



EXCERPT



True Companions

A Book for Everyone About the Relationships That See Us Through

February 9, 2021 | \$24, 240 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4768-6

More than a marriage book, this is a companionship book. Anyone—from single young adults to elderly married couples, from the divorced to the widowed, from siblings to friends—can benefit from the wisdom it uncovers about what it means to be human and to be true companions.

Perfectly Loved, Or Loved As If I Am Perfect?

It was a doozy of a fight.

Less like a lovers' quarrel than an American Civil War battle, the kind where you declare a ceasefire at sundown, go back to your tents for the night, and resume in the morning after breakfast. The kind of fight that can last for a week, or weeks. It all started when my wife pointed out that I was checking out. Around bedtime—when the kids most long for a father to come to them and see them and send them into their sleep—I was scrolling through my phone. Checking email. Returning texts. Catching up on news. Getting lost down YouTube rabbit holes. Basically, she told me I was digitally abandoning my family.

What I heard her say, though, was that I wasn't doing enough.

So, I made a list of everything I had done for the family that week, from going to work so we can pay the mortgage to making sure the kids brushed their teeth so we don't have to pay the dentist. Nothing was too big or too small to include on the list. Then, I went to my computer and I typed it out. I actually did that. With differently sized fonts, some items bolded, some italicized, like I was preparing a proposal to a board of directors. After the kids were all in bed, I handed her the list.

Cue Gettysburg.

For about a week, I used my words like bayonets and her eyes were muskets. Neither one of us was willing to retreat. She insisted bedtime books were not too much to ask from a father who had just published a book called *Loveable*, and I refused to hear it as anything but unfair criticism. Eventually, one morning, we went on a long walk so we could battle in front of our neighbors rather than our kids and we reached a truce. Once all the treaties were signed, I was eventually able to identify the culprit behind the whole conflict.

Unconditional love.

I know it might sound crazy at first, but unconditional love is at the root of a lot of marital misery. Our fight had started because my wife had not loved me unconditionally. She showed there were limitations to what she would put up with, things I do she'd like to see stop, and things I don't do she'd like to see begin. Expectations for how I will act and live and love. Conditions, if you will, for her approval. I had called her out on her conditionality, and she had called me out on defending myself with high-minded ideas arising less from my desire to be perfectly loved than from my desire to be loved as if I am perfect.

Sometimes, I'll fight a whole war before admitting she is right.



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Of course, aspiring to unconditional love is a noble thing. I want you to know I'm not trying to undo anything you've been taught in church or anywhere else about unconditional love. I firmly believe unconditional love is that from which we came and that to which we will return. What I'm suggesting is, noble things in human hands can quickly become not-so-noble. What I'm suggesting is, if you're like me and the rest of us human beings, then perhaps, maybe, possibly, you undo what you are taught about unconditional love, while you are being taught it.

For instance, when your pastor or priest or whoever has the pulpit in your life begins talking about unconditional love, you probably begin tweaking the ideas for your benefit rather than your transformation. Unconditional love in human hands has consequences. As my wife pointed out, we hide our failures, flaws, and foibles behind it, demanding to be loved unconditionally under conditions no one should be expected to tolerate, let alone love. Or, in the name of loving someone unconditionally, we forgive and forget things that should be confronted and condemned. Or, we circumvent conflict and cut corners on the hardest parts of cultivating companionship because conflict scares us and corners cost us, and then we call those shortcuts unconditional love. We tell ourselves, even though we are distant and mostly removed from the hard work of relationship, at least we aren't judging and demanding, at least we are accepting and approving, at least we are loving unconditionally. You see, the thing about unconditional love—the thing that makes it something less than the cure-all we often want it to be—is that it can happen from very, very far away.

From somewhere up in the heavens even.

Yet, not even God acted as if that kind of love was good enough for true relationship. Even God decided unconditional love lacked something a little more proximal, something like skin, something like a body and heartbeat and a pulse, something like a voice to bless with and a voice to berate with, something like arms for embracing each other and fingers for pointing at each other. Even God knew he had to come closer to us than unconditional love would demand of him. So, on a silent night in a little town called Bethlehem, he did. In a manger, love came close.

