

How to Stay Married & Love It Even More!

Completing the Puzzle of a SoulMate Marriage

Introduction

**“Love is what matters.
When all is said and done, love is what we remember.
On your deathbed you won’t say ‘I wish I’d made more money,
I wish I had worked more.’
You will grieve the lost opportunities for love, and celebrate the ones you had.”
Pat Love¹**

When I start a jigsaw puzzle, I like to get the four corners and the frame in place first. It defines the field, so to speak—letting me see the parameters within which the rest of the pieces will fit. In How to Stay Married & Love It! (from now on referred to as Book #1) we “framed” the puzzle of a SoulMate marriage by defining the four most essential elements. Those elements establish the dimensions and foundation for a SoulMate marriage.

When I was eleven years old, my parents decided to build a new house. Up until then, the only home I had known was about 1200 square feet of squeaky hardwood floors, real plaster walls, wood framed windows and a little front porch. My two older sisters shared a small room. My younger sister and I shared a double bed in an even *smaller* room. All four of us shared a miniscule bathroom, the site of many squabbles.

The location of the new house was only about a mile away, so we visited the building site often. The first few weeks went by with very little observable progress. A tractor moved some dirt around. Sticks with red ribbons tied to them seemed to be randomly distributed over the area. Trenches were dug, big pipes laid and more pipes added. Some wires were strung about and hung from poles. It didn’t look anything like a house to me. I wondered how the workmen knew what to do. It was a *huge puzzle*.

After several weeks of what appeared to be little change, I heard the excitement in my mother’s voice when she said, “They’re pouring concrete today!” I knew that meant a foundation. Maybe *now* it would start to look more like a house.

After the concrete hardened, we walked over the foundation as my mom described where the various rooms would be. I was afraid she’d made a big mistake. It looked so small. If we weren’t going to have more room, why couldn’t we stay in the old house that I loved? It was familiar. I was dreading the move. Mr. Dorming, the

¹ Love, Pat, Ed.D., 2001. *The Truth About Love*, p.243. New York: Fireside.

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

Swedish master-builder, assured me that the new house was considerably bigger than our current abode. Darn.

From that point on everything happened fast. It seemed that it became a real house overnight. The walls were framed in a blink. I could walk down a hallway, enter rooms and see where the long bathroom counter would go with two sinks and a huge mirror for my sisters and I. It was such a *long* walk from the back bedroom to the family room—how did the space become so big? The transformation felt like magic.

Since then I've explored many homes under construction. I've learned that the foundation *alone* appears deceptively small. Once the walls are framed, defining the various living areas, the true space of the house can be more accurately assessed.

When Jim and I were laying the foundation of our SoulMate marriage it seemed to take forever. It was tedious work. Progress was measured in inches. It was like a chaotic building site with trenches, pipes and wires randomly scattered about. The tools were unfamiliar and felt awkward to use. We knew that we *didn't* want to live in the old angry marriage anymore, but we had only a vague concept of what we were trying to build. The amount of work was daunting.

In addition, the dimensions of the foundation felt too small. The confines of *respectful* communication sometimes made me feel claustrophobic. Our agreement specifically barred sarcasm, yelling, attacking "you" statements and bringing up old business. Leaving in a huff, slamming doors, withdrawing in martyred silence and self-righteous accusations didn't fit within the parameters, either. Jim and I some times longed for the days when we said whatever we wanted to say without going through an internal check to see if the words and tone of voice conformed to our chosen limits.

It was only after our relationship continued to improve and expand that we began to appreciate what a magnificent foundation we had. A lovely, spacious marriage-home was gradually taking shape. My parents had Mr. Dorming to insure that all the important pieces fit and the foundation perfectly matched the plans. We believe there was a *Master Builder* at work in our marriage. Although we hadn't known *what* we needed or *how* to read the blueprints, all the essential pieces of the foundation for a great marriage were in place. In review, they are:

- One: A SoulMate Point of View—Accept that you and your partner both have a legitimate points of view.**
- Two: SoulMate Communication—Communicate in ways that facilitate hearing each other creating greater intimacy and resolution of issues.**
- Three: SoulMate Respect—Always treat each other with respect and use anger to create deeper intimacy.**
- Four: SoulMate Commitment—Commit to this partner, this marriage, for life.**

If you haven't read [How to Stay Married & Love It!](#) I urge you to put *this* book down and read *that* one first. The skills taught in Book #1 are foundational to the skills

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

proposed in “Even More.” The puzzle of a SoulMate marriage needs a clearly defined frame before the rest can be successfully completed.

