

## Couples retreat.

This retreat outline is authored by DeeAnn and Ron as one couple reaching out to another couple, sharing activities and exercises that we have experienced and that mean a lot to us personally. Our hope, and the goal of this outline, is for you to experience a rich and memorable adventure during your couple retreat – exploring and celebrating your marital friendship to date, perhaps making some course corrections, and building a picture (perhaps by reviving personal and shared dreams) of your future together.

You needn't feel compelled to fulfill every suggestion we've offered you. While the exercises were in part selected to build on each other, your personal preferences and interests will not necessarily be the same as ours and the pace of your time together is very important. Try not to let yourselves become too bored by an overly slow pace, or too performance oriented. Let your energy and the Holy Spirit guide you in this. Pay attention to your spouse and keep in mind that sometimes less is more. Besides, any activities not done presently can always be explored together at a future time

Let's start with some preparation. Prior to coming on retreat, consider gathering photos from this past year. Look for photos that collectively capture the highlights of past 12 months or so for you as a couple, images that seem to represent the events or people that made up your significant stories of the year. Discuss how you might display this collection in your home. For example, you may want to create a collage of the photos along with a few significant words, or you may want to buy a premade collage frames with individual areas within the framework to display these photos. We recommend gathering the materials in advance and bring them with you – to work on side by side while on retreat.

Once you are here – how might you start? As you arrive at the retreat center, consider what you need to do in order to settle in. Perhaps you want to go on a walk or a hike and talk about what's currently on your mind. Sometimes we need to do that before we can set that aside and engage with our spouse more fully. Perhaps you just need a refreshment and time to relax. A nap? Time together in the prayer room, centering and inviting God into your time

here? There are many great areas just minutes away for hiking. There is Irvine Regional Park for groomed trails. And there is Santiago Oaks Park with a more rustic, hilly landscape. Maps to both areas are in the Armoire. When we hike we like to do what we call a prayer hike. During this hike we take turns praying for the things that God brings to mind. At times the theme of our prayer might be gratitude. Sometime we alternate prayer for each other, and sometimes we hold up our hopes and dreams to God for the upcoming year.

When you are ready (we think of it a cleansing our spiritual palate, or changing channels, or transitioning out of everyday life) discuss what you would both like to do next. Again, as we authored this retreat, we created a variety of activities. Through these activities, we believe God will cultivate a grateful spirit for the story He has authored in you over the last year. He will remind you of the places He has taken you and how He has chosen to show himself to you. It is our prayer that you will emerge from your retreat feeling refreshed and grateful with improved clarity and purpose as your next chapter as a couple is written.

We suggest reading through the entire retreat and then, together, pick and choose the order and activities as you feel led to them. Bear in mind that sometimes we might initially feel resistance to a particular activity. But, if time allows, we also encourage you to give it a try. We've found that many times those are the exercises that are the most impactful and we're glad that we pushed forward.

## Exercise options

### 1) Words that encourage and affirm

Doesn't that always seem like a good place to start? We heard a story at church the other day about Gary Smalley, author of many books on the topic of marriage. He kept an ongoing list of all the things he loved and appreciated about his wife and during those times when he didn't necessarily like her, he went to this list to remind himself of how he truly felt about her. Perhaps now is a good time to start that list and add to it each year as God reminds you of what a gift your spouse is to you. After taking some time to collect your thoughts, come together and share those descriptive lists with one another. As those lists

are shared, listen well both at what was said and what wasn't said. Then ask each other clarifying questions for the purpose of understanding what is truly important to one another. We realize that finding words of affirmation may be challenging for some people. So we created a list of affirming words which you will find at the end of this retreat for you to choose from.

