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UNCOMMON

What we've learned about lasting love and overcoming life's obstacles together

MARRIAGE



TONY & LAUREN DUNGY

WITH NATHAN WHITAKER

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Uncommon Marriage: What We've Learned about Lasting Love and Overcoming Life's Obstacles Together

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Kimberly Miller

Published in association with the literary agency of Legacy, LLC, Winter Park, Florida 32789.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dungy, Tony.

Uncommon marriage : learning about lasting love and overcoming life's obstacles together / Tony and Lauren Dungy, with Nathan Whitaker.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-4143-8369-9 (hc)

1. Marriage—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Dungy, Tony. I. Title.

BV835.D85 2014

248.4—dc23 2013038252

ISBN 978-1-4143-9064-2 (ePub); ISBN 978-1-4143-8436-8 (Kindle); ISBN 978-1-4143-9065-9 (Apple)

Build: 2015-08-06 16:23:30

To our parents,
Doris and Leonard Harris
and
Cleo and Wilbur Dungy,
who modeled how to have an uncommon marriage

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Introduction

As we pulled into the school parking lot, I tried to let the moment sink in.

Our twelve-year-old son, Jordan, didn't pause to think about the significance of this day, however. As he glanced at his new school, nestled in a scenic woods setting, he was anxious for me to park so that we could walk back to the sixth grade pod and join the other students waiting on the back porch.

"Bye, Mom," he said before quickly giving me a kiss and taking off. As he disappeared around the corner, he yelled, "Love you!"

Jordan was ready for the start of sixth grade at Learning Gate Community School, itching to head inside for the latest adventure. He wasn't thinking about the doctors' prognosis that he might not live long enough to reach middle school. He wasn't counting the surgeries—more than thirty total—that he'd had since he was an infant. He wasn't fretting over the speech delay that still sometimes made finding just the right word difficult. Instead, he was eager to join the group of jumping and jostling classmates who were waiting for the bell to ring.

As Tony and I talked about Jordan's first day later on, we agreed that enrolling him in a mainstream classroom was an answer to twelve years of prayer. Who knew what more lay ahead for him?

Because of Tony's career in professional football, some aspects of our lives have been visible to the public. Yet it's largely the moments like this one—small but full of significance to us—that have defined our marriage. We believe it's because of our unwavering commitment to support each other and to live out certain principles that we have enjoyed a marriage spanning more than three decades—an uncommon feat in this day and age.

When Tony was coaching, we felt that one of our responsibilities was to model a strong and loving marriage to our players and staff. Now we feel ready to do that on a wider scale. That's not to say that we have it all figured out. We don't feel like experts, and the examples and principles we've tried to follow haven't resulted in a neat, tidy formula. In fact, we don't think that marriage can be captured through a formula or a "to do" list.

Relationships are challenging, especially because the miracle of two becoming one is such a mystery given each spouse's different personalities, desires, and passions. Some days, it seems like marriage is as much about hanging on for dear life, or just trying not to make things worse.

Before we tell our own story, we have to acknowledge that the longevity of our marriage is due, in no small part, to the examples our own parents gave us. Their examples were similar in important ways, like looking to the Bible for answers, but so different in the way those values were expressed in their daily lives. That has meant, at times, we have had to work through the different examples and resulting expectations that we brought into marriage.

So often in life and in marriage, we've discovered, there isn't a clear path. After all, as the apostle James wrote, "How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow?" (James 4:14). Instead, we walk forward, hand-in-hand, and *make* a path.

Looking back, we can see where we've come from and the ways in which the Lord has been present, even in those moments when we didn't know just *where* we were headed ourselves:

- when an anticipated career advancement didn't pan out
- when our expectations, formed as we were growing up in two very different families, clashed
- when I first moved hundreds of miles from my family
- when Tony's job demanded long workdays and extended stretches of time on the road
- when I felt blindsided by a major decision Tony made
- when our kids received extra scrutiny because of who their dad was
- when a middle-of-the night phone call plunged us unexpectedly into the fog of grief
- when we felt called to expand our family through adoption . . . many times.

We could go on and on. The point is this: we are convinced that there is power in story. We hope that something in *our* story will connect with something in yours.

Maybe you'll uncover a specific takeaway for you or your spouse. Maybe something we've experienced will be a warning to you—*I'd better not do that!* Maybe you'll better understand what happens when a biblical principle is lived out—or isn't. Maybe you'll simply experience renewed hope at the thought, *If they can make it work, so can we.*

Whether you are looking at the bleak remnants of a marriage that once seemed so promising, or at the fruit of a great marriage that has flourished, we hope the Lord will use this book to help and encourage you. If you feel that your marriage has hit rock bottom and you're not sure you can live another month, let alone another year, with your spouse, we strongly encourage you to get professional assistance as well. Some issues grow and fester over time, and you may need a pastor or other professional counselor to help you navigate them.

