

FOREWORD BY GARY CHAPMAN
AUTHOR OF THE BEST-SELLING *THE 5 LOVE LANGUAGES*

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THE GOOD FIGHT

HOW CONFLICT CAN BRING YOU CLOSER



Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHORS

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WHAT READERS OF **THE GOOD FIGHT** ARE SAYING

Who knew conflict could be fun? We laughed out loud while reading this book. And, thanks to the app, we're now practicing "The Rules of Fight Club." *The Good Fight* delivers!

JUSTIN AND BELLA, MARRIED 5 YEARS

The Good Fight changed everything in our relationship. It's the first book we've actually looked forward to reading together.

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The chapter about your personal "Fight Type" is worth the price of the whole book. One of us is a "Cautious Fighter" and the other is a "Competitive Fighter." That awareness was a game-changer in our marriage.

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We don't fight a lot but when we do it's usually a doozy. Les and Leslie taught us how to turn those tough times around faster than we ever imagined. We love *The Good Fight*.

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The first time we heard Les and Leslie say that you can use conflict to bring you closer together, we had our doubts. But after reading *The Good Fight*, we are true believers. Our relationship has never been better.

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We've never read a book like this. The app is incredible because it actually has us put into practice what we're reading. Genius!
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Our couples small group read *The Good Fight*. We'd never been more energized and excited to get to group. Truly, each chapter reveals practical applications that we'd never considered.
GEORGE AND CALA, MARRIED 7 YEARS

The Good Fight showed us what we are REALLY fighting about. That insight has done more than just about anything to curb our conflict. ROBERT AND
DESIREE, MARRIED 19 YEARS

THE
GOOD
FIGHT

HOW CONFLICT CAN BRING YOU CLOSER

Drs. Les & Leslie Parrott

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHORS



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Helping People Experience the Heart of God eBook available at worthypublishing.com

Audio book distributed through Brilliance Audio, visit brillianceaudio.com Library of Congress Control Number: 2012956461

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Published in association with Yates & Yates, yates2.com ISBN: 978-1-61795-119-0

Cover Design: Kent Jensen, Knail LLC, knail.com Cover Image: Brandon Hill, Brandon Hill Photos, brandonhillphotos.com Interior Design and Typesetting: Kristi C Smith, Juicebox Designs, juiceboxdesigns.com

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 LBM 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Scott and Theresa— a couple doing more to help other couples fight a good fight than most will ever know.

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★ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ★

WORTHY PUBLISHING LIVES UP to its name. Byron Williamson, president and publisher, caught the vision for this book from the moment we first mentioned it. So did Jeana Ledbetter, our editorial expert. Jennifer Day and Tom Williams polished every sentence. And the sales, marketing, and publicity team are some of the best in the business: Dennis Disney, Morgan Canclini, Alyson White, Betty Woodmancy, and Sherrie Slopianka. We could not be more grateful to the entire

Worthy family for allowing us to publish with them. We owe a special debt to a handful of couples who literally read

aloud an early draft of this book in a single sitting together. They traveled from around the country to do this for us, and each of them added immeasurable value to the project. Ranjy and Shine Thomas are two of the most creative, talented, and giving people we know (and we have the late night phone records to prove it). Brandon and Kristin Hill have endured Sunday brunches after church to help us unpack our thinking on this book. And it's also Brandon who talked us into an arm-wrestling match—which he photographed for the book's cover. Rich and Linda Simmons offered sage advice and wisdom at multiple turns. And Tim and Beth Popadic, flying to Seattle from Palm Beach, Florida, have gone way beyond the extra mile to invest in the message of this book with us. In fact, it was Tim, with his trademark mojo, who fanned a flame for live Fight Night events with us in cities across the country.

A band of people in Boulder, Colorado, have also invested themselves in this project.

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We're deeply grateful to our Rocky Mountain friends: Ryan Holdeman, Sara Meyer, Jeff Fray, Bob Brown, Brian McKinney, Caleb Hanson, Leora Weiner, Tory Leggat, Mark Ferguson, Brian Ledbetter, Ryan DeCook, Justin VanEaton, Liz Swanson, and Eric Swanson.

Dr. John Gottman has done more yeoman's work on the empirical side of understanding couples conflicts than anyone we know. And in a sense, the seeds of this book were first planted many years ago over a delightful lunch we had with John overlooking Lake Washington.

Throughout the writing of this book we've stood on his shoulders. Finally, we want to thank five very important people in our lives. Sealy Yates is not only a great comrade in publishing but a great friend.

Mandi Moragne, our director of Amazing Customer Experiences, cares about the people we serve every bit as much as we do. Janice Lundquist has managed our life on the road (and more) in a way that two travelers have no right to expect or ask. Kevin Small, the chair of our nonprofit, is incredibly helpful at every turn. And Ryan Farmer, along with his wife, Kendra, are unimaginable gifts to our efforts. Ryan adds value to everything he touches, and we could not be more grateful to him and our entire team who have worked so hard on our behalf. We can't say thanks enough.

★ A SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT THE APP ★
IT'S POWERFUL, FUN, AND FREE!

GET *THE GOOD FIGHT* for iPhone or Android for free (valued at \$12). In it you'll find videos, assessments, games, and more that will help you personalize the content of this book.

It contains more than two dozen applets that relate specifically to what you will read in this book, and it will help you to put it into practice.

As you're reading along, you will occasionally encounter a box that looks like this:



THE GOOD FIGHT

This app is like nothing you've seen before. It's designed exclusively with the two of you in mind. And it's chock-full of helpful tools geared to bring the two of you closer. It contains several short videos from us as well as self-tests, exercises, games, and more.

This app creates the world's smallest social network—the two of you. And it's private. And if you purchased this book, it's free.

As far as we know, this is the first book to provide such a powerful and useful tool. We think you're going to love it. As you'll soon see, you can communicate with us along the way, if you choose, right from the app. We'll reply promptly. We hope to hear from you soon!

★ INTRODUCTION ★
WHEN THE FUR FLIES

*Marriage is one long conversation,
checkered with disputes.*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

“**HOW MANY OF YOU** have ever struggled with conflict in your relationship?” It’s a question Leslie and I often ask couples during our marriage seminars.

