

LOVIN' WITH GRIT & GRACE

*STRAIGHT-TALK ABOUT ROMANCE,
SEX, FUN, AND THE TOUGH STUFF TOO*



Jessica Ronne

Praise for
Lovin' with Grit and Grace

“Jess Ronne is one of the most inspiring human beings on planet earth, and her story will forever change your perspective in positive and practical ways. This book isn’t just an incredible marriage resource; it’s an irresistible invitation to embrace all aspects of life with more grit and grace.”

—**Dave Willis**, coauthor of *The Naked Marriage* and cohost of *The Naked Marriage* podcast

“Once again, author Jess Ronne pierces readers’ hearts and provides practical insights! In *Lovin' with Grit and Grace*, Ronne poignantly writes about her personal experience with remarriage after loss and shares biblical wisdom along with practical tips that leave readers with a roadmap to keep your marriage strong through life’s unexpected storms. Ronne even throws in some delicious recipes for good measure, and her husband, Ryan, provides insightful additions as well. Married people at any stage of their relationship will benefit greatly from this book.”

—**Ashley Willis**, author of *Peace Pirates*

“This book has the perfect title. With entertaining story telling from her own marriage, Jessica shows the hard work of marriage takes grit but then points the reader toward the grace it takes for a marriage to thrive. I loved how Jessica can write a chapter about diapers and drudgery and take the reader straight to the cross.”

—**April Graney**, author of *The Marvelous Mud House*

“What a wonderful addition to the Grit and Grace series! Not only did I find value in the content and thought provoking questions sprinkled throughout the book, but I greatly appreciate the honest perspectives of both Jess and her husband Ryan when tackling the challenging topics that can greatly impact a marriage. Jess has a gift for writing and storytelling that is relatable—I was feeling the humor, frustration, and love with every word.”

—**Laurie Hellmann**, author of *Welcome to My Life: A Personal Parenting Journey through Autism*, and host of *Living the Sky Life* podcast

“In *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace*, Jess boldly and beautifully talks about the tough, fun, and delicate stuff that makes the journey of marriage adventurous. She invites us into her world while reminding us of how intimately wonderful marriage truly is and that with God’s grace, we can experience it in a new and fresh way.”

—**Rachel G. Scott**, writer, speaker, Host of *Taking the Leap* Podcast

“I felt so seen in the first few pages, tears started falling. So much of this book accurately described the life my husband and I had been living for fifteen years after severe trauma shattered our lives and left us clinging to one another in an ocean of despair, loneliness, and struggle; all the while wondering if God had abandoned us. If you’ve ever felt the same, this book will show you spiritual, emotional, and practical steps to learn how to rise above the waves together and find peace, healing, and joy in God and one another . . . no matter what circumstances you are facing.”

—**Lindsey Hartz**, author and speaker, and CEO and Lead Marketing Strategist, Hartz Agency / Ignite Faith Media

“Finally, a marriage book that meets most people where they live. Jess and Ryan Ronne live in the trenches where most couples also do, struggling to do the right things in a life that’s messy with kids, careers, and all the obstacles to marriage.”

—**Brenda L. Yoder**, LMHC, licensed mental health counselor, educator, and author of *Fledge: Launching Your Kids without Losing Your Mind*

“Jess and Ryan openly share about how having a healthy marriage takes grit and a lot of grace to work together through the daily struggles, demands of special needs, a large family, and secrets from their past. It is incredibly encouraging to see them offer hope and practical ways to impact the health and rhythms of your marriage!”

—**Misty Phillip**, Founder of Spark Media, award-winning author, host of *By His Grace* podcast, and cohost of *Spark Influence*

“Marriage can be wonderful and hard at the same time. Jess Ronne’s new book, *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace*, is filled with deeply personal and relatable stories of the mistakes, love, and heartache of marriage. She tackles the love and sacrifice necessary to a successful relationship with the added stress of blending two families. Let her words invite you into her journey. You’ll appreciate her wise and biblical counsel knowing she’s been where you are and understands what you’re going through.”

—**Kate Battistelli**, author of *The God Dare* and *Growing Great Kids*

“Jessica Ronne points your marriage toward connection and deeper intimacy with your spouse in *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace*. She addresses the real issues and questions that spouses face with genuine care, humor, and biblical insight. You will be encouraged with every chapter and will find yourself reflecting on every part of your marriage through the lens Jessica so practically and generously shares with us. If you want to grow in your marriage, this book is for you!”

—**Vanessa Martindale**, Founder of Blended Kingdom Families,
author of *Blended & Redeemed*

“This book you’re holding is a priceless, years-in-the-making gem by Jessica Ronne. The truths within didn’t magically emerge from her family life; they were developed over time, intensified by raw and extremely harsh circumstances. The making of a pearl is like the making of a unique, beautiful family. Not one is the same in shape, size, color, or experience. The process includes great aggravation, endurance, yet over time, the grain softens and is shaped into something to be treasured. You will not find another work as authentic and unique; providing wisdom as God shapes your family life into something beautiful.”

—**Colleen Swindoll-Thompson**, Founder of Reframing Ministries,
Insight for Living

“*Just keep livin’*. Jessica Ronne’s signature send-off perhaps rings more clearly in this book than any of the wisdom and insight she has shared about the journey of a caregiver when there is no end to the road of caregiving. *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace* is an invitation to vulnerability, honesty, and hope for couples who long for a marriage that is more than wedding rings and well-rehearsed vows. She holds nothing back in this intimate look at everything from sleep and secrets to sex and solitude. The book’s conversational style is both practical and hopeful, and Jess and her husband Ryan are unafraid to address topics like the importance of long-road faith and the pain of abuse and pornography. And Jess invites us to the table with recipes that have sustained her family, her marriage, and her own soul for years. *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace* should be required reading for all couples longing to “just keep livin’” a real and abiding relationship.”

—**Ronne Rock**, author of *One Woman Can Change the World*

“Marriage is hard,” said everyone who’s been married longer than ten minutes. Jess and Ryan show us how to endure through the hard parts while intentionally finding joy in the everyday moments. With endearing stories woven into a memorable acronym (HISHERS), this book will show you God’s heart for today’s marriage.”

—**Amy Lively**, author of *How to Love Your Neighbor Without Being Weird* and *Hope Fully*

“Jess Ronne and her hubby deliver a fantastic book to help us all keep our marriages spicy, fun, and devoted to one another. *Lovin’ with Grit and Grace*—written in Ronne’s signature style of real, witty, and practical—is a must-read. I came away encouraged and ready to implement her tips in my own relationship. I devoured this book. Reading it was like being on a double-date full of heart to hearts, good wine, and outbursts of giggling.”

—**Sarah Philpott**, author of *The Growing Season: A Year of Down on the Farm Devotions* and *Loved Baby: 31 Devotions Helping You Grieve and Cherish Your Baby after Pregnancy Loss*

LOVIN'
WITH
GRIT & GRACE

*To my husband Ryan, grow old with me,
the best is yet to be.*

*To my children, may his favor be upon you for a
thousand generations and your family and your
children and their children and their children.*

*To my faithful Savior and Lord,
thank you for the gift of life.*

Just keep livin'!

