

Life in the Foxhole

Keeping Your Heads in Marriage When the Bullets are Flying

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When I was a child, our family had a book about World War II. It was a picture book of photographs on the front lines and on the seas. One photograph that stands out in my memory was of two G.I.s sitting shoulder deep in a foxhole. The look on their faces was of bone-weariness with a war-shocked, stark gaze. Unshaven for days or weeks, emotionally and physically spent, they sat back to back peering into the approaching darkness for any sign of enemy soldiers.

Now how is this going to tie into marriage? The photograph is an example of the sayings *I got your back* or *I'll cover your back*. I would like to present this picture to you as one aspect of the marriage union. As depicted in the photograph, the lives of each of these soldiers desperately depended on the other. Together they had a 360-degree view. Together they could see everything in front and behind them.

Additionally, the foxhole was no place for petty differences. At the time of WWII during the days of explicit racism and segregation, even those differences would be obliterated in the face of an enemy charge. Men were in the same foxhole watching for the same common enemy. Any arguments, differences, or gripes they might have against one another were forgotten. The supreme goal of staying alive made them buddies—perhaps for the rest of their lives long after the war would be over and a fading memory.

This, in one sense, can be a caricature of marriage. In marriage, couples are bonded together to face life's joys and adversities together. Marriage puts couples in the same foxhole with a common enemy. As a spouse, you are there to watch your mate's back, to cover his or her weaknesses, and to look out for one another's survival.

But often we lose sight of this. Through the course of life's battles, we begin to question our relationship and the strength and quality of our spouse's desire and commitment to be there for us and to watch our back. Often, in fact, we come to view our spouse as the enemy. Thus, we turn our attacks and our defenses against our mate. Jesus said a house (a foxhole, a marriage) divided against itself cannot stand. (Matt 12:25) So it is that many couples turn against each other and bite and devour one another (Gal. 5:15).

In the following pages, we will explore life in the foxhole. One thing that happens in life and in the foxhole is that we get wounded. And that is where we will start.

Wounds

Thanks to the suggestion of a dear and fairly newlywed couple, we will begin this session talking about wounds—not the wounds from your common enemy but rather the wounds that you have given to and endured from each other. During this time, we admonish each of you to be very quiet and to listen—to really hear—as your spouse shares his or her wounds. Please do not react by defending yourself. It is not necessary to do so. This isn't a faultfinding and blame-placing expedition. It's a healing mission. If one or both of you are wounded, the need is for "a medic". You need healing. Defensiveness and blame shifting antagonizes the wounds and makes them all the worse. We are seeking healing. The responses that foster healing are such things as real listening, really hearing your spouse, understanding her or him, and having a heart to bind up the wounds. Sincere grief over the realization of your bad treatment of each other is a sign of God's grace and spirit. It's a sign of hope and healing and restoration. Listed below are a few points to consider and to put into practice as you begin to talk about your wounds.

- Perception: Whether or not your mate is seeing things correctly or is stating the facts correctly, it is nevertheless how they see things; it's what they feel, and what they believe. Rightly or wrongly, this is what they feel and perceive, and it is what is motivating their attitudes, behavior, and responses. Consider this extreme example: A drug addict is walking down the street

erratically dodging right and left because he is hallucinating that people are throwing rocks at him. His perception is wrong, but his behavior—his response—is appropriate and reasonable. Your spouse's responses likely are appropriate to his or her perceptions—even if the perceptions are wrong.

- **Acceptance:** You have to deal with it on that level. First, you must accept that this is your spouse's perception, and his or her perception is what you must seek to understand. For the moment, you must simply and humbly accept their evaluation and seek to understand their pain.
- **Validation:** It will do you no good to try to negate or diminish their perception. It's what they believe and feel, and you will do well to engage them in their pain. This isn't an admission of right or wrong. Rather, it's a way of putting down your weapons and trusting one another with your wounded hearts. Your husband or wife needs to know above all else, you are there for him or her.

What will these steps accomplish? Your spouse will know that above all you seek their well-being, that you are their friend and not their enemy, and that you truly are willing to confess whatever part you may have in the wounding and are seeking forgiveness and restoration and improvement. In short, your humility—laying down your weapons and defenses—will be a catalyst for the beginning processes of healing. *A soft answer turns away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.* (Prov. 15:1)

Here is a made up scenario for you to see the dynamics of the above: Steve and Susan are not on the best of terms lately. Many unresolved issues have piled up over the years.

