

Introduction

DURING THE YEARS OF MY PRACTICE AS A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST, I (JOHN) MET MANY COUPLES WHO CAME TO ME COMPLAINING THAT THEY WERE GROWING DISTANT—DRIFTING APART. One couple in particular stands out as a typical example. Jim and Mary had been married seven years and were parents of two very active toddlers. They were also both working full time.

As they sat in my office I could tell that they were tired, stressed, and angry at each other. Mary felt overwhelmed, and Jim was bitter because he felt ignored by his wife and did not want to be in my office.

Mary complained: “Many evenings, after spending eight hours at work, I find myself coming home to cook dinner, fold the laundry, and play with our sons, Jack and Mike, or give them a bath and put them to bed. Meanwhile, Jim is either in the garage working on his favorite hobby, his car, or playing video games.”

Turning toward Jim, she said: “What about me? When do I get a break? I’m exhausted!”

Mary paused for a few seconds to compose herself and then continued: “I often wonder what’s happened to us. We still have the wedding pictures on our coffee table, yet we feel miles apart. How did we end up feeling so distant?”

Mary and Jim were suffering because they were mourning the intimate connection they once had with each other. They could still remember their wedding day very vividly, but the warmth of their relationship was slowly fading. They seldom saw smiles on each other's faces. All they felt was pain, frustration, and anger, and they could not give each other comfort. They felt lonely, and they were thinking: Is this all there is?

Jim and Mary are a normal couple. What they were facing was a crisis in their relationship—a crisis that is common to most spouses. Dr. William Doherty, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota and a marriage therapist, compares what happens to couples after they marry to what happens to someone who sets out on a voyage on the Mississippi River with a canoe. No matter how much love the spouses feel for each other, writes Dr. Doherty, if they do not intentionally paddle together to stay on course, they tend to drift apart emotionally. Life's river currents take them to places that they did not plan to visit, far away from their intended destination.

In *Take Back Your Marriage*,¹ Dr. Doherty explains that this drifting is something that all couples experience throughout their lives. We are all prone to becoming complacent in our relationship, and we tend to take each other for granted. We let our relationship go on autopilot and don't realize that we are slowly growing distant.

We asked couples we know in our community: How do you know when you are drifting? These are couples in stable marriages who were willing to share their journey with us. Here is what they said:

Bill I know we are drifting when I feel something is missing—like I'm missing my best friend.

Beth We have many little squabbles—nothing serious. We are short with each other for no special reason.

Mark When we find that we don't have anything to talk about, it tells me we are drifting.

Barb I think we're drifting when I catch myself thinking: It doesn't matter what he wants to do; I'm doing what I want.

Gina When Bob went back to school, it was a difficult time. That commitment took over a large part of our free time to be together.

Bob (agrees) Yes, I was very busy, and I felt isolated, and we disconnected.

The problem for most couples is that growing distant is so gradual that, unless we are aware of the possibility and are watchful, it is difficult to know that we are drifting apart. We may feel some discomfort, but we ignore it. We blame our busy schedules or our spouse. We feel the pain, and we carry on. We dive deeper into our work, or we turn our attention to the needs of our children, or distract ourselves with sports, hobbies, or friends on social media, or we busy ourselves with volunteer work, even church work. It is only after months or years that we realize that we are not where we want to be. We are becoming emotionally

disconnected. We do not know each other anymore. Our lives are moving on different tracks, in different directions.

Have you ever felt that you were drifting? How would you recognize that you are drifting? How do you reconnect?

Unfortunately there are some couples whose canoe is so far off course that they cannot find their way back. They do not think they have the energy to rebuild their relationship. Too much damage has been done. Some jump ship; others settle in an uncomfortable marriage, not knowing what to do. However, it does not have to be this way. Fortunately there are many more couples that, inspired by their faith and by what they believe about marriage, seek the help and guidance of a good book, or a couples' retreat, or the advice of a priest or a professional marriage therapist. Be one of these!

Pope Francis' Advice to Jim and Mary and to Us

In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* Pope Francis, as a caring pastor, gives couples like Jim and Mary, whom we met at the beginning of this book, and to all of us some helpful marriage advice. Here are some of his thoughts.