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SEX, FUN, AND THE TOUGH STUFF TOO*

Jessica Ronne



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LOVIN' WITH GRIT AND GRACE

Straight Talk about Romance, Sex, Fun, and the Tough Stuff Too



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CONTENTS

FOREWORD , by Gina Spehn.....	11
INTRODUCTION	13
1 HEALTH: Preserving This Commodity in Our Marriages	19
Consistency Is Key	
Walking through the Seasons of Life	
Winter Walk	
In Sickness and in Health	
Psalm 23 and Self-Care	
Health and the Caregiver	
Bedtime	
Pruning for Self-Care	
2 INTIMACY: What This Word Means and Why It's Vital for a Thriving Relationship	47
Words That Wound	
See Me	
See Me Too	
Finding Your Voice	
Releasing Control	
Spring Walks—Dealing with Your Anger	
Vulnerable Moments	
Ignorance Is Not Bliss	
Sharing Your Fears	
Don't Look in the Rearview Mirror	
Restoration	
3 SEX: Some Want More than Others—Why It's Important	83
Desire Starts with You	
Desire Me Too	
Sexual Graveyards	
The Day Everything Changed	
Snapshots	
Obstacles to Sex	
Spice Is Nice	
Boundaries	
Bargains and Schedules	

4	HOUSEHOLD TASKS: Nonnegotiable Tasks and Peaceful Compromise	115
	Delegating Duties	
	Help Please!	
	Diapers and Drudgery	
	When Expectations Clash	
	Money Problems	
	Remember Me? When a Parent Forgets They're a Spouse	
	Summer Walks	
5	EXCITEMENT: Required to Thrive—but How?	135
	Date Night!	
	Affordable and Unique Options	
	Secret Excitement	
	Step Out of Your Comfort Zone!	
	When a Date Becomes a Horror Story	
	Dream a Little Dream with Me	
	Celebrating Milestones	
	Family Fun	
6	ROMANCE: For Women and Men? Let's Find Out	155
	Romantic Misconceptions	
	A Man's Idea of Romance	
	Understanding What Romance Is to the One You Love	
	I Already Got You	
	Fall Walks	
	Getaways	
	Romance Killers	
	More Romance Killers	
7	SPIRITUALITY: Growing Faith Contributes to a Growing Marriage	177
	The Two Become One	
	Building Our House on the Rock	
	Holding on When Times Get Tough	
	Staying Grounded	
	Lay It on the Closet Floor	
	True Faith?	
	Till Death Do Us Part	
	Codependent or Dependent on the Lord?	
	Radical Obedience	
	Fear or Faith	
	AFTERWORD	203

FOREWORD

Discovering “Jess Plus the Mess” on Facebook in 2012 was like finding a unicorn. I didn’t know any other couples who took a flying leap of faith into a new life after losing their first spouses to cancer. Like Ryan and Jess, my husband Michael and I blended our families, started a nonprofit, wrote a book (that became a Hallmark movie), and live a messy, unpredictable, and chaotic life built on the hope we have in Jesus.

Experiencing Jess through her writing is to experience 2 Corinthians 1:3–5: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” I was understood, validated, and not alone in my circumstances.

Jess is a vulnerable, honest, and authentic writer, and person. She handles sensitive subject matter with the kind of delicate honesty that elicits responses ranging from fist pumping to laughing out loud to flat out feeling convicted. Her words stir the soul as

they expose the heart-wrenching underbelly of marriage with the kind of vulnerability and transparency that make you feel known. This gift offers us the strength to persevere.

Jess has used her experience and wisdom to become a beacon of hope for a stressed-out, worked-up, freaked-out world. She is credentialed, and her voice rises above the noise of the “do more, be more, pursue more” world, reminding us we can choose to move forward with faith and tend to all our “special needs” . . . not only special needs children, but also the special needs we have as individuals to care for ourselves.

Throughout the book Jess seamlessly sprinkles in recipes for delicious and comforting foods. The recipes flow in and out of chapters like the day-to-day process of feeding a family, as if while writing she looked up and realized, *I have eight hungry mouths to feed!*

But the real recipes are those baked in, sautéed, and simmering throughout the book, using “Health, Intimacy, Sex, Household tasks, Excitement, Romance, and Spirituality” as the key ingredients. This isn’t a sugary, processed dish that lacks substance. No, this is real sustenance and nourishment for husbands, wives, and marriages that will help us go the distance while under the watchful eyes and listening ears of our children.

Whether newlywed or celebrating a golden anniversary, the tenderness, simplicity, and raw truth on these pages will give you the strength to persevere and live with hope. I’m thankful to Jess and Ryan for their courage in writing this book and for the privilege of reading the intimate details of their life. Their words are a reminder to walk closely with God to be continually refined and reshaped for his purposes in your marriage.

Gina Spehn

Author of *Color of Rain* (turned into a Hallmark movie)

Cofounder and President of New Day Foundation for Families



INTRODUCTION

The words we need to say are usually paired with a look that says *I mean business*, and it almost always requires immediate attention. We've all witnessed a scene in a movie where this scenario is portrayed, and the entire set goes quiet and heartbreak follows. Have you noticed this too? "We need to talk" is often followed by a call for change and a whole lot of tears. I'm guessing you are thinking of the last time you heard or even said this phrase and realized something was about to pivot in your life. Maybe it was a sudden change that crushed your heart.

It was those four simple words that paved the way for a big change in my marriage; including the ideas for growth that followed. Let me set the scene for you.

"We need to talk." I gave my husband Ryan a look that indicated there was a deep conversation looming on the horizon.

He quickly shimmied his way to the couch and rested his feet upon the coffee table. February was usually when we vacationed in Mexico, but this year we opted out of warm sunny skies and ocean breezes and opted in to a weeklong “vacation” at a local Airbnb where we spent our days clearing trees from our recently purchased parcel of land in Michigan that we were preparing for a future build. Mexico, Michigan—the exact same, right?!

After seven years in Tennessee, we made the difficult decision to move back to my hometown where we hoped to receive the support and resources needed for our large family and for our disabled son Lucas. We were leaving a state we had called home for seven years, a place where we often found ourselves panicky and frantic and clinging to one another for dear life; we were drowning in an ocean of responsibility, one of us going beneath the surface while the other was coming up for air, oftentimes pushed back down by the weight of the never-ending tasks with no life preservers in sight. No one to help. And now we were building a new dream in Michigan, a life built on the premise of community—friends and family who knew us and would throw us a life preserver if needed.

And now, here we sat, suspiciously looking at one another, inhaling a delicious pizza after an exhausting day of cutting down trees and moving logs, but I wasn't content. No, in fact I could feel the stream of tears starting to rise out of frustration.

“What's wrong?” he cautiously questioned.