The majority of hands shoot up without hesitation. “Keep your hands up,” I tell them. “Look around. Do you see the

people who aren’t holding up their hands? What do we call them?” The audience replies in unison: “Liars!” It’s true. No couple, no matter how loving, is immune to conflict.

It’s inevitable. Recent research reveals that the average married couple argues about small, nagging things as much as 312 times per year.¹ That means most couples experience a tug-of-war of some kind on a near-daily basis. It doesn’t mean they don proverbial boxing gloves and step into the ring for a major bout. It just means that conflicts in marriage—the little scrapes, spats, and squabbles—are endemic.

Even as married professionals—a psychologist (Les) and a marriage and family therapist (Leslie)—we have our fair share of tussles. We’re the first to admit it. In fact, we had one of our worst fights just before we were about to speak on the art of love to an auditorium of eager couples (more on that later). The point is, if you’re in a relationship, you’ve got to learn to fight it out fairly.

LOVE AND WAR

A few years ago, while traveling in China, we were invited into the humble home of an elderly couple outside of Beijing. Through an interpreter, Les commented on the bright red paper decorations around the small doorframe of the otherwise drab two-room home. This delighted the eighty-something husband and wife who lived there.

As they invited us in, our hosts bowed repeatedly and directed us to a wooden table that looked about as old as they were. The home was dimly lit by a single exposed lightbulb. It was hot and humid.

Conflict is inevitable,
but combat is optional.
MAX LUCADO

The air was stagnant and stale.
They offered us handheld fans,
which we gladly accepted.
Speaking only a few words of
English, they demonstrated the
ancient art of *jianzhi*, Chinese paper

cutting. Soon they gave each of us a pair of surprisingly modern scissors and a sheet of bright red paper, asking us to follow their directions. We carefully folded and cut the red paper as our hosts directed us. After dozens and dozens of intricate, precise cuts, we unfolded our work.

“What is it?” Les asked.

“It is a special symbol,” our hosts replied through the interpreter. “It is used only at weddings. It symbolizes ‘double happiness.’”

As we examined our work, we engaged in some lighthearted teasing between us about which of us had done a better job of creasing and cutting the paper. Our hosts, knowing little English, thought we were having a tiff until our interpreter explained our playful banter, letting them know we were just having fun.

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“Your hosts want you to know,” said the interpreter, “that we have a saying in China: ‘Even the teeth sometimes bite the tongue.’”

Before we could ask for an explanation, the couple giggled in delight. This wise husband then said, “Even loving couple have war.”

We all laughed. The spirit of his message was clear. He was stating a marriage truth that transcends oceans and national boundaries: even in the closest and most loving of relationships, we sometimes have painful moments when “the teeth bite the tongue.”

Conflict. It’s pervasive, recurring, and universal.

ALLIES, NOT ADVERSARIES

Just because two people argue doesn’t mean they don’t love each other. Just because they don’t argue doesn’t mean they do. In fact, generally speaking, couples who supposedly never fight are either redefining fighting to make them immune or are walking on eggshells to avoid telling each other the truth. We’ll say it again: all couples fight. Fighting is as intrinsic to marriage as sex. And the goal for both activities is to do them well.

As you are about to see in this first chapter, what matters is *how* we fight, not *whether* we fight. It’s how we fight—the quality of our quarreling—that determines the closeness of our relationship. Multiple studies have identified what separates happy from not-so-happy couples. One answer surfaces every time. Happy couples have a lock on healthy conflict resolution. They know how to fight well. Couples who stay happily married disagree just as much as couples who get divorced, but they have learned how to use those

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disagreements to deepen their connection. They've built a bridge over issues that would otherwise divide them. Above all, happily married couples see each other as allies, not adversaries.

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READY TO RUMBLE?

We hope you've downloaded the app. If not, you'll want to do so now by going to www.GoodFight.us. The *Ready to Rumble* applet will give you a fun overview of *The Good Fight* and show you how to take full advantage of what you are about to experience in this book.

WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

In a *New York Times* interview focusing on her thirty-plus-year marriage, Anne Meara of the comedy team Stiller and Meara was asked, “Was it love at first sight?” “It wasn’t then,” she replied, “but it sure is now.” That sentiment gets at our intentions for writing this book. We’re a living example of how learning to fight a good fight can bring a husband and wife closer together. Over the years, we’ve written books for couples about communication, sex, empathy, parenting, spirituality, time management, and personality, but never a book about conflict. We wanted to get it right first. So with over twenty-five years to practice what we preach in this book, we’re ready and eager to show you what we’ve learned.

Everything in this book—every tip and tool—has been time-tested in our own relationship and with countless couples just like you. You won’t find flippant platitudes, silly strategies, and hackneyed advice here. We’re giving you innovative and sometimes counterintuitive approaches that work.

If you are feeling especially entrenched in conflict that seems almost impossible to change or overcome, we want you to know there is reason for optimism. You might be thinking you are doomed to a relationship of strife. Maybe you’ve swallowed as truth the old proverb that “As you have made your bed, so you must lie in it.” Don’t buy that

lie. That's ridiculous. You don't have to put up with a belligerent bed. As G. K. Chesterton said, "If I have made my bed uncomfortable, please God, I will make it again." You can remake your marriage by learning to fight a good fight.

Whether you fight a little or a lot, this book is for you. Whether you are dating, engaged, newly married, or married for decades, this book is for you. If you're

**Marriage is nature's way
of keeping us from fighting
with strangers.**

ALAN KING

tired of squabbles, quarrels, tiffs, and conflicts that assault your love life—or if you just want to ensure that they don't—this book is for you. In these pages you will find practical help for turning those tiresome moments into

milestones that mark deeper intimacy and greater passion for each other. This book is for every couple who wants their relationship to be "love at first sight" now.

— Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott Seattle, Washington

★ CHAPTER 1 ★

WHAT MOST COUPLES DON'T KNOW ABOUT CONFLICT

No pressure, no diamonds.

MARY CASE

WE HAD JUST COMPLETED two days of speaking to an exuberant group of couples in the southeast end of London. The venue was only two blocks from the famed Abbey Road Studios where tourists take countless photos of themselves walking over the zebra crossing to replicate the cover of the Beatles' 1969 *Abbey Road* album.

