am tempted to harbor resentment toward my husband (which is often!), I ask God for the ability to forgive him. I also distract myself from the angry thoughts and focus on my husband's good qualities. I try not to pout or give my husband the cold shoulder. Eventually, I am blessed with a feeling of forgiveness.

The more deeply I understand that Jesus always forgives and loves me, the easier it is for me to forgive my husband. The best ways I have found to understand this forgiveness are by attending church, reading the Bible, and talking with God. (Please understand that forgiveness does not mean enduring abuse, continued unfaithfulness, or serious addictions. If you are in such a relationship, get help from a counselor or crisis center immediately.)

*** HOT TIP:** Sincerely ask your husband's forgiveness if you have harbored resentment toward him.

Express Gratitude

As I learn more about Jesus and His love for me, I feel tremendous gratitude for God's forgiveness and love. Taking time each day to thank God for my husband and the many blessings in my life builds my faith and my marriage. Keeping a gratitude journal or saying a short prayer of thanks each day is yet another way to enjoy the same benefits.

When we are quick to praise and slow to criticize, our husbands are more likely to demonstrate loving behavior in return. When my husband doesn't load the dishwasher "the right way," or when he gets the wrong items at the grocery store, I am so tempted to criticize, yet, if I do, the chance for closeness diminishes greatly. Therefore, I try to bite my tongue when I have negative thoughts and give praise instead. I am learning that changing my thoughts can make my attitude more positive.

I ask myself these questions:

- How important is this?
- Did my husband mean to upset me?
- If I criticize, what is likely to happen?

I find that a simple "Thank you for going to the store," or "Thanks for helping with the dishes," avoids an argument and contributes to a romantic, intimate mood in our relationship every day.

*** HOT TIP:** Try to give your mate at least one compliment a day.

TEN STEPS TO UNCOVER THE LOVER WITHIN:

1. Take care of home space that is essential to intimacy.
2. End or change relationships that interfere with your marriage.
3. Create an intimate, romantic mood with your spouse at home.
4. Cultivate confidence by looking your best.
5. Take care of your own emotional needs.
6. Seek professional help for physical, emotional, or marital problems that do not improve.
7. Seek to understand your husband, not control him.
8. Ask for God's help.
9. Forgive your husband, and let go of resentment.
10. Give at least one compliment each day.

When you create a romantic setting, try to be an admirable leading lady, and trust the director of marriage, you'll have something even better than a Hollywood romance. You'll have a chance for true intimacy with the man you love and you just might uncover the lover within!

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Sink Reflections: FLYLady's BabyStep Guide to Overcoming CHAOS by Marla Cilley.

15 Minutes to Build a Stronger Marriage by Bobbie & Myron Yagel.

Personality Plus for Couples: Understanding Yourself and the One You Love by Florence Littauer.

Freedom from the Spirit of Anger, audiotope with Dr. S. M. Davis, author. Available at www.titus2.com

www.changeyourlifedaily.com

This Web site offers books, videos, and information on forming small groups to help you make positive changes.

www.smalleyonline.com

Here you will find books and videos on marriage and personality.

www.ilme.org

The International Lutheran Marriage Encounter provides resources and commentary about Lutheran marriage retreats.

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for a variety of ministry resources*

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