“Well,” I hesitantly continued, “we've been on vacation for a few days, and I've been harping for months about the lack of romance in our relationship. You've continued to assure me for *months* that ‘it'll change as soon as we go on vacation,’ because you have a hard time being romantic with the stresses of daily life and eight kids and special needs and work. And actually, you promised ‘all the romance I can handle on vacation,’ and I've given you grace. I've held out hope for this magical promise of a romantic vacation.

I've eagerly anticipated our time together and worked my tail end off, hauling logs as a forty-three-year-old middle-aged woman—trying to make you proud. Trying to entice you to do something super romantic and nothing has changed. You're still exhausted and stressed, and I'm still disappointed."

I blurted out my passionate plea and slumped back into the couch, eager to shove another piece of pizza into my starving, weary, and unromanced body. I expected an immediate apology or at the very least an excuse, but instead I received spitfire anger. My husband was ticked off.

"I've been working for months," he began, "never taking a break, going far above and beyond what my body is probably even capable of—especially after a shoulder surgery only a year ago!—and you're complaining about romance? Seriously? I'm *always* romantic! I help with the dishes every day. We walk together. We pray together in the morning! We have a consistent sex life; and you think I'm not romantic?! Really? Most women would kill for what you get!"

Now I was disgusted, frustrated, and mad.

"You think sex and praying are romance? Seriously? You don't understand women at all!" I shoved the last morsel of pizza into my mouth and stormed off to the bathtub to wash the angst out of my soul.

I allowed the warm water and soothing lavender bubbles to calm my racing heart, and Ryan used the silence that followed our heated argument to reflect. I emerged thirty minutes later with a slower heart rate and was ready to ignore my husband for the remainder of the night; however, while I had been stewing in the bath, he had been thinking. I hesitantly rejoined him in the family room and slowly met his gaze.

"You know," he said, "you're right. I thought those things—dishes, walks, prayers, and sex—were romance. As men, we're

taught that sex begins in the kitchen; and in my mind, if I'm doing the dishes, I'm romancing you for later that night."

I sat there dumbstruck. My husband seriously thought doing the dishes was romantic? Oh boy. It was going to be a long night.

"Explain it to me," he continued. "I want to know! I need to understand."

And that began our exploration into the question of what romance looks like in a relationship. How is its perception different for men and women? What does romance look like for me personally? We stayed up late that night questioning, laughing, and exploring these concepts, which eventually led to a fun little acronym that has been extremely helpful in our journey toward understanding the differences and expectations we each bring to our relationship. The acronym is simply His & Hers. Seven letters (most of you know how much I love my sevens): HISHERS—which stand for seven important categories in a marriage.

H—Health

I—Intimacy

S—Sex

H—Household

E—Excitement

R—Romance

S—Spirituality

All seven categories are imperative for a healthy, robust, and growing marriage, but some have more importance to one partner than the other. Each category should receive consistent check-ups for the relationship to maintain respect and growth. The unique nature of His & Hers is that some couples will require more checks in certain categories than others. Some women might want a lot of checks in the sex box, while others may not. Some men might require more checks in the intimacy box and not require as many checks in the sex box. Some women might need a lot of

new activities and excitement—tango classes, yes! Cooking club, yes! Movie night, yes! And some may rather have the dishes done every single day.

It's about moving intentionally, step by step, and communicating about which categories are most important to you as an individual and to your marriage, and then setting realistic goals to attain what's needed in these areas. For example, I want more romance, yes, yes, yes! Romance to me is *not* doing the dishes or praying together. Doing the dishes falls under the household category and praying falls under the spiritual category. Romance for me is a candlelit dinner, flowers, or little notes of endearment left on a steamy mirror. In a perfect world, I'd appreciate some semblance of romance once a month. Laundry, dishes, and clean floors are not that big of a deal, but romance is. Another woman reading this might think I'm crazy and may want clean dishes every day, and perhaps that is romance for her! That's where effective communication factors in as you help your partner understand your needs and expectations.

Admittedly, marriage is never easy. Never, ever, ever. Fulfilling? Absolutely. Growth inducing? Positively. Worth it? Yes, in my opinion. We are now eleven years into marriage together after our first spouses passed away in 2010; eleven years with seven then eight children, special needs, autism, lingering grief, and adoption. Statistically speaking, 67 percent of second marriages and 23 percent of marriages with an autism diagnosis end in divorce.¹ I think that gives my marriage about a 10 percent chance of making it; but here we are, still standing. No, it's not perfect, but what Ryan and I have is pretty darn special and worth celebrating. Our relationship has blossomed from two naive thirty-four-year-olds secretly running off to the courthouse to get married (Yep! More on that admission later) into a respectful and loving union through reliance on the Lord, communication, and, let's face it, effort. Good

old fashioned elbow grease, which includes checking in with one another and occasionally peeling back the perception of peace to expose the real issues that might be lurking beneath the surface. And believe me, every relationship has those issues!

What works for us may not work for everyone, and this is where these categories provide boundaries for communication to occur so lasting change can take effect. The key to these seven categories is consistency, and this includes an occasional check-in about what is important individually and collectively. Most couples yearn for change but simply don't know how to bring it to the table. It's difficult to admit that there might be something lacking in a relationship or to rock the boat when things seem to be somewhat peaceful; however, that peace is often a façade if we're not addressing issues, and that façade has the potential of exploding into a much bigger issue if we don't face our resentments.

That's where I hope and pray *Lovin' with Grit and Grace* can provide a gentle road map for any marital relationship that seeks clarification, simplification, or maybe a firm kick in the rear end. Maybe you and your spouse need hope, or a walk together, or simply a good recipe—which are occasionally shared because “the way to a man's heart” and all that jazz. Sound good? Alrighty, find a comfy chair, put up your feet, and let's dive into the ways these categories have played out in our marriage and how you might find similar success through incorporating these seven principles.

Just keep livin'!

Jess

NOTE

¹ Mark Banschick, “The High Failure Rate of Second and Third Marriages,” *Psychology Today*, February 6, 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-intelligent-divorce/201202/the-high-failure-rate-second-and-third-marriages>; Stephen Grcevich, “Special Needs and Divorce: What Does the Data Say?” Key Ministry, March 28, 2016, <https://www.keyministry.org/church4everychild/2016/3/28/special-needs-and-divorce-what-does-the-data-say?rq=divorce%20rate>.



HEALTH

Preserving This Commodity in Our Marriages

“Jess, they want to schedule a PET scan. They think it might be cancer.”

I heard these words from Ryan in 2017, and they rocked my world. We were living what we thought was our dream life in rural Tennessee: raising our children, tilling the land, butchering chickens, and renovating houses. Only a few years earlier, we had left everything we had ever known to pursue the simple life, and now Ryan was facing numerous health scares, including the discovery of spots on his lungs, a thirty-pound weight loss, and trips to the emergency room. I wanted to scream, “Are you out of your mind, Lord?! You took one husband and left me as a widow with four kids. Are you seriously going to do this again? Cancer with eight children? In the middle of nowhere?!”