- Married life is a long journey and with the help of God's grace, you make progress by working on it one day at a time (n. 218).
- Remember that neither one of you is perfect, and each must set aside all illusions and accept the other as he or she actually is: a work in progress (n. 218).
- Married life is a process of growth, and each of you is an

instrument through which God helps the other mature. “The greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman” (n. 221).

- Hope is what helps you make progress on your journey together. Hope is the leaven that makes it possible for you to look beyond the present conflicts and arguments and see your current situation in a broader perspective (n. 219).
- Generosity and sacrifice are required throughout your marriage. At each stage of your life you need to sit down and renegotiate your agreements so that there are no winners and losers (n. 220).
- Learn to be present to each other. Make time for each other. Develop daily rituals, such as a morning kiss, an evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together, and sharing household chores; and it helps to break the routine with an occasional party (n. 225).
- Remember that “none of this is possible without praying to the Holy Spirit for an outpouring of his grace” (n. 164).
- “Love is always a gift from God” (n. 228).

These are great words of advice! Pope Francis writes that our hopes for the future give us a special motivation. Hope gives us a vision of what can be. It compels us to take control of our canoe

and reset the direction of our journey. We believe that this hope and motivation come from something deep in our heart; they come from the meaning we give to our voyage—the reason we got into the canoe.

“In the strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning.” ■ DR. JOHN GOTTMAN, PHD²

The Importance of Meaning

In order for couples to find the interior strength and energy to stay on course and to build their marriage, they need to be convinced that what they are doing is worthwhile and has a purpose—a meaning that is compelling. This is what gives them the hope and the courage to persist and to make the necessary adjustments and even sacrifices.

That day in my office, I asked Jim and Mary many questions: “Why did you get married? What were your dreams for your life? Are they still the same today? What do you want for your future?” I was trying to help them find in their heart the reason—the meaning—for being together that would give them the hope and the strength to make the changes they needed to reconnect.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor, wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning* about the importance of finding a purpose, a meaning. He writes that the meaning of life can be found in every moment of our life; even in suffering and death. This is what he learned while imprisoned at the Auschwitz concentration camp. He writes that those who found meaning in their life found the strength to endure and, for some, even to survive.

John Gottman, a psychologist who studied married couples extensively, wrote in *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

that one of these principles is “shared meaning.” To be happy, spouses need to find a common reason for their relationship, one that transcends them, something that propels them forward on their voyage together and guides them when they get lost. Marriage is not just about sharing a home and raising kids. It is about something more. It is the pursuit of a vision of life that guides the spouses to build a life together, a life that has a purpose.

For Christian couples the meaning for their life together comes from their faith. In my conversation with Jim and Mary I heard them say: “We got married in the Church because we thought it would mean something to us. Right now, we do not know exactly what that is, except that we know God is with us.”

The sense that God is present in one’s marriage is a particularly powerful predictor of marital success among young married parents in America today. ■ THE STATE OF OUR UNIONS, 2011³

The Power of Faith

Couples married in the Church face the same challenging passages and difficulties as all other couples. What is different for them is the presence in their life of a light that shines on their path and shows them the way in the face of obstacles. Pope Francis explains that we can see the beauty and attractiveness of marriage and family life when they are anchored in the love of God.⁴ Our Catholic faith gives us a very clear map and compass for our canoe voyage and disposes us to receive the graces we need to overcome the obstacles we encounter. Our Christian faith helps us see that our marriage is not about us; it is a calling from God to serve him by being married, raising a family, and contributing to society. This calling gives meaning to our life.

On our wedding day, as baptized persons, we accepted a mission from God: to be icons of his love in our communities. We gave ourselves to each other completely and brought Christ with us in our canoe. Today, Christ is in our home; he is paddling our canoe with us and giving us the graces we need to steer our marriage in the right direction. With him as our companion, we let God chart our course and write our story.

“This is holiness: to let God write our history.”

■ POPE FRANCIS⁵

This Book: Six Jars of Love

The goal of this book is to help you be aware of Christ’s presence in your canoe and to let him guide you and help you steer your vessel in the right direction.