As we learned to stay within the parameters of our marriage-foundation, we felt safe and secure. Our depleted energy resources were gradually restored. We gained confidence that we could live at peace and even joyfully with each other “‘til death do us part.” The remaining six pieces began falling into place to complete the multi-dimensional puzzle of a SoulMate marriage. Those are the qualities described in *How to Stay Married & Love It Even More! Completing the Puzzle of a SoulMate Marriage*.

Unlike cardboard puzzles, your marriage is a multi-dimensional puzzle—a living, breathing, changing organism. Every exchange—each separate act—influences the relationship in a negative or a positive way. A SoulMate marriage-house is built piece by piece, day by day, as the skills that express each of these ten qualities are practiced in relationship with your spouse.

Although not a physical house, this marriage structure provides shelter impossible for wood or stone to give. By putting into practice the skills recommended in Book #1 you’ve been framing the puzzle—building from scratch or shoring up your marriage foundation. We invite you to continue this exciting process. Add the next six pieces to *complete* the puzzle of a SoulMate marriage. As you do, your marriage becomes a shelter safely housing a place of intimate belonging and romantic loving for you and your spouse for life!

This volume begins with a concept that we took for granted in “How to #1,” yet perhaps that was a mistake. The concept of choosing and living by our priorities is foundational to a SoulMate relationship! Read on...

“It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”

Irish Proverb

“There are three things to wonderful for me to understand—no, four!

How an eagle glides through the sky.

How a serpent crawls upon a rock.

How a ship finds its way across the heaving ocean.

The growth of love between a man and a woman.”

Proverbs 30:18, 19²

² Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotes are from The Living Bible by Tyndale House, available in most bookstores.

Puzzle Piece #5: Put First Things First!

Chapter 1 Put First Things First



“Marriage creates a situation in which our desire to be served and coddled can be replaced with a more noble desire to serve others.”³

Tad and Liz⁴ had been working hard on their relationship and were making great progress. Then Tad told her about his deep desire to participate in a dangerous recreational activity. She was stunned. His participation in this activity would affect her life in ways she absolutely did not want! They were at a standoff. He agreed, reluctantly, to postpone any action until the issue was satisfactorily resolved between the two of them, but I could see the direction this was going. They were each

³ Thomas, Gary, (2000). Sacred Marriage, p. 186. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ Fictitious names.

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

marshalling their arguments for their respective positions. They were preparing for an appointment where I would hear each side and, like the judge on a television courtroom drama, decide which argument had the most merit. It was a no-win situation for all of us. One of them would “win” the battle but lose some ground in the building of a SoulMate relationship, the other one would “lose” and have ammunition for long-term resentment, and I . . . well I *knew* I would not place myself in the position of “judge.”

While running errands I was thinking about the appointment I had with them later that day and wondering how to approach this issue so that everyone would win . . . a seeming impossibility, until I remembered how Lady, our beloved boxer dog, came into our lives.

The boys and I were camping in the mountains of Northern California with extended family. We went to the nearby town one afternoon to do laundry. Peter, age 4, with his brother and cousins, wandered down the sidewalk to visit the pet shop. While waiting for the wash cycle to finish, I saw Peter weaving his way through the corridor between washers and dryers, dodging laundry baskets and women folding underwear. He had a little puppy pressed against his chest and a big wet spot on his shirt. His eyes were huge and pleading. “Mommy, can we take this puppy home?”

My heart sank. I didn’t like dogs. When I was seven years old I got caught in the middle of a dogfight. My arm got in the way of snapping jaws. I still had the scars. After my husband died, I’d tried two different times to provide my boys with a dog—both times were disasters. I didn’t want to try again. It was hard, however, to just say “No” to the longing in my son’s eyes, so I gave him an answer that I thought was safe. “Peter, if you really want a dog, you will have to ask God to change my heart because right now, I don’t want a dog, so my answer is no.”

I knew my child. If he pestered about something constantly, it was relatively unimportant—a fleeting desire in his little heart. If he brought up a subject once in a great while, it was something that resided deeper within—something much more important to him. Every 4 to 6 months he would quietly approach me and ask, “Mommy, can we get a dog?” Each time I repeated my answer that I didn’t like dogs, didn’t want to take care of a dog, didn’t want to get stuck with training, or cleaning up, or feeding a dog. I’d always soften the blow by adding, “If you really want a dog, you’ll have to ask God to change my heart.” Three years went by. Peter refined his dream. On the rare occasions when he would mention the subject, I heard that he now wanted a large dog with many colors and spots because dogs of only one color were “boring.”