And I began to panic. I set systems in place to make my family even healthier than we already were. Intense systems created out of fear, like no sugar or carbs; only organic, free-range meats and vegetables; lots of elixirs and cancer-killing teas; and energy workout videos on YouTube. I needed something to occupy my thoughts, and instead of turning to prayer, I turned to control.

Now, we do have a role to play in our health and should strive to do the best we can. This is a biblical principle—“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19)—but there is also a time and a place to surrender and give it to the Lord: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28 ESV).

Ryan and I have had many encounters with death and scary diagnoses, which have led to our marital efforts to maintain a healthy lifestyle; although it has not been the easiest endeavor while caring for a disabled child. The experts state that 53 percent of caregivers claim that caring for a loved one has worsened their health, which was part of Ryan’s problems.¹ He is a “put your head down and get ’er done” kind of guy; and instead of acknowledging and releasing the stress in his body, Ryan allowed the stress to build and fester, which led to numerous trips to the ER, weight loss, and the conversation where he said, “Jess they want to schedule a PET scan. They think it might be cancer.”

Cancer. The most feared word in most people’s vocabulary, including mine. A word that experts claim is avoidable by 80 percent of people who get it.² Since we do have some control over the process, I’m going to do my part to maintain a joyful, healthy life with my family for as long as the Lord grants me breath in my lungs. Our health is a gift and should be consistently prioritized—all aspects of our health, including our diets and our mental health.

We should care about this precious commodity not only for ourselves but also for those we love.

Consistency Is Key

Throughout our eleven years together, Ryan and I have diligently incorporated daily and weekly routines to prioritize healthy habits; and yes, these habits have arrived through consistently choosing what may not be the most pleasurable option in order to reap the long-term benefits. You know what I'm talking about. Making a fresh salad instead of running through the McDonalds drive-through on the way home from work. Or setting the alarm to get a morning run in because you know you won't do it at the end of the day. Or putting your phone away and reading a book instead of obsessing about what the neighbors are doing. These are choices we make to reap the long-term benefits of health, and this consistency is the cornerstone to our success with busy lives.

I'm pretty sure I come by these traits honestly. I grew up with parents who each made daily to-do lists. I'm also the granddaughter of Sarella and Leonard Bossebroek. Leonard was a respected pastor and Sally, his wife, was a nurse turned homemaker after giving birth to their four sons. I vividly remember as a young girl visiting my grandparent's home and being told to *not bother Grandpa in the basement* because he was preparing for his Sunday sermon. Sometimes I would tiptoe down the steps when Grandma was busy and peek around the corner to find Grandpa hunched over his desk, glasses perched high upon his face, pouring over the Bible and other commentaries that would help him formulate the sermon he would preach on Sunday. He would stay in this posture for hours, diligently studying and praying for wisdom until Grandma would call down, "Dad! It's time for your afternoon walk!" and up the stairs he sauntered, put on his spirit walking shoes (with galoshes if weather called for them) and a lightweight

Polo jacket, and ventured off for his daily walk. I'm not entirely sure how long his walks were, but he prioritized them almost every day. Grandpa was also diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in his older age, and Grandma made sure to use this diagnosis to reprimand him whenever he tried to add an extra spoonful of sugar to his morning corn flakes—the same daily breakfast he'd eaten for years. He'd wink at me as he tried to sneak this spoonful of sugar only to have Grandma whip her head around from the kitchen and declare, "Dad! You know you can't have that with your diabetes." "Oh right, Mom," he'd mutter, slowly putting the spoon back into the sugar container. But it wasn't only that Grandma took care of Grandpa. If she looked worn out or tired, he was quick to suggest that she lie down for a bit. And often she would oblige, although I'm not sure she slept much. They took care of each other and, as "iron sharpens iron," looked out for one another's best interests when it came to their health. The key to their longevity (they both lived to be in their nineties!) was consistency with many of these small daily practices.

Consistency is a theme that will pop up time and time again throughout our stories. This isn't an exciting word or a sexy concept, but it is the glue to a healthy, happy relationship and a healthy, happy life! The word "consistency" is cousins with words like "rhythms" and "routines," and these ebbs and flows are what balance us and bring us back into communion with our Maker and with one another. These routines also instruct us in what it means to be a human being. Since the beginning of time, humanity has had its roots in rhythms. In Genesis we read that the Lord created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. He made the sun, moon, and stars to dictate the circadian rhythms so that we would know when to sleep and when to rise. Everything in creation follows a pattern for survival—the rising and the setting of the sun, the lunar cycles, the months, the seasons, and the years

steadily marching forward—so it makes sense that our bodies operate optimally within cycles and seasons as well. Individually, this looks like rising with the sun and sleeping with the moon, or working six days a week as our Lord modeled and resting on the Sabbath, or gathering our harvest in the summer and relaxing in the cooler winter months. When our body is in rhythm with nature, we give ourselves an optimal chance at maintaining optimal health.

Ryan and I prioritize a handful of rhythms that help maintain the seven categories we are going to address: health, intimacy, sex, household, excitement, romance, and spirituality. We pray together, walk together, drink tea together, and garden together (weather permitting). We cook together, making homemade pasta or brick oven pizzas on the patio. We head to bed and watch our shows and turn off the lights together. We have many dynamics and busy schedules, so most of our routines occur at home, but perhaps it's different for your family. Maybe you like to get out of the house and participate in triathlons or enjoy family days at the gym.

Whatever this looks like for your situation, remember, these are the intimate moments that build a life together. These are the moments we will look back on fondly at the end of our days and recall—the good stuff, the stuff we dwell on as the angels escort us to glory. Some of these are seasonal rhythms, some annual, and others daily. They provide structure for our busy lives and a framework to slow down and breathe—a framework individually and for our relationships. These routines speak life into our weariness as we set aside our personal agendas to enjoy these joint priorities with a partner we love. They also provide a loose framework for maintaining health and vitality in our busy schedules as we habitually return to the basis of our beliefs, which is really what these rhythms and routines consist of.

Health is so much more than the foods we choose to put in our bodies; it's a state of mind and includes our daily choices. Choices to exercise and go to bed on time. Choices to face any addictions that may hinder our relationships. Choices to pursue self-care and rest so we don't end up in the hospital. And nine times out of ten, these choices will lead to a life of health and vitality or a life of prescription drugs and pain.

What consistent choices are you making as a family? Where might you need to improve? Think through these questions with your spouse and then commit to making one small change this week. You'll thank yourself for it in the long run.

Quick and Easy Salad

I often have most of these ingredients on hand to make this quick and easy salad instead of running through a drive-through somewhere. And yes, I top it with homemade ranch because I deserve a reward for all the vegetables.

- Bag of mixed greens
- Red onion
- Bacon bits
- Grilled chicken
- Avocado
- Cherry tomatoes
- Optional, fresh mozzarella cut into small pieces
- Ranch dressing seasoning packet

Mix the ingredients together to make the homemade ranch and chill for about an hour. Next, toss the remaining ingredients together and enjoy!