Following our seminar, we ambled over to the crossing and did our own imitations of Paul and Ringo. We had the time because we were staying over a couple of days to celebrate our wedding anniversary. Our boys were safe at home in Seattle with their grandmother, so we were footloose and carefree—just the two of us.

Wedding anniversaries are big occasions with us, so we splurged shamelessly. A nice hotel, a leisurely brunch after waking without an alarm clock, window-shopping on Oxford Street, high tea at Fortnum & Mason in the afternoon, a dinner of prime rib and Yorkshire pudding and cherries jubilee that night at the Savoy Grill. Then, under a clear night sky, we strolled hand-in-hand along Westminster Bridge

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while taking in the majesty of Big Ben, London’s iconic landmark. Extravagant? Luxurious? Delicious? Romantic? Yes, all of the above. The entire experience was idyllic—one for the memory books.

And then, suddenly, without warning, it happened.

“I want to buy a couple of sweatshirts for the boys,” Leslie said. “Um, hmm,” I replied, watching people hop onto the back of a bus.

“Why don’t we have double-decker buses in Seattle?”

“Did you hear me?” Leslie said a bit sternly.

“Sure. You want to buy something for the boys.”

“Do you remember where we saw those red ones near the hotel?” “They’re all over the place,” I said, pointing to a line of red buses. “I’m talking about sweatshirts,” said Leslie. “Do you think they’d still be open this late?”

“I’m pretty sure we can’t fit two big sweatshirts into our suitcase.

Besides, do you think they really need more sweatshirts?” Sensing she was going to have to argue a strong case for buying the sweatshirts, Leslie replied with an edge in her voice, “I’m not going home without something for the boys.”

Empathy is the great unsung
human gift.
JEAN BAKER MILLER

“Fine,” I replied, thinking we could still steer this conversation away from the brink. “How about something easier to pack?”

“They love those hooded sweatshirts. Are you going to help me find them or not?” Leslie abruptly unfolded a map of the city. “I’m just saying—” “I know what you’re saying!” “Oh, really?” I said with a caustic tone. “What am I saying?”

Leslie, having found something on the map—or just pretending she

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had—started to walk quickly, a couple of paces in front of me, without saying anything.

“Why are you walking so fast?” I asked as if I didn’t know. “Angry energy,” she snapped without skipping a beat. “Angry energy?” I asked with genuine intrigue and a little grin in my voice. It was a pretty astute comment for someone so perturbed. She didn’t answer. We walked in silence for a few paces, Leslie marching two steps ahead of me. At the end of the block, waiting for a traffic signal to change, she said, “Maybe we should stop in there for a while.” She pointed to a sign on an historic building: Cabinet War Rooms.

I smiled. She smiled back.

That was it.

We found a turning point. The icy tension of our brief spat was about to thaw. Without saying another word, we held hands again and kept walking the better part of the block. The pressure was off, but we needed a moment to let our hearts recalibrate.

After a few more strides, Leslie squeezed my hand to say she was with me. I got the message and squeezed back.

We came to Downing Street. “Shall we see if the prime minister is in?” I asked.

“He’s probably managing an international conflict somewhere,” she said, knowing she was lobbing me an easy one.

“Or maybe one with his wife,” I quipped. We walked a few more steps and turned the corner, literally and metaphorically. “We did a nice job there,” Leslie said, still holding my hand.

I knew exactly what she meant.

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We were quietly congratulating ourselves on putting the kibosh on what could have become a full-fledged fight. In spite of the flare-up, we were still an “us.” We’d staved off a quarrel that was looking to come between us. We’d turned around our tiny tiff in just a few moments, and we knew we were stronger because of it. Early in our marriage, the same kind of quarrel could have snowballed into a brawl that would have spoiled the whole trip. One of us would have resorted to fighting dirty, sabotaging the solution with sanctimonious blame or upping the ante by sniping at the other’s character.

Not now. We’ve gotten wise to the ways of the marital street fight. We’ve learned to cut it down before it cuts us up. No blood. No scars. Not even a scratch. We’ve learned a better way that actually draws us

closer. In short, we’ve learned the difference between fighting with honor and fighting without it. The former is always better.

A CONVERSATIONAL AUTOPSY

We all know that conflict has the potential to inflict hurt, resentment, and stress. It can escalate hostility and rob couples of valuable time and energy. It depletes intimacy and pulls otherwise loving couples apart.

Our little spat in London was primed to do exactly that. We were doing fine one moment, but in a flash we were at odds with each other. How could that happen? We were enjoying what was surely one of the best days we could ever dream of, and suddenly, out of nowhere, we were sideswiped by a silly squabble neither of us saw coming.

Over the years we’ve done enough postmortems on our potential fights that we’ve come to call the practice a “conversational autopsy.” Here’s how each of us sized up this one:

Leslie: From my perspective, Les didn’t know that, as the evening grew later, a problem was dawning on me: I was about to run out of time to get something nice for our boys.

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Not only that, they both needed a sweatshirt for the start of school, and I knew they'd love the ones I'd seen in a shop window earlier. I hadn't mentioned this to Les, so it wasn't on his radar. It wasn't fair for me to expect him to know of my concern. But that's not all. Les didn't know I was about five days premenstrual. At the time, that fact didn't register with me either.

Les: From my perspective, I was surprised that Leslie had abruptly become task-oriented when we were just enjoying the relaxing evening. When she said she wasn't going home without getting something for our boys, I felt that she was saying I didn't care about bringing our boys a present they would enjoy. I felt judged. But what she really meant was that she'd already determined what would be best for them and assumed I'd go along with it. Of course, it never dawned on me that her hormones might be contributing to the mix.

All those factors from our perspectives added to the mysterious amalgamation of motives, perceptions, and inferences that created unexpected tension between us. At least, that's the best we can make of it in retrospect. Maybe that's why it happened or maybe not. The bottom line is that these little land mines erupt without notice on a regular basis for every couple. It's a given. What matters is how we deal with them.

We haven't always known how to deal with our conflicts, and

we've had some real humdingers along the way. Like the fight that ensued in our car on a Saturday morning while we were running errands. That one didn't end until the next day. The conflict? It was a circular conversation over who was pulling more weight on the home front. In short, it was a chore war, and each of us had drawn a battle line. We both dug in our heels and were dead set on proving the other person wrong.