For reasons unimportant to this story, I decided to fence the back half of our quarter-acre lot. The morning after the chain link had been installed, I looked at the enclosed backyard. I was startled when this thought popped, unbidden, into my mind, “What a perfect place for a large dog!” Oh, no! I *couldn’t* think that! I *don’t* want a dog! I shrugged it off. Nevertheless, a

strange thing began to happen. I spontaneously began to wake up at 5:30 a.m. every day *longing* for a dog! I'd lay in bed telling myself I was crazy and reciting all the reasons why I *didn't* want a dog! After 2 weeks of this aggravating routine, I took the boys to a pet shop to buy an aquarium and some gold fish in hopes that the acquisition would quell my dog impulses. While they were choosing fish, two fawn-colored boxer puppies reached out and grabbed my heart. I stifled my reaction so the boys wouldn't see. I paid for the fish and we left, but I couldn't exorcise those puppies from my mind. Even though they were monochromatic in color and had no spots, I *really wanted* one of those boxer puppies.

Finally I thought, "O.K. I give up. If one of those puppies is still there one week from today, I'll go back and get it," but after only three days, I couldn't wait any longer! While the boys were at school I drove to the pet shop. They were both gone! Both had been sold! I was heart-broken. I got in the car and, to my embarrassment, nearly cried. Part of me was *incredulously* watching this drama . . . what was *happening* to me? Didn't I know that as soon as we got a puppy home and it had an "accident" on the carpet or chewed up my favorite flowers I'd regret it? Even so, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

I went straight home from the pet store and opened the Yellow Pages. I found a boxer breeder who had puppies that were ready to be weaned. One of the puppies had poor conformation for a show dog so the breeder was willing to sell her as a pet. Although I wondered about the (assumed) "boring" color and no spots, the force that was behind this compulsion seemed to have honed in on boxers, so I went with it.

A nice lady opened the door to my knock. I barely greeted her before my attention was riveted on a puppy sitting quietly in the hallway behind her. I heard the breeder say that this was the one that was for sale. As I remember it, there were several other puppies in the room, but my internal radar zeroed in on only this one. As I approached her, I realized that she had *multi-colored* striated bands of fawn, brown, rust, chestnut, chocolate, and black—with a white belly, chest and collar around her neck. I had never heard of or noticed what the breeder called "brindle" coloring! By this time the puppy was in my arms, licking my face as though she had been waiting *forever*, and I had *finally* arrived. When I noticed a large *spot* of brindle color in the center of the white on the back of her neck, there was no question about it—*this* was the dog that Peter had dreamed and prayed into my heart! I adored her!

Tad and Liz made themselves comfortable in my office. Tad initiated discussion of "the issue." I interrupted him and asked permission to relay a story that had come to mind as I was thinking about their dilemma. They both agreed, so I told them the story of how Lady became a beloved member of our family. As I finished, I asked him if he would be willing to trust that either Liz would change her mind or his desire for the

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

dangerous activity would disappear so that they could experience a win-win whichever way it went? To my surprise, he immediately said, “Yes. I can do that!”

Liz sat there stupefied. She’d come armed for battle. She said, “How’d you do that? I thought Tad would list his reasons for doing this and I’d list my reasons for not doing it . . . (just as I suspected) and I didn’t know what would happen next! You just bypassed the whole argument!” This was one of those times when I know I am not alone in the counselor’s chair. Either way, they both win!

My father and two of his brothers were partners in a vegetable-growing business for more than 40 years. In all that time they never fought. At the outset of their partnership they had agreed that all decisions would be unanimous. If one of them hesitated about a particular opportunity, all three of them would shelve it. Sometimes the reluctant one would change his mind in the coming weeks or months, and then, because they were now unanimous, they’d move forward. Other times the two who had been gung-ho in the beginning, were later grateful that the third one had applied the brakes. The priorities of their relationships and the unity of their partnership were higher than any particular business decision. With this agreement, they may have missed a few good opportunities through the years, and they probably missed some disasters, as well, but for as long as they lived, they were good friends and trusted allies for each other.

When building and maintaining a great marriage is a high priority, other things find their proper place in your life. When the marriage is not a high priority, other things, even minor things, constantly whittle away at it.

For instance, issues about driving with a spouse are frequently brought up in our classes. Recently one young husband said that he often feels nagged about how he’s driving. In his mind, his wife should only need to hear, “I’m sure I’m safely in control of the car” in order to be reassured and let the issue rest. His reassurance doesn’t still her anxiety, however. He felt defensive and “right.” She felt resentful and “right.” I asked him what his reason was for driving fast. He answered that he believes in being on time—that it is an act of respect for whomever he is meeting. He already knew and usually practiced the typical time management tips such as: work backwards from the appointment time, subtract the time the journey may require, then note the time to leave home, and so on. Sometimes, however, life happens and for whatever reason, he’d find himself short on time.