Steve: *Maybe you should think about going on a diet.*

Susan: *(In a hurt tone) What are you saying? Are you saying I'm fat? You don't love me. You don't accept me for who I am. Mary is fifty pounds heavier than I am and her husband adores her. I see you checking out other women. You're the one with the problem. You men are all alike. You're disgusting.*

Steve: *Oh, brother. There you go again—always trying to make me feel guilty. All I'm saying is . . . oh forget it. What's the use of talking? You're just like your mother. Go ahead; finish off the chocolate cake. Maybe you can get a job in a circus as the fat lady . . . Miss. Piggy!*

In the above example, emotional bullets are flying back and forth. Susan breaks down in tears or stomps off in anger. Steve throws up his hands in frustration and stomps off to the garage to work on his motorcycle. They don't talk to each other for days and even then, it's only functional talk—*Who's picking up the kids?*

Here is the same situation and how they might turn things around.

Steve: *Maybe you should think about going on a diet.*

Susan: *(In a hurt tone) What are you saying? Are you saying I'm fat? You don't love me. You don't accept me for who I am. Mary is fifty pounds heavier than I am and her husband adores her. I see you checking out other women. You're the one with the problem. . . . You men are all alike. You're disgusting*

Steve: *I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, Susan. I didn't mean to. I only thought I was making a helpful suggestion. Do you really think that I don't love you? It hurts me to know that I've hurt you. As for me looking at other women, it's true. I'm sorry. I know that hurts you too. I'm struggling with sin that is deep seated and I really need and want help.*

Even though Steve was merely trying to be helpful, he acknowledges Susan’s perceptions and hurt feelings. He doesn’t try to defend himself on the first point (even though her perception is wrong) or on the second point about his issue with lust (her correct perception).

Maybe the above example will be of some help to you. The same type of dynamic can be applied to many conflicts. While answering the questions below keep in mind the steps of *perception*, *acceptance*, *validation*, and a *soft response*. Feel free to use additional paper to add any comments or information for which the space does not provide.

1. What are some of the wounds you have received from childhood—from parents, peers, strangers, etc?

2. How are these affecting you now and especially how do they affect your marriage union?

3. How are you dealing with, facing, or coping with these issues? _____

4. With brief statements, list several of the wounds that your spouse has inflicted upon you.

5. How have you reacted to or dealt with each of these wounds?

6. List several wounds that you know you have inflicted upon our spouse.

7. How have you addressed your own sin, offenses, and wounds that you have inflicted on your spouse? What steps have you taken to heal the hurts, to ask for forgiveness, and to change your habits and behavior?

Primal issues

What underlying, longstanding issues are in your inner world, that are triggers for certain responses? For example, as is common for many men, the fear of inadequacy is ever present as a crouching lion waiting to attack. It's the fear of being an inadequate provider—an inadequate husband, father, and model to his children. Being laid off or fired from a job hits at the core of a man's identity, stability, and well-being. Perhaps it's the same for "working women"¹ these days, but traditionally and by divine decree, men (rather than women) are *suppose* to be the providers. When they are not, they suffer in ways that women, perhaps, do not.

Women, on the other hand, are likely to have buttons (issues, worries, concerns) such as not being desired by their husbands or that they are not attractive or not as attractive as other women are. A women's soul is crushed if she doesn't sense her husband loves her and admires her above all others. Comparing your spouse to another person is a killer.

Such things are what I call primal issues that each of us have in one way or another. They are deep-seated root fears and issues that often have nothing to do with our spouse. Rather, they are issues or burdens we have carried most of our lives—some of which are inherent to each gender.

¹ The terms "working woman" and "stay-at-home mom" seem somewhat offensive—as though women (mothers especially) who stay at home do not work. Contrariwise, they likely work harder and longer than anyone else does.

Take some time and give deep thought before answering the following.

1. Regarding life in general, what do you most fear? _____

2. Regarding your relationship, what do you most fear? _____

3. What are some of the “buttons” your spouse pushes that you respond to with anger, defensiveness, retaliation, fear, depression, withdrawal, etc.

4. What types of strategy, behavior, or emotions do you use to counter these buttons when they are pushed?

5. What types of strategy, behavior, or emotions do you use to manipulate your spouse or situations?

What types does your spouse use? _____

Emotions

We are emotional beings. Conflicts are charged with emotion, and much of the time, we deal with conflicts on the emotional level—thus escalating the conflict to ever-higher levels. Rational is what's needed in these situations; however, it doesn't do any good, for example, for a husband to tell his wife she is being irrational. Her feelings make perfect sense to her. They are perfectly rational to her. As Emerson Eggerichs says in his *Love and Respect* series, it's just that, as a woman, she sees things differently. She or he isn't wrong—just different.

Women seem to get the brunt of emotional jokes. Women, in general, do wear their feeling on their sleeve. My wife cries at the drop of a hat. She cries when she is happy or sad. Give her a birthday card—she tears up and gets gooey. It's a different kind of cry when I wound her. One is tears of joy; the other is tears of pain. But me? I hardly ever cry—can't remember when I cried last. But I get angry, depressed, and generally freaked out at times. Those are genuine emotions. And they say something. I believe anger often is a man's way of expressing pain or fear. Anger might be a man's way of crying—of expressing pain. Pretty irrational, huh?