More than any other single deficiency, I think it is the lack of mutual empathy which results in sword-drawing in marriage.

BERNARD GUERNEY

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“It would be nice if you could actually lend a hand on occasion,” Leslie said sardonically.

“Seriously?!” Les retorted. “You’re actually going to say I don’t help out?”

“Do I need to?”

“Apparently!”

“Okay, then, you *don’t* help out.”

“What do you want me to do that I’m not doing?” Les asked the question as if Leslie would have to think long and hard to answer it. She didn’t.

“How many do you want?”

“C’mon.”

“Let’s start with taking out the trash.”

“I do take it out!”

“Then why did we have a heaping pile of rubbish in our garage for the past two weeks?”

“Oh, that’s rich! You know I was traveling and—”

“And you didn’t take it out before you left.”

We jabbered on like this throughout the day, with accusations hop-scotching around to various chores: cleaning bathrooms, yard work, and so on. When we weren’t talking about it, we were each building up our case and reloading our ammunition for the moment the battle engaged once more. Each of us was far more concerned with winning the fight than resolving it. We were in a serious power struggle, a world-class game of blame, and we were dangerously close to belittling each other

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with true contempt. In short, we were having an honest-to-goodness bad fight. Except there wasn't anything honest or good about it.

At the time, we didn't really know it was a bad fight, because early in our marriage we didn't know there was a distinction between a good fight and a bad one. We just thought a fight was a fight. But that's far from the truth.

To deal effectively with any conflict, we've got to know the difference between a good fight and a bad fight.

WHEN THE GLOVES COME OFF

Professionals formerly believed that couples who were more prone to arguments were the least satisfied with their marriage. The studies that led to those findings, however, failed to distinguish among the kinds of fights the couples were having.¹ Truth be told, the difference between a marriage that grows happier and one that grows more miserable is not *whether* they fight but *how* they fight.

All fights are not created equal. A good fight, in contrast to a bad fight, is helpful, not hurtful. It is positive, not negative. A good fight stays clean, but a bad fight gets dirty. According to researchers at the University of Utah, 93 percent of couples who fight dirty will be divorced within ten years. A study at Ohio State

Respect is a two-way street.
If you want to get it, you've got
to give it.
R. G. RISCH

University showed that unhealthy marital arguments contribute significantly to a higher risk of heart attacks, headaches, back pain, and a whole slew of other health problems, not

to mention unhappiness. In the end, bad fights lead to marriages that are barely breathing and will eventually die. In fact, researchers can now predict with 94 percent accuracy

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whether or not a couple will stay together based solely on how they fight. Not *whether* they fight, but *how* they fight.

The line separating good fights from bad is not fuzzy. Research makes the difference clear, and the following chart lays it out plainly.

	BAD FIGHT	GOOD FIGHT
GOAL	Winning the fight	Resolving the fight
TOPIC	Surface issues	Underlying issues
EMPHASIS	Personalities and power struggles	Ideas and issues
ATTITUDE	Confrontational and defensive	Cooperative and receptive
MOTIVATION	Shift blame	Take responsibility
MODE	Belittle	Respect
MANNER	Egocentric	Empathic
DEMEANOR	Self-righteous	Understanding
SIDE EFFECT	Escalation of tension	Easing of tension
RESULT	Discord	Harmony
BENEFIT	Stagnation and distance	Growth and intimacy

PRIDE FIGHTING

Arguments where one partner or the other becomes defensive or stubborn or withdraws are particularly destructive. Belittling and blame are also toxic. The list of qualities that make up a bad fight could go on and on, but if you boil the essence of a bad fight down to a single ingredient and sum it all up in a word, it would have to be *pride*.

In the book *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez portrays a marriage that disintegrates over a bar of soap. It was the wife's job to keep the house in order, including the towels, toilet paper, and soap in the bathroom. One day she forgot to replace the soap. Her husband exaggerated the oversight: "I've been bathing for almost

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a week without any soap.” Although she had indeed forgotten, she vigorously denied forgetting to replace the soap. Her pride was at stake, and she would not back down. For the next seven months they slept in separate rooms and ate in silence. Their marriage suffered a meltdown.

“Even when they were old and placid,” writes Márquez, “they were very careful about bringing it up, for the barely healed wounds could begin to bleed again as if they had been inflicted only yesterday.” How can a bar of soap ruin a marriage?



Love is honesty. Love is a
mutual respect for one another.
SIMONE ELKELES

The answer is simple: pride. Both husband and wife were hanging on to it with a vise grip. The husband wouldn't overlook an offense; the wife wouldn't admit a mistake. Both refused to let go of

their need to win, to show the other that they were superior.

The Bible makes it plain: “Pride leads to conflict.” It's that simple. A prideful spirit keeps us from cooperating, flexing, respecting, compromising, and resolving. Instead, it fuels defensiveness and discord. It stands in the way of saying “I'm sorry.” It lives by the motto “The only unfair fight is the one you lose.” Self-centered pride is at the heart of every bad fight.

Research shows that when pride sets in, a partner will continue an argument 34 percent of the time even if he knows he's wrong or can't remember what the fight was about. A full 74 percent will fight on even if they feel “it's a losing battle.”

Let's be clear: healthy pride (the pleasant emotion of being pleased by our work) is quite different from unhealthy pridefulness in which our egos are bloated. The latter is laced with arrogance and conceit.

That's what we're talking about here.

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We don't have to be egomaniacs to suffer from unhealthy pride. It has a way of secretly seeping into the crevices of our conflicts even when we are consciously inclined to avoid it. That's what makes it so toxic and devious. "Through pride we are ever deceiving ourselves," said Carl Jung. "But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune."

Reverence reduces hostility.
TOBA BETA

You know the feeling of being out of tune. We all do. It's born of the tension between being the kind of person we want to be and our fear of being snookered. We don't want to be prideful, but

we also don't want to be duped. The tension between those two concerns is what causes pride to kick in. That's when we realize, deep down, that we've taken the

low road. More often than not, this sinking feeling even becomes more difficult to admit to ourselves, let alone our spouse, so we accede to our pride and perpetuate the conflict.