## 2) *Creating your collage*

Part of your preparation for coming on retreat was to collect photos and memorabilia that tell the story of the past year. In this exercise you can use a bit of creativity in making a visual representation of your year to help you to capture some of those memories. While creating this collage, take the time to reminisce and share the meaning of some of the happenings of the year. Maybe an event holds different meaning for you individually – and that might happen often. Listen to your hearts and your bodies as you walk through the year. What is coming up? What do you see as the same and what do you see as different? We encourage you to take postures of both curiosity and appreciation as you consider each other's views and experiences.

## 3) *State of The Union*

Each year the constitution requires our President to give Congress a State of the Union (SOTU) Address. The goal is to share an executive view about how our nation is faring including strides that have been taken and are underway. It is also a time when the President shares executive views of goals that are deemed necessary and expedient. Have some fun with this! Individually come up with your own SOTU Address (i.e., your marital union). How are you doing? What have you accomplished and experienced together. What areas need attention and collaboration to protect and improve your union? After writing your SOTU Address down, have fun sharing it with one another. Writing it down in advance will help you share thoughtfully. Don't shy away from honest feedback after hearing the address of your spouse – but remain curious, supportive and gentle. You might consider some of the following areas in your Address: showing love, mutuality in conversations, how you care for

one another, how you share responsibilities, quantity and quality of time together as a couple, how you seek God together, intimacy, and vocational support.

#### 4) Goals

Ron and I set goals for the year. We begin this process by reviewing our goals from the previous year or years, along with an assessment of how successful we were in attaining those goals. Keep an ear especially tuned to the Holy Spirit as you navigate this. Then we consider the categories for which we want to set goals. Some to consider are: Financial, Relational, Physical, Spiritual, Vocational, Home, and Family. We will set a few to several goals per category with a corresponding plan for how we are going to work towards that goal. For instance one year we set a goal of celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Our plan included researching options for a safari to Africa and creating a corresponding financial plan to finance this. Then we assign the point person for the plan. We type up these goals and keep them in a place where we can see them. We schedule time to review them together. You might initially spend time just throwing out ideas. Some categories might be easier than others. A relaxed approach to it might be a good initial way to start depending on your personality and that of your spouse (often one person is more goal oriented than the other). Take a faster or slower pace to ensure participation and buy in from both partners.

#### 5) Visio Divina –Holy Seeing

Choose a picture out of one of the books in the Experiential Worship Room. Choose one that both of you are attracted to. Use this picture for this exercise. Get into a comfortable position where you can both see the picture.

Prepare: Take a few moments to be still, invite the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart. Center yourself on Jesus

Gaze: Allow your eyes to rest and gaze gently, compassionately on the image. Let the feelings and thoughts and associations arise as you take in what the image is presenting to you. Notice the forms and lines, the colors and shapes. What are you reminded of? Take a few moments to be present to this.

Reflect: What image or place in the image is drawing you? Where is your eye being invited to rest? What attracts you? What is arising for you out of this? A memory? A feeling? A thought? Allow space for these to unfold, simply noticing your experience and being present to what is stirring in your heart. Put yourself in the scene. What would it feel like to be in this place? Is this place safe and inviting? Is it scary and challenging? Turn to Jesus now, in your heart and respond.

Respond: As your prayer deepens, be open to what the Holy Spirit is showing you. How are the feelings, thoughts, desires and meanings evoked by this image connected with your life? What connection does it have with things that are important to you, or what event or season in your life does it reflect? What invitation from God is there for you? How do you want to respond?

Rest: Now simply rest in the grace and love of God for you.

Share: take time to share your experience with your spouse.

## 6) Seasons

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” Eccl 3:1

We believe that our marriages go through different seasons. This can be as orchestrated by God and for His shaping of us and our ability to love one another. It can be in concert with the plans and purposes He has for us at a time such as this in our marriage. But it can also come about due to our own inattentiveness or distraction or willfulness, or even sin.

Chapman in his book *The 4 Seasons of Marriage*, states “marriages are perpetually in a state of transition, continually moving from one season to another- perhaps not annually, as in nature, but just as certainly and consistently.”

