

The 10 Best Decisions a Couple Can Make

Bill & Pam Farrell



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Decide to Build a Love That Lasts

Here's to marriage, that happy estate that resembles a pair of scissors: So joined that they cannot be separated, often moving in opposite directions, yet punishing anyone who comes between them.

—SYDNEY SMITH

How would a real estate agent describe your marriage? *Rare find! Ideal! Outstanding and sharp! Beautiful and elegant! Mint condition! Fabulous!* Most marriages would get a more realistic description: *Remodeled charmer. Solid foundation but needs some TLC. Great curb appeal but interior needs a major remodel. Good neighborhood—a cozy fixer-upper!*

The television listings are filled with home-improvement shows, including *Trading Spaces*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *Merge*, and *While You Were Out*, just to name a few. The long list of fix-it shows includes *This Old House*, *Bob Vila's Home Again*, and *Designing for the Sexes*. These shows demonstrate effective techniques and strategies for making any dwelling a better place to call home. In the same way, your marriage needs a strategy for staying in good shape.

Just as the walls don't paint themselves, the grass won't mow itself, and the dishes won't wash themselves, a marriage doesn't magically become strong and beautiful on its own. Creating a beautiful home requires a good set of plans, a competent contractor, able craftsmen, and gifted decorators.

Everything worthwhile is worth investing in. Homes that receive

consistent tender loving care are appraised at a higher value. In the same way, every marriage given consistent love and attention will become a work of art, a sanctuary of love, and a haven of hope.

Think of this book as a set of plans for building a long-lasting love. Your first step is to decide to build a love that lasts. Decide that you want to discover what makes love last for a lifetime. Decide to look for a good set of plans for building a love and a life. We want to take a humorous and practical look at marriage and provide everyday tools for the couple who wants to do a little work around the house and create a home you both want to come home to—a home built with love.

Lessons from the Contractor

As of the writing of this book, we have been the proud owners of three homes. They have all been projects, and they have helped us learn some of the most important lessons in our relationship.

We thought our first home was the most awesome thing we had ever seen. It was built in the 1950s, but it looked like a shiny new diamond to us. The bright yellow and orange wallpaper in the kitchen looked hideous, but we thought, *This is not a problem. We'll just put up new wallpaper.* The green shag carpet throughout the house was nauseating, but we thought, *This is not a problem. We'll just rip it up and refinish the hardwood floors.* We had heard that the house had termites, but we thought, *This is not a problem. The house has just been fumigated, so all the termites are dead.*

Looking back, we realize this was relationship lesson number one. We all go into our marriages thinking, *This is not a problem. We'll just work it all out because we're in love.* This idealism is probably necessary because if we knew everything that is involved in building an intimate relationship, we would conclude it is impossible and run the other way. But we seem to have a marvelous magnet in our hearts that convinces us we desperately need each other.

Actually, every marriage has bugs, viruses, challenges, inconsistencies, and shortcomings. As Dr. Harry Ironside is famous for saying,

“Where there is light, there is bugs.” Successful married couples learn to live with their eyes wide open to the challenges and assume they will have to remodel their relationship on a regular basis to counteract the natural process of decay.

What Is This?

And so with youthful enthusiasm we began our adventure. With wide eyes and expectant hearts we launched into fixing up our “new” home. We started by tearing down the hideous wallpaper in the kitchen. Attached to the kitchen was a breakfast nook with a bay window with wood frames, and the nook was accented with a wooden wainscot. The wainscot was not original, so we decided to remove it as we were remodeling the kitchen.

As I (Bill) was enthusiastically taking the wood paneling off the wall, one of the windowsills came with it! The rotten piece of wood dropped to the floor. It had obviously been the home of termites for a long time. A cavernous network of tunnels ran through the wood. Parts of the sill were nothing more than a paper-thin facade. I’m not sure, but I think I heard the house laughing at me. With the sill on the floor, I could clearly see the bottom of the window frame. What I saw there was amazing. Dead termites were stacked on one another. The bottom half of the frame was almost totally eaten up. Some fat termites must have been running around that neighborhood! I remember thinking, *What have I done?* We knew about the termites, but no one told us we were buying the Home Town Buffet for bugs!

