

The Five-Year Marriage

Secrets, Tools, and Strategies
for *Reimagining Marriage*
So It Works for You

2ND EDITION

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Introduction

Love doesn't just sit there, like a stone,
it has to be made, like bread;
remade all the time, made new.

- Ursula K. Le Guin

For the rest of my life?

Until death do us part?

Those very words kept me from making a marriage commitment. Why?

For years I watched couples take those vows with good intentions and high hopes. Yet, for too many of them, reality turned the “rest of my life” promises into a prison sentence and their “till death” commitment manifested in the crushing of their spirit and the demise of their love. It was sad—and scary.

Then someone, someone I loved, wanted me to say those words and make those promises.

How could I do that? What was I thinking?

I wasn't some teenage kid with stars in her eyes who was looking for the stuff of romance novels. I was a woman who had worked hard to become independent. I had a decent job, owned a house, and I liked my freedom. While I wanted “someone special” in my life, I didn't want it at the expense of my individuality. I also didn't

want some open-ended marital agreement with “death” as the end-date.

Do you know what I mean?

Okay, maybe you aren't *just like me*, a “good girl” Catholic with an Italian heritage who grew up in the suburbs of a major city. Instead, you could be a woman who has seen her share of fatherless families with single mothers struggling to support their families alone. Or, you grew up watching one parent dominate the other, and you want no part of *that* kind of marriage. On the other hand, you might be part of the LGBTQ community, and though same-sex marriage is legal in many states, you don't want to do your marriage like everyone else.

No matter what place you're coming from, if you are thinking about marriage, you're looking for some new and improved way to fulfil your marriage commitment. You want to have a marriage that doesn't require losing yourself in the process.

You want to know if there is “something better” for you.

Yes, there is. It's the Five-Year Marriage®!

It's new, it's different, and now it's here for you to discover for yourself. The Five-Year Marriage® is a marital commitment that does three things:

- Defines how you choose to live your marriage *just* for five years.
- Allows partners to periodically reshuffle the deck in response to change.
- Empowers partners so that each Five-Year Marriage® begins with a strong foundation.

The details for creating your Five-Year Marriage®,

as I developed them over thirty years, are in this book, including:

- Choosing your Five-Year Marriage® partner.
- How to get started (The Beginnings).
- What to negotiate (The Nitty Gritty).
- Living your Five-Year Marriage®.
- How children are part of the Five-Year Marriage®.

In these pages, I also show you how to use those details so you can put together your own Five-Year Marriage® contract using a simple form (also included). Along the way I share some of my own Five-Year Marriage® experiences, and so does my spouse, Joseph Eagle.

Before you get to all those specifics, first I want you to know how the Five-Year Marriage® came about. You might even recognize yourself in some of my story. You see, my ideas about marriage evolved over time.

It was never because I hated marriage. In fact, when I was younger, I *really* wanted to get married. My parents, my friends, and society said it was the right thing to do. When I was a senior in high school, one of the class assignments was to make a “marriage book,” which was, I guess, a Catholic version of the visualization collage we now refer to as a “vision book.”

In my teens and early twenties, marriage was definitely on the agenda. In fact, I felt as though getting married and having children was my only important goal.

However, years after making that teenage marriage book, I was still single. I wondered if I’d ever meet a guy I wanted to marry, or one who wanted to marry me.

During those years when I was shifting between dating and being single, I started to notice things about marriage. I began to think that “until death do us part” might not be such a good deal for a woman.

Then I met Joseph. He wanted to get married. He asked. I ignored the question. He was persistent. So was I.

That’s when I had the idea for the Five-Year Marriage®. But it wasn’t something we made public. As far as anyone knew, Joseph and I were going to have a traditional marriage.

I remember announcing my engagement. Some people audibly cheered while others breathed a sigh of relief. My mother did both—loudly. She felt that, *finally*, her daughter would no longer be a *puttana* (Italian whore) living in sin, and once I married, she would know what to call Joseph. For some reason, that was a big dilemma for my mother.

Not everyone felt the same. I can still see the grimaces and the pained faces people made when I announced my engagement. Some of the people weren’t even close to me or people who knew me well. They were co-workers, colleagues, and acquaintances. It wasn’t because they thought I was making a wrong choice. Most of them barely knew Joseph.