The antidote to unhealthy pride is, of course, humility. The word from which we get *humility* literally means "from the earth." In other words, humility steps off its high horse to stand on the earth—to become common and lowly. Humility isn't for cowards. It's risky. Humility makes us vulnerable to being played or to being made to look the fool. But it also makes possible everything else we truly want to be. Seventeenth-century British author William Gurnall said, "Humility is the necessary veil to all other graces." Without humility, it's nearly impossible to engender kindness and warmth with our spouse. Without humility, it's impossible to fight a good fight, the kind that brings you closer together.



THE PRIDE-O-METER

With this handy tool on your smartphone or tablet, it will take you less than thirty seconds to get a reading on your level of pride at any moment. You'll soon see how this quick increase in self-awareness will help you cultivate more humility, making a good fight far more likely. It's quick and painless. Try it right now.

THE ANATOMY OF A GOOD FIGHT

The cornerstone of every physician's education is anatomy. The word *anatomy* dates back to at least 1600 BC, and it literally means "to open up." Without having opened up human bodies to gain an understanding of human anatomy, it would be impossible for doctors to practice good medicine. In the same way, couples cannot practice good fighting until we understand the substance of a good fight. We need to open it up and see what it's made of.

The following is not an exhaustive list of what makes up a good fight, but it's a look at four critical elements—the central, innermost essentials. They are easy to remember because their initials form an acronym that spells **CORE**: Cooperation, Ownership, Respect, and Empathy.

Cooperation: Good Fighters Fight for a Win-Win

A study reported in *Psychological Science* discovered that, when it comes to couples, the best arguers are those who work in tandem with their partner. According to the study, the person who says "we" the most during an argument suggests the best solutions. The study cited researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who used statistical analysis to study 59 couples.

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Spouses who used second-person pronouns (you) tended toward negativity in interactions. Those making use of first-person plural pronouns (we) provided positive solutions to problems.

The study concluded: “‘We’-users may have a sense of shared interest that sparks compromise and other ideas pleasing to both partners.

‘You’-sayers, on the contrary, tend to criticize, disagree, justify, and otherwise team with negativity.”

Without honor, all the
marriage skills one can
learn won't work.
JOHN GOTTMAN

How do you cultivate a cooperative spirit when a conflict heats up? It can be a challenge. The good news is that cooperation is a skill set; that is, it can be learned. The more you practice it, the easier it gets. The key to cooperation is found in reframing a conflict from win-lose

to win- win. Your conflict is not a competition.

Your marriage is not a zero-sum game.

Win-win is a frame of mind and heart that seeks mutual benefit. It's an attitude that says, “If you win, I win too.” It's committed to finding solutions that benefit both sides of a dispute. There's a sense of “we” in win-win. But let's be honest: not every dispute has a solution for both sides.

On a bulletin board in our kitchen is a cartoon of a cat and a dog standing in front of a judge's bench. The dog says, “Let's agree to disagree.” When a win-win can't be found, it's time to do just that: agree to disagree.

The phrase first appeared in print in 1770 when English theologian John Wesley wrote a memorial for his friend and colleague George Whitfield. They had doctrinal differences and neither wavered from them, but, as Wesley said, they held fast to the essentials together. In other words, their friendship continued in spite of issues on which they did not agree. It's that kind of attitude, when shared by husband and wife, that creates a win-win for a couple even when they continue to disagree.



GETTING TO WIN-WIN

Ready for a little fun? *Getting to Win-Win* on your smartphone or tablet presents a game that can be won only when the two of you are working together. It's a real-life example of putting into practice what you just read. Not only that, it provides further helps in cultivating more cooperation when the relational tension mounts. In short, this helps you move from a win-lose scenario in your conflicts to seeing more clearly than ever that your conflicts can bring you closer together when you stay on the same team.

Ownership: Good Fighters Own Their Piece of the Pie

Maybe you've seen the bumper sticker "The man who can smile when things are going badly has just thought of someone to blame it on." Sadly, this is sometimes much too close to the truth when it comes to conflict and couples. It's so tempting to play the blame game. Why? Because we think it will let us off the hook. So we say things like

- We wouldn't be in this mess if you knew how to manage our money.
- You're the one who's angry! Not me.
- If you were ever on time, we wouldn't have missed dinner.

When we blame our spouse (or anything else), we shift responsibility. We think our fancy footwork puts us in the clear. Of course, it doesn't work that way. Blame only exacerbates a conflict. In the boxing ring they call it blocking when you twist your shoulders to prevent an opponent's punch from landing squarely on your torso. In a relationship we call it an excuse: "I didn't see the bills until just now."

If we don't try to block the blame with an excuse, we might throw a counterpunch: "Oh, really? So *I'm* the one who doesn't know how to manage our money?"

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Let's talk about your shopping spree last weekend." A bout like this can go on and on, until one person quits pointing fingers and takes ownership. In the final film of the classic boxing series *Rocky*, an aging Rocky

Balboa says to his son, "You gotta be willing to take the hits and not point fingers, saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him or her or anybody! Cowards do that, and that's not you!"

The blame game is for cowards. Ownership takes courage. It takes mettle not to be a victim. Shifting blame immediately makes you powerless. But when you take ownership for your piece of the conflict pie, you're instantly empowered to find a solution together.

You say things like

- It's unfair for me to think you could balance the books with the week you've had.
- I admit that I'm feeling angry here, and I don't know what to do.
- I didn't think about the traffic when I scheduled the dinner. That was a mistake.

These are the words of ownership. They drive blame back to its corner.

When Andy Stanley was doing marriage counseling as pastor of his now megachurch in Atlanta, he would get a pad of paper, draw a circle on it, and say to a couple in conflict, "This is a pie that represents all the chaos in your marriage. Now, 100 percent of the blame is in that pie, because that's where all the chaos is." He would give each spouse a pen and say, "I want you to draw a slice of pie that you think represents your responsibility for the chaos."