Lesson number two: Every couple goes through a period where they wonder, *What have we gotten ourselves into?* No one could possibly anticipate all that is involved in an intimate relationship, so surprises are inevitable. I remember my first big surprise. Pam and I were quietly sitting in our living room during our first year of marriage. I was thinking to myself, *This is awesome. She is beautiful, sex is great, and we’re young and having a lot of fun together.* Then it happened. I said something that pushed some button in Pam.

She abruptly stood up and exclaimed, “You don’t love me

anymore!” Then she ran to our bedroom, slammed the door, and sprawled herself across the bed. When I walked in, she was sobbing violently. I knew our marriage would hold some challenges, but no one ever told me about this!

I have since learned that one of the best things I can do for Pam is to help her feel secure. She needs to know that she is important and valued. I know that now, but I didn’t then. That day she ran into our room, I wondered who this person was and where she had taken my wife.

I Have a Dream!

Back to the house. I had to hire a contractor to remake the window frame because matching windows were no longer available. With his expert help, we repaired the window and continued on with the kitchen.

The old wallpaper had to come off because we decided to paint. For some reason, we thought that paint would look better and be easier to clean. Covering the wall with new paper would have been easier, but *we had a dream*.

The wallpaper was stubborn, so we had to rent a steamer. Nobody told me that a steamer is like a boiling serpent looking for someone to attack. It sputtered. It clogged. It refused to work. It was just plain stubborn. I could have stopped early in the process and put up wallpaper, but *we had a dream*. So I committed to “fix” the steamer. In the process, I sprayed myself in the face with steam. It scared me and made me more determined at the same time. Fortunately, all I received was an unwanted sunburn for my efforts! At that point, I probably should have said to Pam, “We need to give up this plan and wallpaper the kitchen.” But *we had a dream!* I am proud to say that after much travail, the kitchen was beautifully painted with contrasting trim on the wood windows.

Lesson number three: At times the only thing that keeps a couple going is *the dream*. Intimate relationships are very influential on our hearts. They are filled with hopes and dreams and disappointments.

The relationship begins with the feeling that it will be magical and fulfilling. The dream gets interrupted by the real needs of the individuals involved. A lifetime of marriage is filled with disappointments, setbacks, misunderstandings, times of great responsibility, financial decisions, and many other challenges. No man ever said to a young woman, “Will you marry me so we can load up on bills and work hard the rest of our lives to pay them off?” But when reality hits, a couple can endure some boring, stressful, and painful times because of the dream: We can rediscover our love over and over again. A couple with this dream will work together to build a place where their relationship works. The dream gets them through the unexpected.

After we finished remodeling the kitchen, the dream expanded. As we grew accustomed to our new home, we entertained a foolish thought: *This is not enough*. Lesson number four: Something in the hearts of men and women easily becomes discontent. We have cars, but they aren’t nice enough. We have computers, but they aren’t fast enough. We have homes, but they aren’t big enough. We have relationships, but they aren’t good enough.

We get married to the person of our dreams but grow discontent because we forget the dream in the light of reality. What was beautiful in the night fades in the daylight. A joke we read puts it this way: “Did you ever notice that when you fall in love, you sink into his arms, but after the wedding, your arms are in his sink?” In every relationship, the dream must withstand the realities of everyday life.

The “not good enough” bug bit us, and we decided we needed to add a master bathroom to our house. The project seemed simple as we talked about it. We would just move the front door and then simply turn the entryway into a bathroom. What we thought would take about a month to finish took almost five times that long. I would love to tell you that Pam was very proud of me and said, “Wow, honey, I appreciate your perseverance. Even though this is taking longer than you thought, I am amazed at the way you’re sticking to the task. By the way, you look really sexy in dirty construction clothes!”

Instead, the comments degraded from “I’m so excited!” to “How

long did you say this was going to take? Don't you think you should get someone else to finish this? I'm beginning to think you like working on the house better than spending time with me."

Even though hiring a contractor would probably have been a good idea, my ego winced. My thoughts had originally been noble: *I'm going to do this for my new wife.* But as time went on, my thoughts turned sour. *I'll show her. I can't believe she doesn't think I can do this! Why is she complaining? This was her idea!* I had lost sight of the dream.

Survived Once—Do It Again!

Our second house is a very different story. With great expectation and enthusiasm we moved to San Diego County to pastor a church. We assumed we could sell the home we remodeled and buy a home in Southern California. During the first three months we were in San Diego, however, the average house rose \$40,000 in value, and we were priced right out of the market.

