

Happily Ever After?

...and they lived happily ever after.

—Every love story ever written

We sat there, side by side, staring out opposite windows. The music drifting through the speakers wasn't enough to overpower the eerie silence that filled my car. I felt colder than normal, so I pulled my jacket around my shoulders a little tighter. I couldn't believe that we had come to this, but too much had changed for us to try to stay the same. Out my window, I noticed a pattern in the bark of the tree next to us. I began studying it—a form of procrastination, I guess.

Taking a deep breath, I finally broke the silence and said to my fiancé, "I think we should break up." We had been working through some issues, so this did not come as a complete shock, but he could not understand why we had to completely end our relationship. I tried to explain my reasons, but they didn't make any sense to him. His jaw clenched as his anger grew. "Fine," he said. "Just give the ring back to my parents." Then he got out of the car and slammed the door.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Ever since I was a little girl, I had dreams of finding "the one," walking down the aisle, and experiencing "happily ever after." I thought everything was in place, but we never even made it to the altar. Relationships were a lot harder than I thought they would be. As I watched him walk out into the night, I began to sob. The "happily ever after" I hoped for had come to a heartbreaking end.

Thankfully, though, this wasn't the end to my story. Twelve years later, when I was in my thirties, a friend named Sean invited me to have dinner with him. It didn't take long to realize that he was the one I'd been hoping for all along. Our engagement not only made it to the altar, but after twenty years of marriage, we are still going strong. My "happily ever after" had a happy ending after all.

So, what changed? What was different between these two relationships?

I changed.

I was different, and I have my single years to thank for it.

Being single was never, ever part of my original plan for happiness, but after my first engagement ended, it's what I was given...year after year after year. When everyone around me started getting married, I was a bridesmaid in their weddings. Thirteen of

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them. *But, really, who's counting?* I spent my twenties wearing the best bridesmaid fashions the 80's and 90's had to offer in every color imaginable.

Looking back, my single years were great, but at the time I didn't want them. As I was bemoaning the fact that every girl around me was falling in love and getting married, God was providing opportunities for me to learn and grow as a person. I gained valuable wisdom and skills that have really paid off in life. Silly me. I was forcing the "happy for you" bridesmaid smile, thinking God was cheating me out of my own love and happiness, when the reality was He was blessing my life that entire time! God used my single years to develop me. He built my character, changed my perspective, increased my abilities, and strengthened my relationships. He grew me into a stronger, more confident woman.

My single years made me a better person all around. I am convinced that I would have enjoyed a happily ever after whether I had married or not. But having married, I can say with confidence that along with making me a better *me*, my single years also gave me a better *marriage*.

Statistics say that most of you hope to get married someday.¹ Well if that's the case, I have a crazy idea for you. What if you used your single years to start preparing yourself *now* for the relationship you hope to have *someday*?

It's kinda like you are loving your husband *before* you even have one.

Friend, I have written for you the book I wish I could have read when I was single. Had I understood the lifelong value of what I was learning back then, I am certain I would have relaxed and actually enjoyed my single years more. I want to share with you some of the things I learned when I was single and how they helped me build a better happily ever after. I think they can help you too.

Like I learned in my first engagement, relationships are harder than we expect. The current success rate for a happy marriage is pretty dismal. Here are the cold, hard facts:

Half of all marriages eventually fall apart.

*Of the 50% of people who do stay married, only 17% say their marriage is a happy one.*²

Allow me to make these numbers a little more personal for you. Let's say you have ten friends. Eventually, your ten friends get jobs, move away, and get married. Years later,

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you all gather back together for dinner to catch up on life. According to these statistics, five of your ten friends will open up about their divorces. Four friends will still be married, but they'll roll their eyes as they talk about their husbands. Everyone will eventually turn to the one remaining friend at the end of the table who hasn't shared anything yet. While she finishes chewing her bite, she will sheepishly smile, throw a thumb up, and say, "Marriage is good. I still like my husband."

I want you to be the girl at the end of the table.

Unfortunately the depressing statistics aren't just numbers. They represent the stories of real women who have experienced broken dreams. I know, because I've done life alongside many of them.

One day I sadly watched out my window as a locksmith changed the locks on my neighbor's doors. Her husband was having an affair, and she wanted him out. After crying with her, that night I had a terrible nightmare. I dreamed that Sean left me for another woman. The dream felt so real. I woke up in tears, heartbroken and suspicious of Sean. He held me and assured me that he was not like that guy at all.