Walking through the Seasons of Life

“Honey! Are you ready to walk?” I hollered to Ryan who was sitting in our office catching up on some paperwork. “Yep! Just give me a minute,” he quickly replied.

Walking is an activity we enjoy and has been a part of my health routine for as long as I can remember. When I was a teenager, my mom and I would relieve the monotonous boredom of homeschooled life by walking up and down our dusty road together. I shared tidbits of my soul, and she would share about her life. I enjoyed the calming nature walking lent to my overthinking ways, and continued this habit into my college years. I often met friends at the local track or snuck off alone on the weekends to a hiking trail to gather my thoughts about life, faith, and men.

After my marriage to Jason, I continued to walk. Sometimes I would hurry home after work to rip off my teaching clothes and replace them with comfy sweatpants and a T-shirt before heading off to Kent Trails—a long winding stretch of paths only minutes from our apartment. Sometimes Jason would tag along; but more often than not, he was still at work, and walking wasn’t his idea of fitness. He was a tennis professional and personal trainer, so he opted for heavy lifting and left the walking to his wife.

Now, at forty-four years old, I’ve walked through many seasons of life. I’ve fought through bitter cold winters in Michigan that require long johns beneath sweatpants and down coats, topped off with hats, mittens, and scarves. I’ve walked in the blazing southern sun as it stretched high in the sky, scorching my brow and anything else I dared to lay bare beneath her fiery rays, kicking up dusty red dirt as I shuffled along. I’ve walked with a brace on my leg after breaking my foot, and only days after losing my baby to a miscarriage—breathing deeply with each step as I chose to move toward life. I walked down to the Tennessee River in our backyard to pray after having my baby girl, and in doing so

regained strength in both body and soul after almost losing my life during her tumultuous birth. I've walked beside husbands and friends and children and babies. I've pushed strollers and double strollers! I've trudged through rain, sunshine, sleet, and snow. I've worn sunglasses for most of my walks to hide the tears when they unexpectedly arrive—which they do more often than not as I pray for those who are hurting and sometimes those prayers are turned on myself. My walks remind me that this is how this life gig works. Step by step. Moment by moment. Walking is therapeutic and reflective and where clarity is revealed, often through the same songs I've listened to year after year. Songs of encouragement for my weary heart. Songs like Natalie Grant's "I will Not Be Moved" and Francesca Battistelli's "Beautiful, Beautiful" or Kelly Clarkson's "What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger." I never tire of these songs because they're a part of me and a part of my rhythm. I allow the words to penetrate my heart during seasons when the sun shines upon me, each step full of life and vigor, or when the sun doesn't shine and I find myself in a season of pushing against the bitter cold, and I dare her outstretched arms to stop my movement forward; literally willing each step as a prayer toward deliverance as I plead for healing from whatever demons torment me.

Ryan often accompanies me on these walks as we've found that the couple who walks together, talks together, and maybe loses a pound or two. Walking has helped as we've wrestled with issues of abandonment, betrayal, blendedness, and special needs. Our life can be heavy at times, but as we've learned with our walking routine, we choose to move forward, step by step, trusting that the Lord's faithfulness will sustain and provide us with what we need for the moment, even if we find ourselves walking in the midst of a bitter cold night as I once did in December of 2009.

Winter Walk

Life can be hard, and we often find ourselves in a period that doesn't make any sense. A period of betrayal or abandonment, or a child who seems to be headed down a dangerous path—circumstances we would wish away in an instant if we could.

I found myself in one such period in December of 2009. My late husband Jason was battling brain cancer, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to engage in life because of the treatments and the effects they had on his energy and mental health. I often walked through the snow on these dark nights as I willed myself to feel alive; to feel the bite against my face and keep moving in spite of how weary I had become.

On one of these particular evenings, the children lay nestled in their warm beds, oblivious to the torment I felt, and as Jason reclined pale and motionless in his reclining chair, I wrapped myself in a thick coat, pulled boots upon my weary feet, and ventured out into the bitter loneliness. My emergence was greeted by a silent dirt road, my being enveloped by the brisk air as the blackness provided shelter from the rest of humanity. Nothing but stillness awaited my pilgrimage. I felt free.

I glanced to the left and recognized a spattering of houses and to the right, nothing but naked branches swayed in the stagnant air. I leaned into the vacancy and began to move, one foot in front of the other, the vicious cold nipping my face and freezing the tears as they fell. I walked in penance for whatever grave sin I had committed—a sin which had led to a life of pain and heartache. I knew that surely if my husband had the strength to wage war against numerous rounds of poison, and my son had the strength to defy the proclamations of death voiced against him, and my children possessed the strength to look into the abyss of eternity staring back at them through their daddy's hollow gaze, then surely—*surely*—I could face whatever lay ahead. And so, I walked.

I walked the coals, the clear crystal coals intermingled with the frozen ground. And nothing moved. And all was silent.

I walked, and I paused, and I crumpled to the earth, fists curled and pumping into the night sky. “*Curse you night!*” I screamed.

I screamed until the noise was deafened by gasps, gasps of oxygen being pumped into a broken heart, gasps of air reviving a weary soul, and then I rose, yet again, to face my tormentor and fell beneath the weight of the heavy cold air. I wrestled and rose and cursed and moaned again and again to the beat of the maestro’s baton, to the beat of the never-ending drum of life.

Eventually I grew weary, as we all do, and I turned back, slowly fixing my gaze to reality, the dim lights flickering through the swaying trees, ready to return to my life—a haven of pain and grief and joy.

I still walk in the bitter air, but I no longer seek the solitude of the night. I now turn to face the warmth of the sun, often walking hand in hand with those I love—those born of the light, like my baby girl Annabelle. I’ve walked through the bitter cold of what was and the warmth of what is, learning how life can unravel at any moment into something bright and beautiful and unexpected.

I am choosing life, choosing warmth, and choosing to keep moving forward, as we all must do.

In Sickness and in Health

In March of 2011, after I had accepted Ryan’s proposal, I ventured to his hometown in Oklahoma to pack for our move to Michigan. I had been going nonstop for years. Jason died in August of 2010, and that’s when I became a single mom of four young children—an exhausting endeavor. And then I met Ryan, and we had a whirlwind courtship as we traveled back and forth to visit, often meeting halfway and sometimes bringing the children and

mourning the deaths of our first spouses while simultaneously grieving our time apart. It was way too much.

As we loaded the U-Haul truck with Ryan's belongings, I realized how exhausted I was. My eyes burned and my back ached and my whole body was bone weary tired, but I chalked it up to how busy we had been over the past couple of months. I figured I could sleep all the way to Kansas, which was the midway point to Michigan and where we would rest for the night. I climbed in beside my fiancé and waved goodbye to the only life Ryan had ever known, waved goodbye to his friends and family, and waved goodbye to his home. I shimmied a pillow up against the window and laid my head against the rattling door.

"Tired babe?" Ryan asked loudly, trying to be heard against the backdrop of the exhaust system.