I did not want to build a house. I had worked as an architectural draftsman for years before becoming a pastor. I helped many people design custom homes for their families, and as I watched these families go through the process of building their homes, I concluded *I will never do this!* Somehow, God must not have heard me correctly.

The people of the church were incredibly gracious. A plumber told me, "If you want to build a house, I'll donate my time to put in the plumbing." I replied, "Thanks for the offer, but we're not going to build a house."

An electrician told me, "If you want to build a house, I'll donate my time to install the wiring." Again I said, "Thanks for the offer, but we're not going to build a house."

A heating and air conditioning contractor told me, "If you want to build a house, I'll donate my time to install the heating system." I repeated, "Thanks for the offer, but we're not going to build a house."

A roofer told me, "If you want to build a house, I'll donate my time to install the roofing." Still I said, "Thanks for the offer, but we're not going to build a house."

I began to think a conspiracy was going on. I didn't want to do this, but God was inspiring people to be incredibly generous. Generosity is a great trait, but it can be irritating when you have an attitude! With the hope that He wouldn't come through, I made a deal with God. I told Him, *I know a man who is a construction supervisor. He's only working four days a week right now. If he approaches me, tells me I should build, and offers to walk me through the whole process, I will build. But he has to approach me!*

You can probably figure out what happened next. This friend walked up to me and said, "Hey, Bill, I think you should build a home. I'm only working four days a week right now, and I'm willing to walk you through the whole process."

My mouth fell open so fast, I think I bruised my chin on the floor. I wanted to say, "Thanks for the offer, but we're not going to build a house." What I said instead was...nothing. I was so dumbfounded that I couldn't say a thing. I finally squeaked out, "I'll get back to you."

Based on this interaction, I found property, drew up plans for our home, and acquired a permit. The week I received the permit, my friend was honored with the job of his dreams. It took advantage of all of his gifts and blessed him with a large salary increase. It also required six days a week and long hours. As a result, he wasn't able to walk us through the process of building our home. *I needed a miracle!*

Lesson number five: All great relationships start when people choose to trust God. We are all imperfect people trying to love other imperfect people in an imperfect world. Therefore, we all have perfectly imperfect marriages. The greatest moment of your marriage is when you realize you don't have all the answers, when in reckless abandon you throw your hands up in the air and say to God, *Okay, we'll do it Your way! Lead on.*

That's exactly what happened with the house. I'll never forget the Friday morning I was standing on my newly poured foundation. The framers were to arrive the next day, and my job was to get everything ready for them. I had never done this before. I had committed to this

because someone with experience was willing to walk me through. Now that man was not available, and I was standing on my cement, asking God for wisdom and any help He could send my way.

My new neighbor happened to have a day off from work that day. He also happened to have experience preparing job sites for a framing company. He volunteered about four hours to show me how to mark the studs so the workers could stay busy. That was just one of many stories.

One day, I was digging footings for the front and back patios. When I started digging, I said to God, *I sure could use a small jackhammer*. Within an hour a plumber friend of mine came by and told me, “As I was leaving this morning, I got this nudging from the Lord that maybe you needed a jackhammer, so I put it in my truck. Do you need it today?”

Another day, I met a young man who had just been discharged from the Marines. He wanted to stay in San Marcos and be a part of our church because he had recently asked Christ into his life. We had a travel trailer on our property, so I had him live in the trailer and trade work for rent. Not only did he prove to be a huge help in getting work done, but I was able to train him in the basics of Christianity while we worked. We didn’t have time to stop and do any lessons, so we did them as we worked. Some of my greatest memories of building the house include writing those discipleship lessons on the wood under the carpet and under the paint. Nobody will ever see them, but they helped change the life of a young man. As we have raised our kids in the same house, I am reminded that people will never see the lessons written on the hearts of our kids, but the results will be lifelong.

To make matters even more interesting, I (Pam) was pregnant, and we were racing the stork to get the house done before the baby came. The whole event became a town spectacle, and a local newspaper even featured us in an article. People were taking bets on whether we’d get in before the baby arrived. Even our two older sons, Brock, then six, and Zach, then four, were part of the crew. Zach was one of Bill’s best coworkers, and together they sided half the house in one

day. (Actually, they only sided the bottom half so Zach could reach to nail the boards!)