When I watch marriages break up around me and people I care for hurting in their relationships, I want to somehow be a part of the solution. Sadly, I often don't know what to say or do to help fix these broken relationships. God can redeem anything, but in most instances the damage is done, and the marriage seems beyond repair.

But as I lay in bed at night and hurt for those I care about, I often think of the young women I mentor. I have spent most of my adult years investing in the lives of college-age women. I have come to realize that the part I can play in helping the marriages around me is to help these young women make more informed decisions early on in life. Because they aren't married yet, my hope is that as I share the lessons I have learned, it can protect them from the pain of a broken relationship down the line.

Just for the record, most marriages have struggles, including my own. Even after two decades, Sean and I are still learning how to love each other well. Unfortunately, there is no formula or checklist that guarantees a perfect relationship. But, I am still convinced that there are some things a girl can do to increase her odds for an enjoyable, lasting marriage—even before she even has one.

One day I scribbled down a summary of the lessons I had learned on an index card. The notes on that card became a series of talks, and I have given those talks to thousands of single women. The response to them blew me away. Young women

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began to make better choices early on in their relationships because they understood what an enjoyable marriage would require. They liked the idea of loving their husbands ahead of time, and they started preparing themselves to beat the dismal statistics.

Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, and mentioned in *TIME* magazine as the country's most successful marriage therapist,³ said in his book, *What I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*:

*"The decision to get married will impact one's life more deeply than almost any decision in life. Yet people continue to rush into marriage with little or no preparation for making a marriage successful."*⁴

Preparing and acquiring skills are common sense for most of the dreams we have in life. To prepare for our careers we do all kinds of things beforehand to create a great resume'. We pay a lot of money for degrees and carve out years of our lives preparing for our dream job. But, when it comes to our dream marriage, we often wing it and make one of the most important decisions in life based on some feelings and chance.

Dr. Chapman points out,

*Divorce is the lack of preparation for marriage and the failure to learn the skills of working together as teammates in an intimate relationship."*⁵

The key to a lasting, enjoyable relationship is rooted in *getting prepared and learning skills*.

Many couples value preparation, but they wait until they get engaged to work on their skills. Sean and I have counseled numerous couples as they prepared for marriage. I've noticed, however, that when couples are goo-goo eyed in love and distracted by planning a wedding, it is a difficult time to have a crash course in resolving conflict or financial management. So I ask, "Why wait?" The type of skills I'm referring to can easily be developed when you are single. I know because that's when I learned them.

Marriage may be far from your mind right now. You may be enjoying just casually dating or too focused on school or career to even think about a love life. But somewhere down the line, some guy you meet may become your husband. The way I see it, here are your two choices when it comes to your future marriage:

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Option A: Keep doing what everyone else is doing in relationships and cross your fingers, hoping that your relationship will somehow beat the odds.

Option B: Learn what makes an enjoyable, lasting relationship, and start preparing yourself to increase your odds to have one.

Which one sounds best to you?

If you are leaning toward Option B, I'm glad you are here. You are holding in your hands the best of what I've learned. I wholeheartedly believe that you can love your husband before you even have one, by getting prepared and developing the skills that make a marriage enjoyable and lasting. You can build a better happily ever after by the choices you make today as a single woman. In the process I hope you will also find a great deal of strength, creativity and some mad skills you may not even know you have hiding within you.

Not long after my first engagement broke apart, a friend sat down beside me and asked, "Aww, Kim, why did you guys break up?" I sighed and said, "You know, it just wasn't working out. I think God has a better way of doing relationships, and I am going to find out how to do them."

I found out how, and I came back to share it with you.

If you want to love your husband, before you even have one, you'll need to prepare yourself now for the marriage you'd like to have someday.

Key Truth:

*The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands
the foolish one tears hers down.
Proverbs 14:1 NIV84*

Point to ponder:

If you are a single woman and a lasting, enjoyable marriage is something you want someday, what have you done up to this point to prepare for it?

Action Step:

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Keep reading. We've got a lot to talk about.

¹More than four out of five college girls say that marriage is an important goal for them. Joe S. McIlhane, Jr., MD, and Freda McKissic Bush, MD with Stan Guthrie, *Girls Uncovered: New Research on What America's Sexual Culture Does To Young Women* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2011), 12.

²Vicki Larson, "Why Are So Many People in an Unhappy Marriage?" <http://omgchronicles.vickilarson.com/>, (May 20, 2013).

³Belinda Luscombe, "How to Stay Married," *Time Special Edition: The Science of Marriage* (2017): 10-11.

⁴Gary Chapman, *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010), 10.

⁵Gary Chapman, *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010), 10.