Your first step if you should choose to do this exercise is to pray for God to open you to a level of honesty and insight as to the season of your marriage and its purpose. Is it of God and in accordance with His purpose for you? Is it a result of distraction, a lack of commitment, willfulness, a focus on individual desires, or inattentiveness?

Next take a look at the words that describe the different seasons and circle the words that you would use to describe your marriage. Resist the pull to circle words that might describe your life, but rather focus on words that describe your marriage. Do this as individuals, not collectively as a couple.

## SPRING

Bursting forth	Playfulness	Season of love	Youth	Pilgrimage
Life	Warm rays	Radiant	Intoxicating	Rapturous
Starting afresh	Revival	Resurrected	Exciting	Opening
Coming alive	New life	Budding	Flowers	Showers
Green	Blossoms	Afresh	Alive	New
Joy	Thawing	Rebirth	Rejuvenation	Renewal
Regrowth	Warmth	Welcome	Spring break	Mania
Exuberance	Energy	Delight	Aroma	fragrant

## SUMMER

Colorful	Warmth	Light	Playtime	Wishes
Green	Hot	Sunny	Long days	Short nights
Grass	Ripe	Lazy	Balmy nights	Mosquitos
Blooming	Prevailing winds	Monsoons	Thunderstorms	Tornadoes
Hail	Summer break	Outdoors	Travel	Beaches
Singing	Flourishing	Gardening	Field of glories	Green pastures
Ripe fruit	Warm sand	Picnics	Starry nights	Growth spurts
Maturing	BBQ	Sultry heat	Lemonade	Ice cream

## FALL

Back to school	Crackly	Colorful	Cool	Settling
Harvest	Maturing	Quieting	Musky earth	Shorter days
Bounty	Thanksgiving	Drifting	Shedding of	Abundance

			leaves	
Reaping	Passing of the year	Mellow	Burned out	Transition from warm to cold
Ripened	Inward turning	Wealth	Sage	Decision to end
Prideful	Contented	Uncertain	Tired	Growing apart
Neglected	Afraid	Burned out	Frustrated	Apprehensive
Detaching	Confusing	Longing	Dis-ease	Hoping for more

## WINTER

Chilly	Frosty	Dark	Flannel sheets	Sorrow
Bare branches	Quieting	Tea	Harsh	Cold
Time for renewal	Hot chocolate	Crispness	Gray	Long nights
Darkness	Snow	Short days	Blizzards	Ice storms
Long nights	Migration	Hibernation	Frozen	Depressed
Influenza	Strong roots	Slumber	Hard	Dead
Buckle down	Clarity	Bliss	Peaceful	Christmas
Cheer	Freezing	Winter wonderland	Open fire	Discouraging
Hopeless	Empty	Destructive	Tension	Withdraw
Unforgiving	Angry	Resentful	Critical	untrusting

Now glance over these lists and see if there is predominant season. Does that seem to fit your marriage i.e. do you think of your marriage as in the Springtime? Summer? Fall? Winter? If not stop and consider that for a bit.

Next ask yourself these questions:

What have I individually contributed that brings us to this season?

Do I believe this season is orchestrated by God or is it man/woman orchestrated?

Can I discern the purposes God has for this?

Now I think is the time to come back together and share your experiences with this exercise. Enter into this time with a desire to open honestly to one another and to God. Be mindful of God's purposes in inviting you into this discussion and be mindful of the emotions and motives which you might be bringing into the conversation. It is my hope and prayer that you may emerge from this time humbled, committed, and more aware.

Sometimes we find ourselves in seasons that are not to our liking but are orchestrated by God. If so you may want to take time together as a couple opening to God honestly and praying for this season.