I said, “*Everyone* knows the car feels safer in the driver’s seat than in the passenger seat! It’s much harder to be on the side without a steering wheel or brake!” The class laughed in agreement. I asked, “What would your behavior be if you valued the respect and comfort of your wife more than the respect of the person with whom you have the appointment?” He instantly knew that he would slow down in honor of reducing her anxiety.

Jim and I used to have “driving” issues. We settled them forever the day we agreed that whoever is in the passenger seat rules. If he’s driving and I need more

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

space between our car and the car we're following, all I have to do is ask, "Would you leave more space?" and it's done immediately. If I'm driving and he's uncomfortable with the speed, he quietly says so and I immediately slow down. It's a matter of maintaining our *priority* of mutual respect.

In addition to pleasing him, graciously cooperating with Jim's request is a smart thing to do for myself—then *he* will be happy to give me the driving conditions *I* want when *I'm* in the passenger seat!

Every decision we make is based on our priorities. Priorities are not demonstrated by what we say, but by how we act—spend our time, energy, and money. I believe most of us would *say* that good health is a high priority, but, according to the national statistics, many of us suffer health conditions that are the result of poor eating, inadequate exercise, and careless life-style choices. Our *behaviors* expose our *real* priorities.

Every person I've ever asked has *said* that he or she wants a SoulMate relationship. Many of those same persons, however, continue to *choose* excessive working hours, say "yes" to many optional responsibilities, spend hours in front of the television, or persist in using communication tools that he or she *knows* are destructive. When the marriage gets only the leftovers of time, effort, or energy, its low priority is revealed.

On the first week of a recent workshop, one husband, after looking over the homework, said with an expression of surprise on his face, "It looks like this is going to take some time!" Yes! It requires time to take the car in for gas, washing, and regular servicing. It requires time to clean the house, or maintain a good relationship with business clients, or nurture a lovely yard, or invest in exercising for good health. Why should we expect a relationship as complex as marriage to flourish without the regular, scheduled attention we expect to give a car?

In our society there is monumental competition for our attention. The entire advertising industry tries to convince us that it is a high priority to purchase this product, buy that gizmo, or have a certain experience. Lately I've been thinking how very hard it is to keep my life simple. I think we must face at least 100 times more choices per day than the average person a century ago. Just walking into a grocery store brings me face to face with thousands of choices that I would not have had until recent years. I can't buy tires for the car, a new television set, or even a dress, without looking at the options and going through a process of elimination. Because of publications like "Consumers Digest," I tend to feel irresponsible and guilty if I buy something without researching all the pros and cons.

The complexities of contemporary life require that we work harder at consciously identifying and living according to our true priorities. Without *conscious* choices, various media, the pace of those around us, or the demands of a boss, a friend, or a family member, will use up our available energy on things that may not, ultimately, give us what we really desire.

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

After my father died, Mom instituted a practice that demonstrated something that was a very high priority for her—frequent contact with her family. She announced that she would be at a particular fast food restaurant each Wednesday at noon. Every member of the family who joined her at that time and place would have his or her lunch purchased by my mother (with her senior-citizen discount!). She insisted on being there even on days when she could barely walk or wasn't very hungry. For many years, her energy and money were spent on this priority. The group varied from 3 or 4 up to 20 persons, week after week.

Before they left our class last night, one couple registered for Workshop II. As they walked out the door they told us they hoped that, by the time they finished Workshop II next month, we'd have a III, and then a IV! They have been enjoying the evening set aside for the primary purpose of investing in their relationship. It's easier to maintain that priority when they've written out a check and are expected to show up each class night with their homework completed! I suggested that, perhaps, by the end of Workshop II, they might choose to maintain the habit of one evening a week devoted to their marriage. It will take conscious effort to keep that priority when there are so many other options vying for their attention.

Our priorities are enormously influenced by our beliefs.⁵ One client's husband works until 9 or 10 o'clock two or three nights per week, and often on Saturday afternoon. It is this man's belief that he puts in long hours to provide adequately for his family, but his paycheck would be the same if he were home every evening at 5:30 p.m. and spent the entire weekend with his family. I suspect that he unconsciously adopted his father's pattern of long work hours and low family involvement without ever examining the beliefs driving the behavior. This genuinely loving husband and father may have the belief that a man is responsible only if he works long hours. It is a high priority for him to be a responsible man, so he works long hours. He justifies it by saying that it's out of love for his family, but I have yet to hear of a family who, when the husband and father died, complained that he spent too much time with them. In order to choose behaviors that would be more supportive of a priority to meet his family's emotional needs, he may need to examine his belief about what defines a responsible man.