"Yeah," I responded wearily. "I'm going to rest my eyes for a bit. Wake me up if you need anything."

That was the last thing I said before I heard Ryan whispering, "Jess, Jess. We made it to Kansas. You slept the whole way." I slowly lifted my head and glanced out at the night sky. Sure enough, we weren't in Oklahoma anymore. The flickering lights from the cheap hotel's neon sign stared back at me.

"Gosh, I don't know why I'm so tired," I lamented as we checked in for the night. I dove onto my bed and slept deeply but awoke the next morning still feeling exhausted. We continued our exodus toward Michigan and arrived around dusk. We unloaded the truck and said hello to my kids. Ryan's kids had stayed behind with grandparents who promised to transport them to Michigan after we were settled. I paid the babysitter and then headed home to sleep. Ryan had purchased a home in Michigan, but I continued to live at my house until we were married because it seemed like the right thing to do. Once home, I climbed into bed and zonked out again. Around midnight I awoke, drenched in sweat

and shaking uncontrollably. I didn't want to wake Ryan who had just had an exhausting day of travel—especially since I had been so out of commission. I took a few Advil, attributed my malaise to the flu, and tried to go back to sleep. I continued to wake up every hour, drenched in sweat and hallucinating about the characters of Sesame Street, in my room, playing duck, duck, goose. Their insistence that I play this game while I attempted to sleep really annoyed me.

When morning arrived, my whole body ached. I somehow managed to get Caleb and Lucas off to school, and then I called Ryan.

I choked out the words, “Honey, I don't feel good. I think I might need to go to an Urgent Care.”

“Really?” he responded. “That bad?”

“I can't stop shaking,” I replied, my teeth chattering, “and my back is killing me.”

“Okay, I'll be right over,” he promised.

While I waited, I contacted the babysitter, and she agreed to watch Mabel and Josh.

Ryan took one glance at me, pale, shaking, and holding my back in agony, and told me to get in the van. He rushed me to the ER, where a few tests later we learned I had a really bad kidney infection, and I was going to be admitted. It was the worst news on so many levels. First, I hate pain, and I hate needles even more. I pretty much cried throughout my entire stay. Second, talk about anxiety for Ryan and his kids. Here I was supposed to be his healthy fiancée, about to be his wife after the sudden death of his first wife, and then I get really sick and end up in ER for a few days! And this is what Ryan's children arrived in Michigan to discover: their soon-to-be new mom in the hospital. Talk about traumatic.

I was admitted, administered a strong dose of antibiotics, and discharged three days later—still exhausted but feeling a little bit

more myself. That was a hard lesson to learn. I had been immersed in a life of consistently going too hard for too long; whereas, if I had incorporated small and consistent acts of self-care, slowed down, not talked to Ryan until midnight every day, and pursued the sleep and hydration my body required, I probably could have curtailed the entire experience all together. I vowed to do better in the future. Better for myself and better for my family who depended on me and was about to grow quite expansive!

Psalm 23 and Self-Care

As a busy working mom, I find it's terribly easy to *do*. *Do* more, *be* more, pursue more, and it's this doing and not enough resting that landed my rear end in an ER room with a kidney infection only months before my wedding day.

It's easy for me to accomplish because doing and being and pursuing and striving are celebrated in our culture. It's noble to pile all the things on our weary shoulders: climb higher, reach for the stars, never, ever quit or give up. It's much more difficult to stop. To rest. To not do. To lie down in green pastures and pursue silence as King David writes about in Psalm 23, where he sets aside his work and pursues peace, stillness, and rest.

When I first received confirmation from my publisher that, yes, they wanted this book, they asked if I could I have it finished by October 2021. I know myself. I could have risen to the challenge because I am not the best at resting and often operate from a “get 'er done” mindset. At first, I responded, “Sure! No problem!” But then I paused. Was this really the best idea? To push this hard in the middle of a move from Tennessee to Michigan? In the middle of building a house? And restructuring a nonprofit? And hosting a podcast? And planning a graduation party for my two oldest? And a being filmed with my family for a documentary project? Oh yeah, and raising a bushel full of children?

I knew I could have a book finished by October 2021 if I had to; but at what cost, I wondered. So I prayed about it. I brought the dilemma to my faithful shepherd, and he said, *ask for an extension*. How do I know he said this? Because I did not feel a peace about having the book finished by October, and when I asked for an extension, my publisher granted the request immediately. Now I'm not maxed out beyond my human capabilities, and this book will still get written (as evidenced by your holding it now!). The Lord met me where I was and provided a solution.

I love learning from the example of King David's life. If anyone understood the concept of fight or flight—a concept I understand well in my busy life—it would have been David as he appeared to live his life mostly in this frantic mode of operation. However, upon a closer glance at his story, which does include fighting and running and making bad decisions that often led to consequences, we also find a man who was well-versed in self-care.

David journaled his feelings, as we witness throughout Psalms. He sang songs of worship to the Lord. He made love to his wife. He gathered in community and feasted and danced! He rested in green pastures. He prayed. He enjoyed the beauty of nature and allowed his soul to find rest in the presence of music.

We can learn a lot about the different forms of self-care by studying the life of David and specifically Psalm 23 (NKJV), which I often use as a prayer when life begins to feel out of control.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

I release my cares, worries, and desire to control the situation. I give it to you Lord and trust your sovereign will over my life.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

Part of self-care might involve me laying down my will for productivity and embracing your will for rest. Part of this rest may involve literally lying down in the beautiful gift of nature you've provided, or maybe it's lying down in my bed and taking a nap instead of pursuing more productivity.

He leads me beside the still waters.

Self-care might look like taking a stroll in nature and breathing in the fresh air you have blessed me with. It might include putting aside the spreadsheet and instead spending time with my husband or children at a park.

He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Oh Lord, restore my weary soul. Breathe peace and wisdom into all the spaces of confusion and overwhelm. Lead me into your paths of righteousness and then give me the strength to obey whatever calling you have placed upon my life.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Lord, as I walk through difficult periods of life, often overflowing with fear or drama or dismay, be my comfort and my shield. Provide me with a peace that passes understanding so that I might stand firm in whatever circumstance life throws my way.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.

As I battle enemies of self-doubt or unworthiness, may I pause. May I invite a good friend over for dinner where we feast upon wood-fire pizza and wine. May the gift of fellowship strengthen me and propel me forward in this life.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Lord, I choose you. I choose your goodness, which is not found in constant doing and striving. I choose to believe your promise for my life, and I choose everlasting mercy in this life and the next. I choose to walk beside you all my days until I breathe my last.

Folks, let's be brave enough to walk away from chaos and the to-do list and the never-ending chores. Let's be brave enough to trust that the Lord will meet us and comfort our weary hearts and bless us with rest and joy and a table overflowing with community. Let's be bold enough to obey and step away to provide a space for self-care to grow in ourselves and in our marriages.

Health and the Caregiver

I awoke in extreme pain in my hips, back, and neck—the same story for years—and I did what I do most mornings. I got Lucas ready for school and then laced up my shoes and embarked on a two-mile walk to loosen my joints and shake off the stress.