Other times we are convicted that this season is a result of our own choices. This can be a bit convicting and disheartening. Perhaps one of God's purposes for you as a couple coming to the Haven on retreat is to open you to this truth. If you are feeling convicted, that is of God. Remember though there is no condemnation through Christ Jesus, so if you are feeling condemned, guilty, or ashamed, that is not God's voice. He wants to lovingly get you back on track in your marriage so that you may love one another as He loves you. No matter how dead or lost or confused you may think you are, He can call you back to Himself and heal your land. In the aforementioned book, *The 4 Seasons of a Marriage*, Chapman articulates practical strategies to help you tend to your marriage. You may need more help than that. A good Christian marriage and family therapist (MFT) can be invaluable in getting you back on track. When Ron and I reach a roadblock we can't seem to get around, I am always amazed how quickly our MFT helps us to navigate past it. She is truly priceless!

You might want to end this time discussing what you want to do to keep your marriage flourishing and in step with the season that God has for you. End by praying for your marriage and one another. As is written in Proverbs 5:18: "May your fountain be blessed and may you rejoice in the wife (husband) of your youth."

## 7) Friendship

Even secular researchers will tell you that within a marriage, contentment has to do with the friendship part of the relationship. For example, John Gottman (considered perhaps the foremost researcher on couple relationships) stresses 3 domains in the couple relationship:

- Friendship/Intimacy/Positive Affect
- Shared Meaning
- Constructive Conflict

This posture may seem to reflect common sense or nonsense to you. But, in fact, decades of detailed research of thousands of couples bears this out. Long lasting and satisfying marriages are largely based on the friendship between the partners – that means you and you!

What makes up a good friendship? Words like loyal, trustworthy, honest, dependability, mutuality and many others might come to mind. Those are desired character attribute of good friends. But, we're going to focus on intimacy for this exercise. Relational intimacy.

How do you know if you are intimate friends? Well, you tell each other things about your life, your preferences, things you love and dislike, your pain, your passions, and on and on.

What follows is a list of questions that are intended to offer you a chance to deepen your knowledge of each other and in doing so, nurturing your intimacy as friends.

We encourage you to find a comfortable place to sit for an hour or so and walk through each question first one person, then the other. Make your best effort to answer the question for your spouse. If you flat out don't know – that's OK for now. But, if you don't know, find out the answer from your spouse and then ask her/him to tell you more about the answer. Your memory is less an issue than showing your love through curiosity.

(Note: if your partner doesn't know the answers, or thinks he/she does and gets them wrong, be very gentle in correcting him/her. Remember, the goal is to make getting to know each other an affirming and fun experience.)

Here we go!

- Who are your partner's two closest friends?
- What was your partner wearing when you first met?
- Name some favorite foods of your partner.
- Which relatives are the least favorite of your partner?
- Describe a favorite vacation/trip of your partner.
- Name 2 or more issues currently causing stress in your partner's life.
- What color(s) does your partner seem to favor in clothes, furnishings, flowers, etc.?
- Recall a difficult childhood memory of your partner's childhood.
- Does your partner have life dreams? Describe what you know about them.
- Name a couple of people your partner most highly admires in the world.
- What are two of your partner's strongest values?
- Name a few of your partner's accomplishments as a child?
- Name two significant fears your partner sometimes struggles with.
- Share a favorite song or two of your partner. What style of music does she/he generally prefer?
- What are some traditions that are important to your partner?
- Does your partner have a favorite cologne/perfume?
- What are some of your partner's favorite gifts from you?
- Does your partner have favored "Love Languages"
  - Quality Time, Gifts, Acts of Service, Words of Affirmation, Touch
- Name an "enemy" or "rival" of your partner – someone who he/she has very little appreciation for.

We hope that was a mostly enjoyable experience for both of you? Discuss what most surprised you about your partner's answers – has something changed? Did you learn something new? Are you reminded of what a complex and wonderful person God designed in him/her?

## 8) Gleanings from the Bible

Ignatius Loyola developed a style of bible reading where you put yourself into the story. You connect with the emotions, the thoughts and desires of the people in scripture as if you were living their story. In doing so you can tap into your own imagination and make them come alive to you, as you enter their world. After entering into the story, you then enter into a conversation with Jesus as though you were a character in this story asking him questions and listening for his response. We are going to do this with the Book of Ruth. This is divided into 2 parts: one for the woman and one for the man. You will work through your individual parts and then converse about what you gleaned from this time with the Lord.