Six Jars of Love is a book to be savored. Read it at your own pace. The chapters that follow were developed from presentations that we give at couples’ retreats for parishes and dioceses. You can read this book with other couples and support each other as you grow in your marriages. Or you can read it together with your spouse as a private spiritual retreat at home.

We want to stress that while it is best if you and your spouse read these chapters together, it is not necessary. If you read this book on your own, know that any improvement in attitude that one of you makes is bound to invite the other to respond in kind. Just as a negative interaction elicits a negative response, a positive one invites a positive response.

We suggest that you read a chapter at a time, and then for a few days pray and reflect on what you read, and practice what you learned. Let God’s grace prepare your heart while you give

the message of each chapter time to sink in, ferment, and make a difference in your life. Let it affect the behaviors and rituals through which you interact with your spouse and with your children. Create new habits—positive habits. Most of all, during this time, remember that Jesus is with you in your canoe. Pray for your marriage and for your spouse, and practice your faith. Scientists at the National Marriage Project⁶ are finding that the practice of one’s faith and the involvement in one’s community are two important predictors of marital success.

As you read and reflect on the chapters of this book, make a commitment to attend Sunday Mass together regularly. When you participate in the Mass you bring your marriage to the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are present on the altar and in the assembly. In the Eucharist you encounter Jesus; you hear his word, eat his Body, and receive from him the graces you need to let love grow in your relationship. Pope Francis told his audience on December 13, 2017⁷ that it is at Mass that we find our strength. He added that without the gift of the Eucharist we “are condemned to be dominated by the fatigue of everyday life.” This fatigue is what causes our marriage canoe to drift and go off course. The Eucharist can help you stay on track.

In addition, consider attending the social activities of your parish and meeting other couples; and if your time permits, volunteer to serve. Making friends with people who have similar values can be of great support to your marriage. Marriages do not grow in isolation.

We hope that through your prayers and through this book, you become more aware of Christ’s presence in your life and you are able to keep your canoe on the right course. Let God write your story. As you do, you will become an icon of God’s love, and

you and your spouse will experience in your relationship the joy of love. This is God's dream for you.⁸

*“Christian spouses can make their marriage
a journey to holiness.” ■ BENEDICT XVI OCTOBER 27, 2010*

PRAYER

It was because of Mary's intervention that, at the wedding at Cana, Jesus changed six jars of water into exquisite wine and helped a newly married couple avoid a terrible embarrassment. Mary and Jesus are great companions to have in your marriage. Through Mary you can ask Jesus to guide you and give you the graces you need as you progress on your journey.

At the end of each chapter we will ask you to pray the Hail Mary, the Memorare, which is a centuries-old Catholic prayer, and the Glory Be.

Hail Mary

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you;
blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners
now and at the hour of our death,
Amen.*

Memorare

*Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to your protection,
implored your help or sought your intercession
was left unaided.*

*Inspired by this confidence,
we fly unto you, O Virgin of Virgins our mother;
to you do we come, before you we stand,
sinful and sorrowful;
O Mother of the Word Incarnate,
despise not our petitions,
but in your mercy hear and answer us.
Amen.*

Glory Be

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
world without end.
Amen.*

PERSONAL/COUPLE REFLECTION

1. How is your marriage voyage progressing? Is your canoe moving in the right direction or is it drifting off course?
2. What are some of the currents that are pulling your canoe off course?

3. Pope Francis writes that hope is the source of strength in marriage. What are your hopes and dreams for your life?
4. What is your purpose as a couple—what gives meaning to your marriage?
5. Looking back, what led you to take this voyage together?
6. How do you practice your faith? What role does faith play in your marriage?

GROUP SHARING

1. Based on your experience of marriage, is the metaphor of the canoe appropriate? Why?
2. What are the currents today that steer marriages away from their intended destination?
3. In your opinion, what is the destination?
4. Why is meaning important in life?
5. What are some of the red flags that tell couples they are going off course?
6. Do you agree that faith practice and community involvement are important? Why or why not?