Are you able to do that? It's tough. It's scary. We humans abhor the vulnerability that comes from taking responsibility. Admitting our imperfections, mistakes, or neediness opens us up to being critiqued,

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and we'd much rather find someone or something to blame. Admitting any weakness, any mistake, we think, makes us vulnerable to rejection. And it does. That's the risk of taking ownership. That's why a good fight isn't for cowards. We'd all do well to take some sage advice from poet Ogden Nash:

*To keep your marriage brimming
With love in the loving cup, Whenever you're wrong, admit it;
Whenever you're right, shut up.*



OWNING THE CHAOS PIE

Wouldn't it be great to have a tangible way to show how much responsibility we're willing to own (or not own) in the chaos of a particular conflict? This simple clarification can go a long way in helping us quit the blame game so we can get on with the more productive ways of resolving tension. *Owning the Chaos Pie* on your smartphone or tablet reveals—quite literally—how many slices of responsibility you're each willing to own.

Respect: Good Fighters Steer Clear of Belittling

Confrontation should always
leave a person's dignity intact.

A. J. ANGLIN

A few steps from our offices on the campus of Seattle Pacific University, you can cross a canal that joins Puget Sound to Lake Washington and walk

down a trail to the University of Washington. Some of the most groundbreaking research on marriage ever attempted has been conducted on this campus.

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In 1986, John Gottman founded a research laboratory with funding from the National Institute of Mental Health where he used video, heart rate monitors, and measures of pulse amplitude to code the behavior and physiology of hundreds of couples at different points in their relationship. He's done more yeomen's work on conflict in marriage than anyone we know. Over lunch one day, we asked John what single quality was most detrimental to a couple's well-being.

I can win an argument on any topic, against any opponent. People know this and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect, they don't even invite me.
DAVE BARRY

“Contempt,” he said, without thinking twice. “Contempt is so lethal to love that it ought to be outlawed.” He went on to tell us how predictive contempt is of marital turmoil and even of eventual divorce. Contempt is any belittling remark that makes your spouse feel about an

inch tall. It's often sarcastic: “Way to go, Einstein. You're a regular genius.” In fact, it doesn't even have to be spoken. Dr. Gottman told us that even eye rolling can be toxic. Contempt conveys disdain, disapproval, and dishonor. In short, contempt conveys disrespect. It sabotages a core element of a good fight.

Everyone wants respect. Scratch that. Everyone *needs* respect. We can't have a relationship without it. An attitude of respect builds a bridge of trust between husband and wife even when they are feeling at odds. Respect does more than curb contempt, however. It helps us to listen before speaking. It drives us to understand before passing judgment.

Both of our boys, somewhere in elementary school, wanted to learn martial arts. We signed them up for karate classes. As we watched from the sidelines of the practice room (the dojo), we were impressed by the instructor's first lesson. He told the boys that every practice and every

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sparring bout begins and ends with a bow. "It's a sign of respect for your opponent," he told them. That's not a bad life lesson. Respect, even for a challenger, is honorable and good.

Respect keeps contempt at bay, and it also creates safety within the relationship. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, respect ensures that even when we don't say the right thing, we leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment. That's why respect is essential to fighting a good fight.



R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Let's be honest. Nobody wants to think of him- or herself in a bad light. But if we are truthful, most of us know that in the heat of conflict we can sometimes be downright disrespectful or even contemptuous toward our partner. R-E-S-P-E-C-T on your smartphone or applet will help you and your partner reduce belittling and increase respect while having a little fun in the process. See if you can find the pictures that best capture your dark side. What photos best depict how you'd like to be shown respect from your partner? This applet is all about the visuals.

Empathy: Good Fighters Step into Each Other's Shoes

For years we have traveled North America and beyond, doing marriage seminars for couples. At some point in nearly every seminar, we tell our audience that if we could press a magic button to improve their relationships instantly, it would be a button that gives them an abundance of empathy. Why empathy? Because empathy, that ability to see accurately the world from your partner's perspective, is the most powerful, consistently rewarding action of love you can ever take. Unfortunately, empathy is in far too short supply when couples are conflicting.

THE GOOD FIGHT

Have you ever said anything like

- I simply don't understand him.
- I have no idea what would make her happy.
- We'll just be talking, and he blows up for no reason.
- I don't understand why she keeps bringing this up.

Each statement reveals a lack of understanding, a lack of empathy. But hear this: if you want to instantly and dramatically increase the odds of experiencing a good fight, you may only need to put the single core quality of empathy into practice. Why? Because research shows that 90 percent of marital spats can be resolved if all the couple does is accurately see the issue from each other's perspective. Don't miss this point: nine times out of ten, conflicts are resolved when couples step into each other's shoes.

We call it trading places, and we've witnessed its simple power with numerous couples. On one occasion we accompanied a warring couple to a shopping mall. They repeatedly fought over money. He was a spender; she was a saver. Neither could see money from the other's point of view—until we had them trade places. We had them walk into a department store and do their best to think, act, and talk like the other person. The wife immediately sat down in a chair that was on sale and said, “We've got to buy this.”

“Oh, now, honey,” the husband responded, “we don't have money for that.”

“But it's on sale,” she continued. “If it's on sale now, it will be on sale later.”

Each took on the other's persona with surprising ease. And the result? After a few minutes, they were both laughing about the experience.

They had entered each other's world for the first time, and soon each began to explore the other's world. They talked about how differently

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each of them was raised concerning money matters. They talked about what money symbolized personally for them. Without any prodding from us, they even talked about what they could do to get on the same financial page in order to diminish the tension.

That's the power of empathy.



TRADING PLACES

What would happen if you became your partner for the next twenty-four hours? What if you were to step into his or her shoes, live in the other's skin, and see the world as your mate does? How would your day be different? Would you feel more secure walking down the street or less? Would you feel more responsible or less? *Trading Places* will help you answer these questions by helping you walk through a typical day in your partner's shoes. It's a fast track to empathy. Warning: You just might never look at each other the same way again. And that's a good thing.

There you have it. The **CORE** of a good fight is comprised of **Cooperation, Ownership, Respect, and Empathy**. When you get a lock on these qualities, your fighting will never be the same. In fact, as you are about to see, you'll reap the rewards that only two good fighters enjoy.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Review the chart in this chapter that draws a line between good fights and bad fights. Then think of the last few conflicts you've experienced. If you were to put yourself on one side of that line or the other, where would you stand on each of the qualities listed?
- Do you agree that pride is at the center of a bad fight? Why or why not? Can you identify an example of how pride fueled a bad fight in your own life? What happened? How would it have been different if pride had not been present?
- When you consider the **CORE** of a good fight (**C**ooperation, **O**wnership, **R**espect, and **E**mpathy), which of the four elements comes easiest to you? Which is toughest for you to demonstrate? Why?