And as I walked, I glanced up at the bright blue sky and noticed the beautiful fall colors that resembled a rainbow, and I wept, thankful for sunglasses that hid any vulnerability from the cars whizzing by.

Being Lucas's mom has broken me in a million ways throughout the past seventeen years: mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and most profoundly, physically. My body is in constant pain, and I do most things right. I eat healthy 80 percent of the time. I work out most days. I stretch. I go to the chiropractor. I get acupuncture. I spend 5 million dollars on supplements so I can live forever. I schedule massages. I take vacations. And I'm still always in pain. The specialists tell me to "get my stress under control." But how, I wonder, when I live in a continuous state of fight or flight as I care for a seventeen-year-old with profound needs; my beautiful son who is aging and, in the process, becoming stronger and more opinionated and aggressive at times.

This problem isn't unique to me. The majority of special needs caregivers I've met or talked to throughout the years have mentioned the negative side effects related to being a caregiver. Some are mild, such as headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, or weight

fluctuations, and other symptoms are not so mild and can land a caregiver on the road to rehabilitation for months, if not years. This was the story for Vance Goforth, a caregiver I interviewed on my podcast. He had a heart attack due to the stress associated with caring for his son Joshua, who has profound special needs and autism.

Statistically, 43 percent of caregivers for those with special needs admit that being a caregiver contributes to high stress, and 26 percent say their health is fair to poor (compared to 15 percent of the general public).³

Ryan and I have experienced numerous side effects from being caregivers—not only for Lucas but for seven other children as well. I don't believe every symptom is directly related to the stress of being a caregiver, but I do believe most of them can be traced back to stress.

A few years ago, it was hair loss, which began when Lucas ended up in the ER in December 2019 due to a shunt malfunction. He finally returned to school in the middle of February but then was released from school indefinitely (along with everyone else) in March 2020. He and his siblings were all released and home for months. This was one of the most difficult times of my life—even more so on many levels than my late husband's three-year battle with cancer. It was around the end of April 2020 that I noticed the large chunks of hair falling out every time I brushed it. Or took a shower. Or simply shook my head. And I freaked out. I seriously thought, *This is it. I'm going bald.*

Of course, I did what anyone would do and immediately headed to Google, which confirmed my worst fears. Yes, high amounts of stress over a prolonged period can cause hair loss, but within six to nine months of the stress being remedied, the hair loss should diminish. I gave myself about six months to complete

baldness because I had no idea how I was going to relieve my stress levels during pandemic living.

So, I did the only thing I could do: I started to slowly, step-by-step, put a plan in place that included practicing breath work to mitigate the flight or fight response in which my body typically operated, taking prenatal vitamins, and using expensive hair elixirs. I guzzled bone broth, which is full of collagen! I attacked the problem in true Jessica fashion, which made me feel better but probably didn't help much, as I simply had to be patient and wait. My hair did finally grow back, mostly. It's still pretty thin two years later, but it's not falling out in chunks anymore.

It's good to be proactive by admitting the issue and then trying to change a situation that's gone off the rails. Make that appointment with the doctor or masseuse or invest in some supplements that might help. But in other scenarios, it's simply a waiting game. Our circumstances aren't going to change overnight, but we can take small steps to improve the situation. Overweight? Commit to a daily dance workout on YouTube. Home with a child with special needs? Dance in front of him or her, and call it entertainment for the day—yes, true story with Lucas.

Being a caregiver is hard and holy work, and as caregivers, we must consistently prioritize those tiny drops of self-care throughout our days. Need some inspiration? Try these five-minute solutions and see if you can incorporate a few of them into your chaotic days:

- Stretch
- Breathe
- Hug
- Voxer or text a friend
- Lie on the floor in a full body stretch with your eyes closed
- Splash your face with cold water

- Give your face a steam bath while cooking that pasta
- Dance to a favorite song
- Run around your house a few times
- Bust out a quick round of jumping jacks
- Jump on a trampoline for a few minutes
- Light a candle
- Savor a piece of dark chocolate
- Journal your feelings
- Enjoy a cup of tea

When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I often turn to baking. There's something about the soothing ritual of stirring together ingredients that is comforting in my times of stress. This is a go-to, one-pot, easy, "healthy-ish" blueberry coffee cake that is always a crowd-pleaser, and it goes great with that cup of tea.

Blueberry Coffee Cake

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 sticks of butter (1 cup)
- 1 1/2 cups sugar or 3/4 cup maple syrup
- 3 large eggs
- 16 oz plain yogurt
- 2 cups frozen blueberries

Topping

- 2/3 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp vanilla

Preheat the oven to 375° F. Combine flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt in a small bowl. Set aside. Beat the butter and sugar together. Add the eggs to the butter and sugar, one at a time. Gradually add the other mixed dry ingredients and then the yogurt. Carefully fold in the blueberries. Pour into a greased and floured 9 x 13 pan. Mix the topping ingredients together and crumble over the top. Bake for 30–40 minutes, until a toothpick comes out clean.

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Bedtime

We recently pulled the trigger and did a thing. Kind of a taboo thing. Ryan and I each purchased our own bed. Yep, you read that correctly. We don't sleep together anymore—at least, not in the same bed. It took ten years to get to the point of admitting that sleeping together was detrimental to many aspects of our life, including our mental health, physical health, anxiety levels, and stress management. Sleep is so important for self-care and even more so for couple care when you're raising children and one with special needs who demands to have his needs met at the crack of dawn. We desperately needed our rest to function optimally.

We tried everything. We really did. We bought an expensive Tempur-Pedic® mattress, which I hated. We purchased numerous toppers—some fluffy, some hard as a rock, some in between, all a waste of money. Our latest topper was ruined after a particularly tumultuous night of sleep where I tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable due to my aching hips; and as soon as the sun rose the next morning, I ripped it off our bed and stuffed it into the linen closet. Those of you who are familiar with the sheer magnitude of a king size foam topper can appreciate the strength it took to maneuver this thing into a small space, but adrenaline was pumping, and I was determined to not sleep another night on that particular monstrosity.

Anyway, a few months later we heard a “drip, drip, drip” from the back of that linen closet and lo and behold, we discovered

a leak originating from the upstairs shower. This drip had been going for quite some time, and this expensive topper was now covered in mold.

After hauling the ruined topper to the trash, Ryan and I had a heart-to-heart about our sleeping arrangement. Now, to be completely transparent, I've suggested separate beds for years. I like the firmest, hardest, cheapest mattress money can buy. I know, weird, but if there's any hint of softness or squishiness, I'm toast. I will not sleep, and my hips will ache all night long. Ryan loves Tempur-Pedic®, and if he sleeps on a hard, cheap mattress, his shoulder will ache, and he will toss and turn. And then if my restless leg syndrome kicks in or perimenopausal hormones . . . well, you get the point. We both toss and turn a lot and keep each other awake, which led to the conversation on the edge of the bed.