As you read this, you may feel comfortable with all this talk about God and these thinly-veiled references to Jesus, or this Christian language may rub you entirely the wrong way. I want you to know, either way, I love you unconditionally. Do you see what I did there? Do you see how easy we clever mortals can make this thing called unconditional love? Sometimes, instead of going all-in on real, gutsy and gritty relationship, we use unconditional love as a cop out. The truth is, we all need something more engaged than unconditional love. Something closer.

I was staring at a half-dozen dirty socks with [my wife] Kelly when I glimpsed it.

Strewn amongst the odorous pre-teen socks were a basket of clean clothes that had been toppled and tossed across the room, a LEGO creation that had been built and demolished and spread underfoot, books scattered like the aftermath of a library bombing, and a mad mishmash of other odds and ends. I was standing in the doorway of my son Quinn's bedroom with Kelly, who had called me to the scene. She said, with an equal mixture of wonder and anger, that she had ordered him to clean up this carnage, and he had implied to her the mission was accomplished. I stood there with her, surveying the spectacle, not understanding her purpose in calling me to her.



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I asked her if she wanted help cleaning it up. No, she said, that's his job. Did she want me to give him consequences for ignoring her and—kinda sorta—lying to her? No, she said, she had started this and she could finish it.

So, we stood in silence and stared at it.

I began to notice other debris I had overlooked upon first glance. Empty candy wrappers. A glass full of something rancid. A desiccated apple core. The home phone, which had gone missing a few days before. After a few more moments of silence, I finally asked the question, "Why did you want me here?" Without taking her eyes off the mess, she put her arm around me and responded, simply, "I just wanted you to witness it with me."

I thought back several months to our Gettysburg week. I thought about how I fired the first salvos in that battle because I wanted her to love me unconditionally from the other room, while she wanted me to love my family up close. It made me recall something I'd been reading about and sharing with her. In English, we have only one word for love, but in the Greek language there are four words for love: *agape*, *eros*, *storge*, and *phileo*.

Phileo takes up residence somewhere between *storge* and *agape*, and if there were an English word for it that word would be . . . companionship. It is about deep affection and fondness for the other. Yes, it is about loving, but it's just as much about liking. Unlike *storge*, which happens spontaneously, *phileo* happens intentionally. A lot of hard work goes into truly liking someone who is totally different than you. *Phileo* is about giving and receiving, about mutual sacrifice. It is about real-world love. It's about doing life together and weaving our lives together. It's about true up close kinship, the kind you have to fight for. It's about true companionship, the kind you can cultivate for a lifetime.

--Adapted from the introduction, "What You Need to Know About this Book and About Unconditional Love"



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Q & A



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Kelly Flanagan is a licensed clinical psychologist and is the cofounder and president of Artisan Clinical Associates, a private practice in Naperville, Illinois, offering services to teens, adults, couples, and families. The author of *The Marriage Manifesto* and *Loveable*, he has also written for publications such as *Christianity Today*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Huffington Post*. Flanagan is a popular blogger and podcaster, and speaks regularly on topics related to marriage, parenting, and spiritual formation. He lives in Dixon, Illinois, with his wife, Kelly, and their three children.

The Labor of Love

What is your elevator pitch for this book?

Kelly Flanagan: This book is about where the search for unconditional love ends, the possibility of true companionship begins.

This idea is distinctive because the false assumption undermining so many lifelong relationships is the belief that unconditional love is a prerequisite for, or synonymous with, true companionship. To suggest that the opposite is true is immediately provocative—bothersome to some, or with a hint of truth and promise and freedom for others. Either way, it elicits the same response: tell me more.

Yes, please tell us more. What is true companionship built on?

Kelly: True companionship is built on seven different conditions. Those seven conditions are:

1. We plan to walk together through everything.
2. We'll figure it out as we go.
3. We can't take away each other's loneliness, but we can share our loneliness with one another.
4. We are committed to trading protection for connection.
5. We will live and love in light of our fragility.
6. We will hold each other accountable for ruthless mutuality in all of this.
7. Along the way, we will discover a love that is not higher than unconditional love, but a better fit for human skin.

Would you share a little bit about your hopes for this book?

Kelly: I hope this book will make readers think and feel, and I hope it will show them the way to grow old together. True companionship isn't about becoming more happy, it's about becoming more human. I also hope readers will find out why the key to a great marriage has nothing to do with getting better at the skills of marriage. It has everything to do with getting clearer about the fundamentals of companionship.



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