★ CHAPTER 2 ★
**THE SURPRISING
BENEFITS
OF A GOOD FIGHT**

*The greatest of all faults, I should say,
is to be conscious of none.*

THOMAS CARLYLE

LET'S START OFF WITH a big benefit that comes from learning to fight well: research shows that couples who learn how to argue productively, compared to couples who do not, cut their chances of divorce in half. Not bad, right? In fact, if that were the only benefit to learning the rudiments of a good fight, it would be enough. After all, we all want our love to go the distance. But fighting right brings even more payoffs. Healthy fighting not only keeps us together, it makes our marriage better on numerous counts. Let's look at some of these other benefits.

AUTHENTICITY: A GOOD FIGHT KEEPS US REAL

“Marriage does not so much bring you into confrontation with your spouse, as to confront you with yourself,” says Tim Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. Isn't that the truth?

Marriage is the closest bond possible between two people. Legally,

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socially, emotionally, and physically, there is no other means of getting closer to another human being. It is the desire for this extraordinary closeness that propels us into matrimony. We long to belong to another person who knows us and loves us like nobody else in the world. This kind of intimacy is the rocket fuel of marriage. Without intimacy, life becomes horribly cold and lonely. So we plunge ourselves into marriage and give our heart in exchange for the heart of another to discover the deepest and most radical expression of human connection possible.

Eventually, however, couples also discover that such closeness creates confrontation. Why? Because marriage comes with a built-in mirror. Your spouse,

If we manage conflict constructively, we harness its energy for creativity and development.
KENNETH KAYE

by default, becomes a full-time observer of your life, and you become the same for your spouse. We bear witness to nearly everything the other says or does. We begin seeing, in both the other and ourselves, our behaviors, attitudes, and motivations like never

before. We give and receive feedback, invited or not, that can rub us the wrong way. But this interchange also makes us better. It heightens our self-awareness and makes us more congruent, more authentic.

Authenticity occurs when our thoughts, words, feelings, and actions come into alignment. Within the intimacy of marriage, we cannot as easily get away with believing we're one way when, in fact, we're actually another. At least not when we are secure enough to be honest and willing to seek and speak the truth.

But even in the most loving of relationships, truth telling can cause conflict. "By marrying," Robert Louis Stevenson warned, "you have willfully introduced a witness into your life . . . and can no longer close

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the mind's eye upon uncomely passages, but must stand up straight and put a name upon your actions." Why? Because if you don't, your partner will.

A husband is talking on the phone, and when he hangs up, his wife comes in and says, "Did I just hear you take credit for organizing that volunteer effort? I thought Amy did all the work." A simple question like that from his live-in monitor should cause him to reflect on his behavior. But his need for honesty is not likely to be his first reaction, is it? He is likely to be offended that his integrity is being questioned. He might get angry that his wife was eavesdropping on a conversation. But whatever he does, there's likely to be a squabble. He's been cornered, and his fight instinct kicks in.

If, however, during the squabble he has the good sense to lay aside his pride and see his lapse of honesty, he'll come out of it with more integrity, more congruence. Knowing we have this built-in monitor of our words and actions should do much to keep our words and actions aligned with truth.

When your partner says you came across brusquely to a server at a restaurant or questions your motives for disciplining your child, he is causing you to confront yourself—the part of yourself you'd rather avoid. Sure, it may cause tension. It may spur a scuffle. But when you fight well, it also helps you shed pretenses and dishonesty. A good fight keeps you and your relationship real. The more authentic you are as people, the healthier your relationship will be.

CLARITY: A GOOD FIGHT SHEDS LIGHT

The popular *Shrek* movies tell the story of a large green ogre who falls in love with Princess Fiona. They eventually marry and travel to the castle of Fiona's parents in order for Shrek to receive her father's blessing. The visit does not go well, and Shrek and Fiona begin to fight.

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After a disagreement with Fiona's father, Shrek barges into Fiona's chambers and starts throwing their things together. As the newlywed's first crisis unfolds, their voices get louder and louder until they're shouting at each other.

Shrek says, "I told you coming here was a bad idea." "You could have at least tried to get along with my father," Fiona replies. "You know, somehow I don't think I was going to get Daddy's blessing even if I did want it." "Well, do you think it might be nice if somebody asked me what I wanted?" In a sarcastic tone, Shrek responds, "Sure. Do you want me to pack for you?" "You're unbelievable," says Fiona. "You're behaving like a . . . a . . ." "Go ahead and say it!" Shrek challenges her. "Like an ogre!" Fiona shouts.

Shrek yells, "Well, here's a newsflash for you. Whether your parents like it or not, I am an ogre. And guess what, princess—that's not about to change."

Fiona pauses and takes a deep breath. She composes herself, walks slowly to the door, and opens it. In a gentle tone that invites reconciliation, she simply says, "I've made changes for you, Shrek. Think about that." Then she quietly shuts the door behind her, leans up against it, and begins to cry. Shrek, cut to the heart, walks to the door and hears her crying, leans up against his side of it and sighs.

The sound of a sigh is sometimes the indicator of new insight and deeper understanding. Shrek knew Fiona was right. Up to that point, he hadn't even seen the issue. She'd sacrificed a lot for him, and their skirmish eventually made that clear. A good fight does that. It sheds light on something we hadn't seen before.

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Recently, while driving as a family on a special outing, I (Les) made some business calls through our car's speakers. This required Leslie, our two boys, and our dog to be quiet. "I've just got to make this one call," I told the group. But that one call turned into a couple more.

"You realize you've been on the phone for nearly an hour," Leslie said. I shot her a look that said, "You realize I've taken a day away from

the office to do this outing, and I've got to get this little bit of work done." We left it at that. But later that evening, Leslie told me she thought it was inconsiderate of me to make my business calls in the car during

a family outing. "The whole point was to have fun as a family," she said, "and that includes the time it takes getting to the beach."

I pushed back: "It was either make those calls or I wouldn't be able to go." We

Each difficult moment has the potential to open my eyes and open my heart.
MYLA KABAT-ZINN

volleyed back and forth a bit with our own perspectives, and eventually I realized how rude it was to have the whole family cater to my calls. To be honest, I

probably would never have realized it was even an issue had Leslie not confronted me.