We endured a pretty strenuous 18-month process from conception (of the house, not the baby!) to our move-in day—two weeks after Caleb arrived. The actual building time was about the same as the pregnancy. During this nine months, Bill was pastoring full-time and building full-time, so he was getting very little sleep. My job was running around town, taking care of the kids, and providing on-site meals. I ran the phone lines, tied steel rebar for the foundation, hammered together walls, and helped insulate, finish wallboard, and clean up each day. I have a renewed appreciation for what the homestead women went through on their trek west!

The two days before Caleb was born, Bill stayed up 48 hours straight while the driveway was being poured and the concrete was setting. We thought we had a shot at bringing the baby home to our new house, so he burned the candle at both ends. I went to the hospital for a scheduled C-section on August 3 at six a.m., and Bill, the amazing dutiful husband, was by my side all the way. However, when I came out of recovery, I looked better than Bill did!

The first day after a C-section, Mom is supposed to stay flat in bed. But in the middle of the night after feeding Caleb, I tried to wake Bill, who had crashed in an uncomfortable folding chair. When I couldn't wake him, I attempted to sit up enough to place Caleb in his clear bassinet.

Accomplishing this was no small feat, but with prayer, determination, and mothering instincts, I set Caleb safely in his bed. In the process, my IV got tangled and was pulled out of my hand. Blood began to spray everywhere. I pushed the nurse's button and yelled for Bill. Bill was in such poor shape that I couldn't wake him. I was up and had walked partway to the center station before a nurse came to help me. Bill never moved an inch, deep in REM sleep!

Even the nurse noticed and said, "Deep sleeper, huh?"

I explained all that Bill had done for our family and me the past few months, and she smiled in approval. I looked over at my sleeping

prince charming, and a rush of love overwhelmed me. I knew regardless of what life threw our way, we'd find a way to stay in love for a lifetime. I had married a real keeper!

Upkeep for the Keeper

When our house was finally completed, I (Bill) was exhausted. All I wanted was to go to work, come home, eat, and sleep. I figured I had earned the right to live at a slow pace for at least a year. But I have a family! Our three boys are just that—boys—and that means things in our home are often broken.

In order to obtain the final permit to move into our house, I had to install a sprinkler system and groundcover on the hill in my backyard. About two months after we had moved in, I pulled into the driveway after a day at work, when suddenly something flew over the windshield of my car. As I got out of the car, I looked in the backyard and saw my two older boys and one of their friends with baseball bats in their hands, practicing their golf swings on my sprinkler heads! I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I felt as if I were in a bad dream I couldn't escape from. I told the boys' friend to go home immediately. He dropped the bat and ran like a gazelle. I then said to my boys, "You'd better get in the house before I do something we all regret."

I wandered around the house for the next hour in a disillusioned stupor. I found myself expecting my four- and six-year-old sons to possess the maturity of adults. *What were they thinking? Don't they realize how hard this is on me? Don't they appreciate the year of hard work I have just put in? I bet they did this just to make me mad!* As I walked around the house, I forced myself to pray one of my most profound prayers: *Jesus, I would rather have kids than sprinklers.* I had to repeat this prayer over and over again because I didn't really mean it at first. But after about an hour, I finally convinced myself that it was true.

Ever since that day, a question has haunted me: Why does life require so much maintenance? Lesson number six: Fixed things won't stay fixed. Weeds grow faster than everything else. Relationships deteriorate unless you nurture them. In other words, remodeling is a way of life.

We bought home number three because Dr. David Jeremiah offered Bill a wonderful position on the staff of Shadow Mountain Church. The new ministry position was a dream, but the 60-minute commute in Southern California traffic was a nightmare. Right away, we prayed that God would give us a home a few minutes from the church and the high school where Caleb, our youngest son, attended.

Our real estate agent, Cynthia, found a home on a hillside with a gorgeous view three minutes away from work and school, but it seemed a little unusual. The owner was a machinist, and his “shop” was 800 square feet and sat next to the home. The home was built over a seven-car garage, where he restored antique cars. We only had two cars (three if you count the 20-year-old VW our son was trying to get running again). I loved the cabin feel of the upstairs, but Bill never seemed to make it up there. Every time we visited the home to decide whether to buy it, Bill stood downstairs, pondering the enormity of the garage. Finally, a little perplexed by this behavior, I marched downstairs and said, “Bill, you don’t need a seven-car garage!”