We have spoken with trusted friends and pastors numerous times in the past, both when life has been challenging and the going tough, as well as when times have been great and the wind at our back. In this book, we'll introduce you to a few of the couples who have mentored us along the way. Over the years, we've come to realize that working on our marriage relationship is always time well spent.

It is easy, as the late Stephen Covey pointed out, to let the urgent things of life crowd out the important things of life. There is a difference between the two. The good *can* be the enemy of the best. That is, there are wonderful opportunities in life, opportunities to do good with and for those around us. However, if we're not careful, those good opportunities can pile up and ultimately impinge on the truly critical priorities of our life.

Like our marriage.

We all must safeguard against that.

Tony's career has given us unique opportunities to be partners, both on and off the field. So when it came time to write this book, we quickly fell into a comfortable rhythm. We also made some interesting discoveries.

First, just because we have intentionally supported and encouraged each other doesn't mean we have agreed about every decision or always understood what the other was thinking. Loving each other doesn't mean becoming carbon copies.

Second, those differences, as perplexing as they can be at times, have actually made our marriage stronger and better balanced.

Third, some of our painful memories have been dulled with time. As we tried to recollect those difficult moments, we were pleasantly surprised to recognize that some of them which had been forgiven have truly been forgotten as well, swept away by the sands of time and the gentle breath of the Lord's forgiveness.

We entered into the writing process with the knowledge that a handful of things need to remain simply between us, as husband and wife. We trust you understand and hope that you won't even notice the few times we've exercised that right.

Writing this book has been a walk down memory lane for us, a chance to pause and reflect, even as life surges on around us, to remember many of the shared experiences of our thirty-plus years together. This journey has been more fun than we even anticipated.

More than anything, it has been a reminder that we have been blessed by a gracious, loving God who has walked alongside us every step of this journey, as well as by wonderful parents who blazed a trail for us.

We pray you will feel the Lord's presence in your relationship as well.

*God Bless You
Tony and Lauren Dungey*

BEGINNINGS

Lauren

I couldn't figure out why my pastor, John Guest, kept trying to track me down. My mom told me that he had called three times in the past week. I hadn't missed church in quite some time, so I knew he couldn't be worried about that.

I didn't have the heart to tell my mom that our pastor had also stopped by the house once when she wasn't there—and I didn't answer the door. I'd been home alone when he drove up, and I was sure he was there to talk with my mom or dad. Not only that, but our church, St. Stephen's Episcopal, was quite large and proper. It just didn't seem right to me—answering the door for our senior pastor when I was dressed casually in shorts.

“Please call him back, Lauren,” my mom said. “I'm sure it has something to do with the church and it must be urgent. Otherwise, he wouldn't keep calling.”

It was a busy time for me—I had recently finished my second year of teaching sixth grade and now was engrossed in my own summer school classes. Still, I realized my mom was right. I needed to get back to him.

So I called the church office right then. John and I had a brief conversation in which he did most of the talking. When he finished, I remember saying, “I'll pray about it,” before hanging up the phone.

Turning to face my mom, I said, “You'll never believe why he's been trying to reach me. He wanted to introduce me to a *guy*—some football player with the Steelers. He's supposed to be a Christian, but you know I would never go out with an athlete.” The truth is, I was seeing someone at the time—well, occasionally, anyway. But when John mentioned the Steelers, I think I stopped listening. I had no desire to meet a football player or a coach. “I'll pray about it” was a polite way of saying “No, thank you.”

While I enjoyed playing sports—I bowled, swam, and played tennis and other sports growing up—I had no interest in fawning over an athlete. My brothers were all athletic, and I had watched all the girls at school trying to impress them. They were great guys, but I don't know if those girls knew that. They seemed to be interested in them because of their status as athletes.

Not only that, but my primary focus in those days was my sixth-grade class at Edgeworth Elementary School. Teaching was the perfect career for me. I'd always loved working with children, developing young minds and helping them reach their potential. During junior high, my sister and I had even run an after-school program for neighborhood kids, helping them do crafts and other activities.