A good fight sheds new light on everything from how we parent to the way we treat each other to how we save, spend, and give our money.

A good fight is often like a searchlight that zeros in on an issue that has been quietly lurking around the landscape of our relationship. Once we discover that issue—often through the illuminating blaze of a good fight—we're able to see it and define it, which puts us in a position to do something about it.

FRESH START: A GOOD FIGHT CLEARS THE AIR

For the first five years of our married life, we lived in Los Angeles while attending graduate school. It was the late 1980s, and the city was sometimes referred to as Smogtown. Smog, a combination of smoke and fog,

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creates a dirty gauze that shrouds buildings and streetlights. On many days it blotted out the mountains we should have been able to see from our city apartment. It would sometimes cause our eyes and lungs to burn. Johnny Carson routinely joked about the lingering menace of smog on *The Tonight Show*. Smog was as much a symbol of Los Angeles as the Hollywood sign it so often obscured.

But the city's long reign as the country's top air polluter ultimately led to a full assault on smog. The number of un-healthy air quality days in the Los Angeles

All married couples should learn
the art of battle as they should
learn the art of making love. Good
battle is objective and honest—
never vicious or cruel. Good battle
is healthy and constructive.

ANN LANDERS

basin has dropped 85 percent since the 1970s. New York, Houston, Denver, and other cities have been taking notes. These days, when we go back to LA from our home city of Seattle, the difference is

palpable. Clean air allows you to breathe deeply and enjoy a higher quality of life.

The same is true in marriage. The pollutants of emotional tension, bitterness, stress, strain, woundedness, bad feelings, pressure, animosity, resentments, and walking on eggshells can choke loving feelings right out of the relationship. Collectively, these irritants become a kind of smog that shrouds your marriage in a malaise of discontent. But a good, healthy fight, where both partners open up their feelings in an environment characterized by **C**ooperation, **O**wnership, **R**espect, and **E**mpathy, clears the air.

Our friend Mitch Temple likens a good fight to a lightning storm on a summer night. Although the lightning itself may be scary, it helps to clean the air. Negatively charged ions produced by the storm attach themselves to pollutants, which fall to the ground. That's why the air smells so clean after a good storm.

The Surprising Benefits of a Good Fight 33

The same is true when you deal with disagreements in a healthy way. Conflict, when done right, reduces tension, eradicates animosity, and causes hard feelings to disappear. It removes the smog and makes room for a fresh start. Some of the closest moments a couple can experience often arrive after resolving conflicts.

SECURITY: A GOOD FIGHT MAKES YOU STRONGER

An African proverb says, “Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors.” It takes a little turmoil to spur any of us to become really good at something—including our relationship. As we weather tough times together and come out on the other side, we build trust and confidence in our relationship. We find security.

This sounds counterintuitive, but a good fight, as opposed to a bad one, actually makes a couple’s relationship more solid. It empowers us. We begin to realize we don’t have to be afraid of troubles and tension.

We can work it out. We’re strong. With new confidence, we say to ourselves, *Our love can stand up when it gets knocked around.*

Research at the University of Washington reveals that couples get angry at each other in a good relationship just as they do in a bad one. But they get angry in a very different way. They see a problem as something like a soccer ball. They kick it around together. They aren’t afraid to roll up their sleeves and dig into whatever is troubling them. They don’t tiptoe around the issue. They say, with respect for their partner,

“This is troubling me and we need to talk about it.” They don’t freeze with tension. They don’t put their guard up. They certainly don’t vent their anger. They simply put their issues on the table, speak the truth in love, and do whatever it takes to work it out—even when the issue might cause them to feel utterly incompatible.

After being married fifty-four years to the same person, Billy Graham was asked to reveal his secret to staying in love.

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He said, “Ruth and I are happily incompatible.” They understood how healthy conflict makes you stronger.

Get this: couples who are able to acknowledge their partner’s faults while maintaining positive views of their marriage overall experience more stability and satisfaction over time. So much for love being blind! The most successful couples air their grievances. They live in the real world with real complaints. But they do so while placing great value on the relationship.

“I didn’t marry you because you were perfect,” writes Thornton Wilder in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. “I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise

made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn’t a house that protected them; and it wasn’t our love that protected them—it was that promise.”

The integrity that sticks by that “I do” promise grows sturdier when couples fight a

Peace is not the absence
of conflict but the presence
of creative alternatives for
responding to conflict.
DOROTHY THOMPSON

good fight. As they shed light on imperfections and weather conflict together, they enrich their original commitment to each other. “Couples who have healthy fights,” says John Gottman, “develop a kind of marital efficacy that makes the marriage stronger as time goes on.” Decades earlier,

theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the same sentiment when writing to a young bride and groom from his prison cell in Nazi Germany: “It is not your love that sustains

the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.”

The Surprising Benefits of a Good Fight 35

The benefits of a good fight truly are marvelous. When you know how to manage conflict in your relationship, you not only double your chances for going the distance . . .

- You become more true and trustworthy with each other.
- You gain more clarity on your issues and what defines you as a couple.
- You remove the smog of resentments and clear the air for a fresh start.
- You fortify the very promise that secures your relationship.

Every fight has the potential to be good or bad. The difference is determined by how the two fighters handle conflict. So in the next chapter we get personal and help you discover your own conflict quotient.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Think of a time when your spouse pointed out some habit or activity that you knew to be self-indulgent, hurtful in some way, or simply wrong. Were you resentful or grateful at the time? Did it cause you to make a change? Do you think you would have changed without that push?
- Have there been times when you felt that your marriage needed a good fight? You and your mate were on different paths. You were pursuing different goals. You could feel the tension building. Think of such a time in your marriage. When the fight finally came, did it open things up and freshen the air in your marriage? What do you think might have happened if you hadn't had the fight?
- Think of a time in your marriage when you were sure you were absolutely right in something you did, but your spouse was hurt or offended by it. Did the ensuing fight cause you to see your mate's viewpoint more clearly? Maybe even for the first time? If not, or if it took a long time for you to see the other side, is it possible that you may need to work harder on developing a better sense of empathy?