The apprehension didn’t seem to be about me or Joseph. Rather, it seemed to be about marriage. Many of those people were divorced or living in unhappy marriages. Many sincerely believed that marriage would ruin my happiness.

Even a psychic weighed in with dire warnings about the impending nuptials.

Already feeling apprehensive, what I saw in their faces and heard in their voices frightened me. I quickly

understood that more people than I ever realized endured unhappy marriages and living-together-loneliness. Some of those relationships had already ended in divorce, but too many of them hadn't.

All that negativity had me reflecting on the relationships of friends. When I thought about them, I could remember when my girlfriends first met their spouses-to-be. I would get a kick out of those delicious Sunday night calls during which a girlfriend would share the secrets of her Saturday date. Or at work on Monday morning, I'd hear those stories in the teacher's lounge or at the coffee machine. It was fun to see the excited, radiant looks of love on my colleagues' faces.

Living vicariously through their new-love escapades, I often yearned for the same thing. Yes, I wanted someone to love me like they were loved. I was disappointed that it wasn't happening for me. So, when they talked about this or that, *their* stories gave *me* hope that someday it would be me telling those stories.

I'd listen with interest and sometimes even excitement to those bubbling stories of young love from first dates through the engagement. It sounded like so much fun to do tastings with caterers, listen to bands or DJs, try on wedding gowns, and fuss over bridal colors.

I especially loved it when I was part of the wedding party (thirteen times!). I loved being included in the bridal showers, girls' nights out, luncheons and other fun parties. Each time I was honored to be asked, and I cherished my role in many beautiful weddings, even when I had to buy that (usually) ugly and (always) expensive dress that I knew I'd wear only once.

I wanted the same thing.

Yes, I'll admit that some brides were over the top.

There was “Bob and I” Diane, and nervous Carol, and oh-so-perfect Nancy. Sometimes their constant love and wedding chatter would become too much. I, like everyone else, would roll my eyes and look at my watch for an excuse to leave the conversation. But those times were few and far between.

For the most part, however, like other family and friends, I listened to the happy wedding chatter. I knew and understood that the brides-to-be were excited and looking forward to what they expected would be *the best day of their lives*.

Unfortunately, for too many of my friends and acquaintances, the wedding and the honeymoon that followed probably *were* their best days. Too often the happy couple didn’t stay that way.

Once settled into post-wedding real life, they were faced with normal problems and arguments that come with couples living together. Most of my friends struggled with their finances. Some, because they were still fairly young, had spouses who still wanted to party and go out drinking with the guys. Others had difficult and demanding mothers or in-laws.

In addition, as good Catholic girls, most of them got pregnant way too fast. For a couple of them, pregnancy *was* the reason they got married. For the rest, once they tied the knot, pregnancy was the anticipated next step. If it didn’t happen quickly, they became stressed. Mary, for example, confided, “If I could have come off the altar pregnant, I would have been happy.” She and her new spouse began trying to have a baby on their wedding night. Mary embraced every old wives’ tale, and bought into every pregnancy superstition or belief, from what to eat to a variety of pregnancy-inducing sexual positions.

Mary wanted a baby so much that, only a few months after her wedding, when she wasn't pregnant yet, she visited her gynecologist to find out why.

While girls like Mary were working on getting pregnant, and I was living vicariously through other friends' weddings, I wasn't really dating anyone. I seldom went out with anyone more than two or three times. And, when I did date a guy any longer, I'd wonder if he was "*the one*."

That's how it was when I met Jimmy.

It was mid-January, shortly after my twenty-second birthday. He was twenty-seven, in the U.S. Navy, and home for a two-week leave. We spent most of those fourteen days together, and some of it talking about how he was looking forward to being discharged in a few months.

In those first few months we both seemed so ready for a commitment. By the time Jimmy's leave was over, we were "in love" with each other. And, for a while, he *was* Mr. Right.

For the next few months we wrote to each other every week (yes, actual hand-written letters sent through the mail!). When Jimmy came home, it wasn't long before he proposed. I said "yes" without thinking about it twice. That next week, on a sunny summer afternoon, the two of us drove to Philadelphia's Jewelers' Row. We didn't look at too many rings before I found my dream ring. The solitary three-quarter carat diamond was set in a brushed gold band. It fit perfectly, which, according to the jeweler, was a rarity. I took it as a "sign" that we were meant to be. Jimmy bought the ring that day.