So what do we do with our emotions in the face of conflict?

You push my buttons so much you make me lose control

Now that's a tempting often-used comeback to our sinful behavior. Although there are times when your spouse can, for example, provoke your children or yourself to wrath or exasperation (Eph. 6:4), there are many times when our spouse's actions or words simply reveal what is already in our heart. I'll illustrate by using myself as an example. Sometimes my wife will do or say something that bugs me, and I'll roll my eyes and think to myself *oh, brother, she doesn't have a clue. . . . What's her problem?* What I am communicating is actually *my problem* not hers. I'm communicating judgment, criticism, disapproval, and rejection.

For another example, if I work on my car, it's almost a guarantee that I will get angry. I can't even change a battery anymore without freaking out. *Those stupid designers. What are they thinking? I have to take apart half the front end just to get the blanity blank, battery out. Blank it all!*

Did those engineers cause me to lose control? Of course they did! It's their fault! They should design cars to be more easily worked on. (About this time, my wife's presence silently heaps tons of conviction and guilt upon me. I've thrown a tantrum like a two year old and I'm embarrassed.) Likewise, when your spouse pushes your buttons, it often only proves that you have buttons.

Should I get angry when I work on my car? No. Should I work on my car? No! I should pay someone who is gifted (graced) to work on cars do it rather than try to save some money.

Should we get angry with our spouse and say mean, hurtful things? No. Instead, we should confess our own faults, wrongdoing, fears, weaknesses, and lack of grace in the situation, and sincerely ask for forgiveness. If we live in grace in the first place, we will avoid the pits of frustration and the emotional meltdowns. Then too, when we do step in it and cause heartache to our spouse, we should likewise apply grace—grace to forgive, grace to ask for and receive forgiveness.

An experiment

If you are at this moment in a state of relative peace and calm without anger or other emotions, try this experiment. However, this could prove troubling, so stay calm, and just agree that this is only an experiment. Again, only do this if you are not presently upset.

Wife: Purposely say or do something in a way that you know pushes your husband's button(s). If you don't know, ask you husband what you say or do that sets him off. But before you do it, give your husband a warning and let him get his mind ready for it.

Husband: When she says it, take control of your thought processes and watch the thoughts and feelings that parade across you mind. Just watch them. Just hold them at arms length and watch them. It's difficult at first but you can eventually do it. If you can, write brief descriptions of the individual thoughts that leaped up within you.

OK do the experiment. Wife: Push your husband's button(s)

1. Husband: write a brief description of each thought or feeling that crossed you mind.

2. Repeat steps 1-4 but switch roles. Husband: say or do something in a manner that pushes your wife's button(s).

3. Wife: Watch your thoughts and feelings and write them down step by step.

What is the point of this experiment? First, it is to show that we are creatures of habit. Habits can be a great blessing or a great curse depending on the habit. You have emotional-thought habit patterns, but the good news it, they are just that: habits. Habits can be changed. The solution in this case is to develop new, healthy, and godly habitual response patterns. Second, the purpose is to give you a tool to practice with that we hope will help you inoculate yourselves against the immediate hot button knee-jerk reactions that so easily beset us (Heb: 12:1).

This not only will work for conflicts, but it will also work for feelings that you carry around that are unrelated to your spouse—feelings such as low self-worth, inadequacy, incompetence, and other emotional-mental issues and mindsets. These things are buttons that are behind the scenes and unrecognized for what they are. Sometimes, your spouse unknowingly and innocently might say something that triggers underlying issues that have nothing to do with your relationship. Try using this experiment on these types of issues.

If you practice this when you are in a good mood and not having conflict or otherwise troubled, you might eventually recognize the habitual thought pattern response at the time of a real conflict. Normally the thoughts come so fast and are so habitual that, in a millisecond, you go from peace to anger, tears, or some other response. Now, however, practice trying to recall each thought in the process. I think you will see that the entrance of the first thought invites its cousin and its cousin's cousin and so forth until a whole family of emotionally charged negative feelings have captured your will and you act out. What do you do without thinking? You snap back or get depressed or go have a bowl of ice cream or some other comfort substance—maybe all three!

Summing it up

Helping each other explore one another's buttons (or issues) can be a great way to improve your relationship. But one or both may not be ready to look at their issues. To be fair, they might not even see their issues or that they even have an issue or button. So, we need to proceed in this path very gently—perhaps like when driving in extremely dense fog. You go slowly and cautiously with vigilance. Looking to yourself least you are the problem.

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

Gal 6:1

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