Tim and Sally⁶ were engaged. Besides preparing for a lovely wedding, they decided to take our workshop as preparation for their marriage. When some troubling issues arose, they asked to see me privately. Sally had some communication habits that were very disturbing to Tim. He was not confident about following through with the wedding if Sally persisted in these behaviors. Sally mirrored Tim's feelings about this issue while I coached. When he felt heard, it was Sally's turn to speak. After apologizing for his hurt, and assuring him that she would diligently work on improving her behavior, she brought up a need of hers that had been consistently ignored by Tim. He heard her, but was becoming defensive. It eventually came to light that he believed his behavior

⁵ See Chapter 26, "The SoulMate Train."

⁶ Fictitious names.

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

(that prevented the meeting of her need) was just who he was—so he *couldn't* change to accommodate her, while her behavior was something she was *capable* of changing. You may be smiling, but Tim's belief is shared by many. It stems from a misperception of behaviors as the essence of *who we are* rather than *habits* that may need to be adjusted.

If my partner asks me to do something that is violating my sense of integrity, my morals, or is unsafe, my responsibility is to protect my alignment with my inner values and personal safety. If my partner has needs or desires that can be met if I am willing to move outside my comfort zone, however, then the priority of a SoulMate relationship requires that I move outside my comfort zone!

I adopted many behavior patterns that originally served a valid purpose, but are not necessary to the genuine expression of who I am. Many of those behavior patterns became masks that prevented authentic expression of myself. As I have already mentioned, I used to be painfully shy. It served a good purpose at one time, but eventually became a barricade between me and the warm, friendly person I wanted to be. I have changed many of the behaviors, forcing myself outside my comfort zone (shyness) by initiating conversations and learning to ask questions. I changed the belief⁷ behind the shy behaviors by choosing to believe that I am basically safe in the world, and will intuitively know if I need to protect myself. I made those changes in behavior and belief because I consciously chose a different priority—one of being more available to life and loving rather than the priority of hiding to keep myself safe.

One of the peripheral benefits of making the journey toward a SoulMate relationship a high priority is that this path will faithfully and mercifully remove many of the "false faces" that hinder our experience of loving and being loved. Jim proved that a SoulMate relationship with me was a very high priority for him when he consented to see a counselor, refrained from hopeless talk, agreed to new family rules, and learned how to be more emotionally available to me—all behaviors that were initially very uncomfortable for him. I proved that a SoulMate relationship with him was a very high priority for me when I chose to vent anger safely, gave up the use of sarcasm, surrendered my role as Jimmy's mother, and learned to stop myself from giving unwanted advice—behaviors that were very difficult for me to change.

And it's not over—this proving of our priorities. Every time he graciously extends the distance between our car and the one in front at my request; every time he requests a mirroring session when he has an issue; every time he checks with me before making plans; every time he expresses his love by opening a door for me, or writing a love note, or stopping on his way out the door to hug and kiss me; he's proving, again, that a SoulMate relationship with me is still a very high priority for him. Every time I tell him how much I appreciate all the energy he devotes to supporting us; every time I praise his valuable contributions to the success of our workshops; every time I surrender to the slow seduction of his love-making; every time I tell him the truth about what I feel

⁷ As described in Chapter 25, "The SoulMate Train."

How to Stay Married & Love It EVENMORE! by Nancy Landrum

or need, I'm proving, again, that a SoulMate relationship with him is still a very high priority to me.

Are you willing to consciously examine and evaluate your priorities? Are you willing to look at your behaviors rather than trust your words about what is important to you? Are you courageous enough to ask your spouse and children what they see as your priorities? Will you look at the condition of your marriage, or the behavior of your children, and ask if they may be a reflection of your priorities?

Puzzle Piece #5: SoulMate love thrives when SoulMates put first things first!

Every day I re-evaluate my choices and make course corrections so my behaviors demonstrate my priority of a SoulMate marriage.

***“We make a living by what we get,
but we make a life by what we give.”⁸***

*“One who doesn't give the gift (love) he promised
is like a cloud blowing over a desert without dropping rain.”
Proverbs 25:14*

⁸ This quote is attributed to several different people (Winston Churchill, Norman Kennedy, MacEwan, and George Elliot to name a few). It's a great quote, but I don't know who said it first!