As we walked back to the car, and then as we drove down the streets of Philadelphia, we shouted from the car to everyone we passed. It didn't matter if they were

walking on the sidewalk, crossing the street, or even just getting into their car. We stopped businesspeople, shoppers—*everybody*—to tell them we were engaged. You would have thought we were the only couple to ever buy a diamond engagement ring. Thinking back on that day makes me laugh and, at the same time, maybe feel a little embarrassed.

Buying the ring was followed by the announcement to family and friends. Then there were congratulation parties, the search for wedding venues and music, shopping trips that helped us fill in the blanks for our life together. We did all the things every wedding-focused couple does.

Looking back, I think we (the engagement and me) were essential first steps in Jimmy's readjustment to civilian life.

One Sunday night in mid-September, Jimmy and I were visiting with Marie and Tom, another engaged couple. The two guys were in the living room talking and watching football while us girls had tea and snacks in the kitchen. I felt like a married lady and I felt good.

Until Monday night . . .

Marie called and said she had something disturbing to tell me. She said Tom had shared some of the previous night's conversation. Tom was concerned because something in his conversation with Jimmy had Tom wondering if my guy was serious enough and if he was really ready to be married in just six months (our scheduled May wedding date).

At first I wondered if Marie was making a mountain out of a molehill. This many years later I don't remember any of the subject specifics or why Marie's revelation set off warning bells in my head. In fact, I remember won-

dering if it was true and, if it was, if I should really be concerned. I even thought about not saying anything and just brushing it off.

I didn't.

On Tuesday night I called Jimmy and said I wanted to talk. He picked me up after work on Wednesday. It was a beautiful and warm mid-September night when we went out for a bite to eat. Over drinks and burgers, I repeated my conversation with Marie. I asked him if what Tom said was true; it was. I expressed my uneasiness with his perspective.

In my heart, I wanted to hear the kinds of things from my fiancé that would put my mind to rest.

I didn't.

When Jimmy took me home that night, as we sat in the driveway of my house, we had one last exchange. I took off my shiny diamond engagement ring and gave it to him. With tears in his eyes, he took it, telling me, "I hope someday I can give this back to you."

In that moment, I wanted the same thing. I wanted to believe that this man, whom I thought I loved enough to marry, really meant it. I wanted to believe he'd grow up and fix whatever that thing was that made him a bad choice for a future mate. And I wanted to believe that we'd be engaged again someday.

That night I cried for a long time. We'd already bought silverware and were looking at pots and pans and dishes and furniture. *I was ready to be a bride.* Suddenly that whole life was snatched away from me.

Ending my engagement wasn't just hard to do. It devastated me. I gained a lot of weight—twenty pounds in a month. I quit my teaching job. For a long time I wallowed in that lonely valley of confusion and depression where

many women go when trying to make sense of something sad or nonsensical.

After a couple years, when I emerged from that valley, I was cynical. With new eyes I saw what was happening with too many of my married girlfriends. It seemed like when they changed their names, they changed who they were. They were no longer free-spirited girls. They were traditional wives and mothers.

By the time some of those friends were saddled with babies and bills, they were hinting to me that marriage wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Those once-fun calls about bubbling love had turned into calls that revealed how the perfect guy they married wasn't so perfect. I'd hear things like, "We have nothing in common," and "He comes home and does nothing . . . I'm exhausted," or "I think he's having an affair."

For too many young marrieds, life wasn't turning out the way they expected. Some became angry or depressed or frustrated. Disillusionment turned into sour attitudes and passive-aggressive behaviors. The once-youthful upward curves of their mouths began to show the first downward bends of bitterness. It was disturbing.

For some, divorce came in the first five to ten years. For others (like those good Catholic girls) they stayed in unhappy marriages; divorce didn't seem to be an option. Some of those women worked really hard to cultivate satisfying lives in spite of their unfortunate union. They naturally poured themselves into taking care of their children. As those children grew up, the women also found jobs, careers, or hobbies, and also groups of friends that soothed and smoothed over feelings of discontent or disappointment.