Then my very wise husband smiled his broad, beautiful grin, the one that made me first fall in love with him, and said, “Pam, picture this. Two-car garage, three offices, and a guest room suite. And the shop can hold all the books and products as our ministry grows!”

He was brilliant! He could see what I had missed—the amazing potential for a bright future housed in the shell of that garage. And that’s the attitude we hope you two embrace as you read this book. Don’t look at the problems, look at the potential of your love!

A Real-Life Toolbox

We have always lived by the motto “knowledge isn’t a skill until it is practical.” To make this book as practical as possible, we’ve enlisted the help of couples who have a proven track record. We asked couples who describe their marriage as happy and strong and have been married more than 20 years to put in their two cents. Throughout this book you’ll find their stories and their words of wisdom.

In past centuries, young men apprenticed under master craftsmen

to learn trades such as ironwork, brick masonry, and carpentry. We hope this book will be an apprentice program for your love whether you have been married a few days or more than 30 years. Each chapter will present practical skills to help you keep your marriage in top shape.

Just as a craftsman learns his trade from a master mentor craftsman, we have discovered it is helpful to have marriage mentors. During the weeks you are reading this book together, we encourage you to find a couple you admire and ask if they will meet you once a week and discuss the key concepts in each chapter. If you are currently happily married, we challenge you to become a mentor couple to a newlywed couple or a struggling couple and pass on the wealth of wisdom you have accumulated. In giving away the secrets of love, you will gain a new fresh appreciation of the love you have built together. Mentor Moment questions are included at the end of this book.

Finally, couples that have been happily married have a friendship circle around them of other couples that believe in love that lasts. This book is a great resource for small groups, so gather a few friends and use the small-group questions in the back to form a safety net for your love.

We are all in process. We are all building, remodeling, “fixin’ up” our love. Our goal is to make bad marriages good and good marriages better. We have organized our thoughts around a favorite Scripture passage used in most weddings. We have chosen this set of verses because they form a strong foundation upon which all healthy relationships can be built. See if you recognize the passage:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8,13).



When a Man Enters a Home Improvement Store...

His heart rate increases.

Endorphins flood his bloodstream.

He forgets why he entered the store.

His eyes move from right to left, trying to decide where to start.

He wanders toward the tools to see what is new.

He dreams of everything he could do with a new cordless drill.

He checks out the new fencing material.

On the way to the fence materials, he notices the new ladders and compares them to the one he already owns.

He remembers that he came for lightbulbs.

On the way to the lighting section, he stops at the tools again to check out the tool belts. He wonders if he looks sexy to his wife with his tool belt on. He asks himself, *If I bought a new tool belt, would our sex life improve?* He can't figure out the answer, so he heads for the lightbulbs.

On the way to the lightbulbs, he notices the lawn mowers. He asks himself, *Do we need a riding lawn mower? If we did, which one would I want?*

He wanders down the lawn-care aisle to see what is new.

He checks out the chain saws. He doesn't need one, but he feels more like a man standing next to them.

He wonders how long he has been in the store.

He pulls the note out of his pocket to remind himself why he came to the store.

He finds the lightbulb aisle and picks up the lightbulbs.

He realizes his wife is probably wondering what happened to him.

On the way to the checkout stand, he stops at the tools again and checks out the new tape measures. He knows they don't cost very much, so he decides to get a new one.

He continues to the checkout line.

He buys the bulbs but decides at the last minute not to get the tape measure.

He gets in the car to drive home and says to himself, *I wish my wife could have been here to see all this great stuff.*

When a Woman Enters a Home Improvement Store...

She checks her list to remind herself she needs lightbulbs.

She stops at the information center and asks where the right aisle is.

On her way to the lights, she notices a lot of men in the tool section.

She asks the man in the light aisle which lights would be best for her lamp.

She puts the lightbulbs in her basket.

She heads for the checkout stand.

She wonders why three men are standing in front of the chain saws.

She buys the lightbulbs and notices that the lady at the checkout stand has the same name as her sister. She has a five-minute conversation with her because no one else is in line. She finds out the names of her two kids, where she graduated from high school, and where she will be going on vacation next summer.

She gets in the car to drive home and wonders if she just met a new friend.