"Honey," I said hesitantly, "I love you dearly, but I really don't want to sleep with you anymore."

"I know," he agreed. "It's probably time to look at separate beds, but," he continued, "I do have one stipulation."

"What?" I asked, fairly certain it was going to have to do with sex.

"I want to cuddle in one of our beds until the lights go out, and then we can move to our separate spaces."

"Deal," I agreed.

We purchased two queen beds, set them up smack dab next to each other, bought matching comforters, Ryan constructed a custom-size headboard to accommodate our strange solution, and it has been life changing. We can toss and turn to our heart's delight and not worry about waking the other one up. I can sprawl out my long legs and hoard the blankets because they're all mine! And he can do the same. Honestly, the only thing that really held us back for years was a fear over societal expectations—*heavens, what would people think?*

I guess eleven years into marriage, we are over what people think and much more concerned with getting a good night's sleep (and I bet a bunch of you are thinking, *hmmm, that might be something we need to think about, right?*).

Ryan's Take

Jess and I have never been good sleepers, and we are constantly searching for ways to improve our rest. And when I say “we,” I mean Jess shares her latest findings of how and why we don’t sleep and what we should try next. I am more of a “grin and bear it” kind of guy; Jess sees a problem and searches the world to solve it. I love that about her. I never had structured sleep habits before I met her, but she did, and if I wanted to sleep in the same room as my bride, I needed to adjust. I’m flexible, which makes it fairly easy to change my habits as long as I’m willing. Jess had been passively telling me that she did not want to sleep in the same bed with me to avoid hurting my feelings, even though she knew we would both benefit. Turns out, she was right; and truth be told, she usually is (but don’t tell her I said that). Sleeping in separate beds like our grandparents did made me feel old. She did mention this subject numerous times in our marriage, but she typically got an eye roll and an under-the-breath grunt that meant I was not willing to consider it. But once she gets something in her head, I’ve learned to listen sooner rather than later. She needed something to change and needed me to recognize that our current sleeping arrangement wasn’t working. We did finally have the discussion, and after realizing my biggest concern really only involved what other people thought, we went for it. She helped me understand what she was feeling and reminded me how much better we sleep on vacation when there are

two beds (and no kids, which I'm sure helps). And you know, now that we have our two beds, side by side, I definitely sleep better knowing that my constant tossing and turning isn't keeping her awake, and vice versa. Maybe those "old people" who typically stayed married fifty-plus years learned early on that it doesn't matter what outsiders think. You do what's best for your marriage. To those wondering how it has affected our intimacy, I'll say this: when my wife gets enough sleep, she is happier and has a lot more energy for extracurriculars in the bedroom—and for ideas like growing her own vineyard.

Pruning for Self-Care

When we lived on our rural homestead, I had a brilliant idea—of course I did. I have always taken great pleasure in a nice glass of cold chardonnay, and now that we owned thirty acres of hills, I thought, *Why don't we plant chardonnay grapes and make wine?*

I immediately hopped on eBay and found what I was looking for—a cluster of grapevines ready to be planted in our red southern dirt. I placed the order and eagerly awaited their arrival—with visions of my basement shelves lined with bottles of chardonnay, made from my own two hands and from the grapes that had come straight from our land. Never mind that *no one* has ever grown chardonnay grapes in southern US soil, as they are typically grown in climates like Michigan or Northern California because it's the cooler weather that gives them that crisp buttery taste, or so I've been told.

But—I was not to be deterred. I was determined to grow grapes and make wine, by golly.

The grapes arrived, and Ryan and I put their tender root systems into the ground.

“Wow!” I exclaimed about thirty minutes into attempting to entrench a shovel into the hard red dry dirt that was to become my sweet little chardonnay vines’ new home. “This isn’t easy!”

“I told you,” my husband replied. “Tennessee isn’t exactly known for their vineyards, and there’s probably a reason for that.” He winked, slightly annoyed, but he understood that this meant a lot to me, and he’s a trooper like that.

We continued working, and within a few hours those tender vines were planted.

The first year, nothing.

The second year, nothing.

The third year, I was so excited to see tons of growth! Twisty vine leaves going crazy! So crazy that my husband had to tie them up on wires!

“Yay! It looks like we might see a few grapes this year!” I said, enthralled over the prospect of finally fulfilling my dream of making homemade wine.

“Nope,” my husband replied. “Not this year. This year we’ll have to prune these vines back so that next year we can enjoy our harvest.”

“WHAT?! Why?!” I wailed. “It looks so promising right now!”

“I know, babe, but that’s what we have to do to ensure the best harvest. You have to prune to create room for real growth. If we leave the branches the way they are this year, sure, we’ll see a grape here or there; but if we prune them this year, next year you’ll be able to reap a harvest!”

“Fine,” I agreed, disappointed but willing to take him at his word.

That spring we did indeed prune those branches. It hurt to see all that potential being hauled off to the burn pile, but I was excited to see what the next spring would bring, hopeful that my dreams of wine making were only a few months away!

Even the best laid plans can go awry. That fall, I heard, “Jess, they want to schedule a PET scan. They think it might be cancer.”

Fear and uncertainty hung in the air as we contemplated our life that had become overwhelming and had led to Ryan’s health issues. For the past six years he had single-handedly renovated our homestead, a sprawling 6,000 square foot home that was in dire need of everything when we purchased it, in addition to our daily life and work, which were hectic!

We were so overwhelmed we couldn’t see straight. After receiving the news that all was clear on the scan (Praise the Lord!), we knew something had to give, or the next scare might not turn out as positively. It was really that simple; so, we evaluated our lives. What could we say no to? And what needed pruning? After a season of prayer, we knew that it was time to say goodbye to our beautiful homestead in rural Tennessee and goodbye to the grapevines. Goodbye to my dreams of making homemade chardonnay.

We packed up what once was our dream life, and by Christmas that year, we found a home near Nashville, and we moved. Although I never got to see a single grape on those grapevines, a student of mine gifted me with something special on my last day teaching. He and his grandfather made homemade wine from the muscadine grapes—apparently those do well in the South—and he brought me a bottle.

We pruned what wasn’t working to make room for something that might. We said no to rural life in order to say yes to us.

Is there something affecting your mental, physical, or spiritual health? Pick up those shears and prune it. It will sting at first, but it’s worth it. Every ounce of my being was sad to say goodbye to rural life; but in saying goodbye, I said yes to my husband’s and family’s well-being.

NOTES

¹“Caring for the Caregiver,” National Alliance for Caregiving, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.caregiving.org/resources/caregiver-health/>.

²Preetha Anand et al., “Cancer Is a Preventable Disease That Requires Major Lifestyle Changes,” *Pharmaceutical Research* 25, no. 9 (Sep. 2008): 2,097–116, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2515569/>.

³National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP, “Caregivers of Children: A Focused Look at Those Caring for a Child with Special Needs under the Age of 18,” AARP, November 2009, accessed July 15, 2022, https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/general/2011/caregiving-09-children.doi.10.26419%252Fres.00062.007.pdf.