### Question to Consider for Husband and Wife

Read Ruth 1:1-5

Questions for her:

- Can you relate to being in a place where are needy, or broken or grieving or looking for a fresh start when you first met your husband?
- Lord, how was I needy or broken?

Questions for him:

- Recall your own relationship story – the chapter where you met the woman who would become your wife. What were the circumstances in your lives at the time?
- What drew you together? Has God revealed his plan for your marriage since that time? Talk to him about it.

Read Ruth 1:8,9

Questions for her:

- Can you relate to Naomi's desire for her daughter-in-laws – "that they may find rest in the home of their husband"?
- As you found and made a home with your husband, what were you hoping for?

- Jesus – was there something more, something hidden that I was seeking?

Questions for him:

- Did you have a sense that you were rescuing your wife during your courtship – or perhaps she represented something more to you than a wife?
- Ask God to help you consider your early motives in courting your wife.

Read Ruth 1:10-22

Questions for her:

- Do you admire Ruth as she responded to Naomi?
- What qualities does she exhibit that you relate to in your relationships – specifically your relationship with your husband?
- How do you see me, Lord?

Questions for him:

- What do you know about your wife's relationships with older women – who was she close with (her mother, an aunt, her grandmother, extended family, a mentor)? How did those women influence your wife's views of marriage?
- If you don't know – ask her when you discuss your answers.

Read Ruth 2:1-4

Questions for her:

- Naomi gave Ruth wise counsel, which she followed. Are there women in your life who are giving you wise counsel regarding your marriage? Are you taking heed of their counsel?
- Lord, do you have a woman like this for me? Who? What keeps me from seeking this?

Questions for him:

- Are you comfortable with the idea that your wife would seek counsel of other women regarding your marriage? Have you discussed it with her?
- Do you feel that you need to have all the answers for your wife and your marital relationship?

Read Ruth 2:5-23

Questions for her:

- Take notice of the interaction between Boaz and Ruth. What do you admire about how they speak to one another? How is that similar to how you and your husband spoke to one another during your dating stage? How does it compare to how we speak to one another at this stage in our marriage?
- Search me Lord and speak to me about this?
- Boaz noticed Ruth, saw her need, and stepped in to meet that need. Are you currently experiencing a need and want your husband to notice and step in and meet that need? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
- Lord, I come to you with this – you are gentle and humble as my teacher. What do you have for me to see here?

Questions for him:

- Since you and your wife were in the courting stage has your communication grown more or less exciting, more or less honoring, and more or less selfless?
- Ask God to help you process how you speak to your wife these days – how can you honor her (as Christ honors the church) in how you speak with her?

Read Ruth 3:1-9

Questions for her:

- Ruth listened to wise counsel, prepared herself, and then approach Boaz with a matter of importance being mindful of him and the timing of the conversation. What does her example say to you?

- Is there an issue like this in your marriage where you need to seek counsel, prepare and give voice to?
- Lord, what are you showing me here?

Question for him:

- Have you noticed how your wife approaches you to initiate conversation on an important matter? Think about it – ask God to give you insight – and consider what her approach may say about your relationship.
- Are you approachable – i.e., do you make it easy for your wife to speak with you about important or sensitive matters
- When your wife speaks to you – do you consider her to give you wise counsel? Do you really consider what she has to say and make sure that she knows she has your ear and can count on receiving your respect?