After a while I started to think that the ones who

divorced fared better. They went forward. Most found new spouses, and created happier lives. The ones who didn't divorce endured, but the marriages broke their hearts—and their spirits.

Either way, those relationships became part of the unhappy marriage statistics.

For many years, and for as much as I wanted to have love in my life, I remained wary. So I embarked on a career, bought a house, and was in the process of creating my happiness all by myself. Though I was still open to meeting “Mr. Right,” I stopped *expecting* to meet anyone with whom I'd fall in love. So, when I met Joseph, and we fell in love, it was a happy surprise. But, to this day I believe I could have been unattached and had a happy life.

Of course, I'll never know.

Also I think I could have continued simply living with Joseph, without a formal attachment, for a long time, and been happy.

It wasn't to be.

Now, many years later, I don't know what would have happened had I agreed to a traditional marriage. Or if I told Joseph I didn't want to get married, ever. Would Joseph and I have continued as we were? Or would we have broken up so Joseph could meet someone else who *did* want to have a conventional marriage?

I really believe that if we'd gotten married with traditional vows, we would have gotten divorced. It would probably have happened around year seven, when Joseph and I encountered a problem we couldn't fix by ourselves. Joseph agrees.

As it is, we don't have a traditional marriage. We have a partnership that we reevaluate. We take our relation-

ship marriage by marriage. So far we continue to choose the partnership, and each other.

Our Five-Year Marriage® has been a stimulating way to live. Joseph and I regularly get to choose, to decide. We always know one or both of us could opt for something else and decide we want to live another way. Some think it's the secret to our success as a couple. *I don't know if that's true*, but having that option may have something to do with why the marriage stays front and center in our relationship. It's not just Joseph and me. It's Joseph, me and the marriage.

That's why, empowered reader, I'm sharing this "grand experiment" with you.

For you and your sweetie, the partnership Five-Year Marriage®, might work better for you than a traditional marriage. I can't tell you that it's easier; it's not. In fact, many times I think a Five-Year Marriage® is harder. That's because it's based on something scarce in most marriages. The Five-Year Marriage® focuses on the partnership with purpose, vision, and goals. It's also about fairness as well as acknowledgement of and mutual respect and appreciation for each other's purpose in life. When those traits become the foundation on which you build everything, it makes a big difference.

Here's what I know for sure about the Five-Year Marriage®. It:

- Focuses on marriage preparation over wedding preparation.
- Is a partnership of the most intimate kind.
- Requires a solid focus on your relationship.
- Allows both you and your partner to have the

emotional freedom to be who you really are within the relationship.

- Consciously recognizes change. You and I know that change happens, but it's often ignored or rolled into another chapter of your life. In the Five-Year Marriage®, you and your partner actively acknowledge and discuss the changes. You aren't a victim, stuck with whatever life throws you. You are empowered and get to choose again.
- Gives your marriage, and the two of you in it, a chance to live a life instead of being boxed into some perpetual corner of discontent waiting for an emotional or spiritual death.

Is the Five-Year Marriage® a risk you want to take? Only you can decide.

If you are intrigued and interested in the Five-Year Marriage®, here's what to do:

First, read this book so you understand what the Five-Year Marriage® is and how to put yours together. That's how you'll get in touch with what you want, what's important to you, and more.

Then, share everything with your prospective partner. Have the conversations suggested in the Five-Year Marriage® chapters. Decide what you want for your Five-Year Marriage® together.

Finally, create your own Five-Year Marriage® contract.

You'll do all that *before* the wedding.

After the wedding, as you start living your Five-Year Marriage®, if you feel you need more, I have many resources for you at the Five-Year Marriage® website.

They include free downloads, seminars, webinars, blog updates, and more. Take a look: FiveYearMarriage.com

If you opt for traditional marriage, I trust you will build a healthy partnership marriage in your own way.

If it helps you to choose, remember that small risks bring small rewards. Big risks bring big rewards. The Five-Year Marriage® might be a pretty big risk for you.

If you decide to embrace the “something new” and more challenging Five-Year Marriage®, good for you! ***You’re in for the ride of your life!*** I wish you love and luck and a fulfilling life.