Read Ruth 3:10-15

Questions for her:

- Boaz responded to Ruth not from a posture of being defensive or criticized or resistant. Rather, he felt blessed that she would come to him and ask his favor. How does your husband typically respond to you when you come to him with a need or a request, or an observation? Is his initial response resistant, but later he softens? How does his response impact your willingness to come to him? Do you view your wisdom and approach to your husband as a blessing to him? How do you think he sees it?
- Jesus, open my heart of love for my husband now. Show me what he needs from me?
- Boaz responded to Ruth's request with an action plan that was immediate and considerate of her in a way that Ruth may not have considered. When you approach your husband, how is he able to bring his wisdom and insight into the situation?
- Jesus, am I responsive and grateful for this or resistant? Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

Questions for him:

- Does your wife ask for your insight and wisdom when she has an important issue to contemplate?
- Do you make her feel safe in coming to you with matters of the heart?
- Ask God if he has anything to tell you about this.

Read Ruth 3:16-18

Questions for her:

- The next step for Ruth, after approaching Boaz with this matter, is to wait for him to act. She needed to give him time and be patient. How are you when you need to wait for your husband to respond? What do you do in that space of time – pray, complain, nag, badger? What do you need from your husband during this time of waiting?
- Naomi knew Boaz' character and she knew he would get right on it. Do you feel that way about your husband? If not, pray for him.

Questions for him:

- Can your wife count on you to be on her side in each and every situation – even if she may not be totally in the right? Or, are you quick to point out her potential faults?
- Can your wife count on you to support her with action when she comes to you with a need?
- Is there something going on right now where your wife is in need of some support? If you don't know – ask her when you discuss your answers.
- Ask God if he wants you to serve, protect, comfort, promote or even take a hit for . . . your wife?

Read Ruth 4:1-10

Questions for her:

- Boaz used great wisdom in taking care of this matter. He relied on relationships he had built over time, his knowledge of the culture and law of the day, his own communication skills and his rights. In the end the matter was appropriately address,

Ruth's needs were met and the issue was resolved. Think back in your relationship with your husband to a time when he used wisdom, knowledge, and skill to navigate through an issue for you as a couple. Write about it.

Questions for him:

- When have you helped your wife solve a difficult problem? How did you go about doing it? Did you esteem her in the process?
- Ask your wife about this topic when you get together – how does she think you did in the case you brought up? Did it make her want to come for your help/support the next time?

Read Ruth 4: 11-22

Questions for her:

- Both Ruth and Boaz experienced God's blessings on their marriage. How are you experiencing God's blessing on your marriage? Thank Jesus for these blessings.

Questions for him:

- Boaz' decision and actions regarding Ruth and Naomi led to a place in history he could never have imagined for his family and an eternal legacy. Have you considered that the very way you treat your wife might have an impact on your partnership in building a legacy? If so – what are you collectively dreaming about? If not – pray about this issue and ask God what he dreams for you and your wife together. Talk about it with her.
- Consider creating a dream journal for you and your wife – both separately and together. What are her dreams? What are your dreams? What are your together dreams? How can you be a force in helping your wife experience the dreams that God has put on her heart in response to how he designed her and how he has shaped her?

## 10) Nourishing and Cherishing

Ephesians 5:29 says “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church.” Cherish is an attitude-to recognize your spouse’s great value. When we do this, we realize that they are a gift and a blessing, not a burden. We see them as a treasure and where our treasure is our heart will follow.

In our earlier exercise on affirmation, you mined out some words of affirmation. Anything else you might want to add to this list?

In the second part of that verse we are instructed to nourish our spouse. To nourish requires action. It might make it easier to think in terms of how you give and receive love. Begin by writing down things you do that nourish or love your spouse.

Next write down things your spouse currently does to nourish and love you

Finally write down any ideas you have on how the two of you might step it up in this area

Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. I feel loved when I know you just want to be with me.
2. I feel nourished when you plan fun activities for us
3. I feel loved when you ask me deep questions because you want to know me
4. I feel nourished by your touch
5. I feel nourished when I know you are actively listening to me and are mindful of my feelings and what I genuinely need in that conversation.
6. I feel loved when you consider my needs and choose to meet them even when they wrestle against your needs.

Again you might want to initially work on this exercise separately, then share your work with one another and let the conversation flow.