After earning my degree in elementary education from Duquesne University, I'd hoped to end up teaching seven- or eight-year-olds at an inner-city school similar to the one where I'd done my student teaching. God had other plans, however. When I graduated, I interviewed and was hired by the

elementary school I'd attended, just down the street from my parents. I enjoyed being able to give back to Sewickley, a suburb northwest of Pittsburgh and the community that had given me so much growing up.

Though I'd expected to teach younger children, I loved sixth grade. My students were eager to learn and not yet struggling with so many of the issues that seem to crop up in middle school. Their parents valued education and were interested in and supportive of what was going on in my classroom.

At the end of each school day, I felt fortunate to be able to share the day's highlights with my own family. I was living at home with my parents; my siblings all lived in or near our family home too. Kevin, my oldest brother, was working and taking classes at the University of Pittsburgh. Averell, an executive with Equitable Gas, lived at home. My twin brother, Loren, was working as a store manager for Midas Muffler and living down the street. My younger sister, Taryn, was still doing her undergraduate work and attending Bates College in Maine. We were a tight-knit group.

My parents modeled very middle-class values. My dad, Leonard, was in real estate and was always looking at business opportunities. My mom, Doris, had stayed home for a while but then went back to work as a primary-care nurse practitioner. We kids knew our parents wanted us to work hard and help our household function smoothly. They expected us to do well in school and pitch in by doing chores and, when we were old enough, holding down part-time jobs. Finally, they expected us to graduate from college, as both of them had. It was a pretty simple formula for my parents.

My brothers were totally into football. Like them, I loved cheering for the "Black and Gold" every Sunday they played at Three Rivers Stadium. Unlike Kevin, Averell, and Loren, I never focused on any of the individual players. When John mentioned "Tony Dungy," that name didn't mean anything to me.

After finally learning why John had been calling and then promising him to pray about it, I tried to avoid him. I honestly wasn't interested in dating an athlete. His matchmaking didn't seem very promising, especially when John said he'd met Tony only once at a father-son breakfast at our church. Tony had been filling in for a Steelers player, Ted Petersen, who'd been the scheduled speaker but had to cancel at the last minute.

That's not to say I wasn't interested in meeting my future husband. My friends were getting married, and I looked forward to joining the married ranks myself. At the same time, I wasn't in too much of a hurry. I was going to wait on the Lord and make sure that it was His voice, not my own desires, that I was following. I was assured that He would answer my prayer in whatever timing He knew was best.

I didn't want to settle.

Plus, I was staying busy, which helped my patience. I certainly didn't anticipate that I would go off to college, return home, and find the answer at my church!

I may have had my doubts, but John wouldn't let it go; he kept telling me that Tony loved the Lord, and John thought we had a lot in common. He was so determined and convinced that God had ordained this relationship that he refused to give up until we had at least met once. I'm not sure I would have admitted it, but he'd piqued my interest enough that I eventually agreed to let him set up time for me to meet Tony.

I was relieved when John suggested Tony come to my house, since I knew I'd have family around

who could make excuses for me if I wasn't comfortable.

Tony arrived right on time that Friday morning. My dad had been coming down the hall when Tony arrived, and after greeting him, he began grilling Tony about the Steelers. My mom came out to meet Tony a few minutes later. Then my siblings began passing through as they were getting ready to go out for the day. By the time he'd been there about five minutes, Tony had met everyone. Tony said it was like a cartoon—one person would leave and another would show up—but he was simply seeing the normal bustle of our household.

I didn't say much at first, but I felt comfortable right away. Tony was smart and respectful, and he had gorgeous brown eyes. He was not at all how I'd pictured a professional football player and coach. He seemed like a nice person.

By the time the afternoon ended, I felt a bit sorry I'd put Pastor Guest off for so long. Then, just before he left, Tony told me, "Give me your number, and *maybe* I'll call you and we can play tennis sometime." I have to admit—I was a little put off by his attitude.

TONY

When I was saying good-bye to Lauren that day, she must have misheard me. What I actually told her was, "I'm headed to training camp and I'll be gone for the week, but if you wouldn't mind giving me your number, I *will* call you, and *maybe* we can play tennis sometime." She'd mentioned earlier that she enjoyed tennis, so I casually suggested we might do that when we got together next.

Lauren still disputes that, but I remember exactly what I said because I had been thinking about what I could say to leave her on the right note. I definitely wanted her to know I'd love to see her again and would call as soon as possible to set that up. When I drove away that afternoon, I thought things ended well, never suspecting she'd decided I must be one of those "players" who had a lot of girlfriends. Shows you the importance of communication in a relationship!

Except for that shaky ending, my experiences leading up to that first meeting were similar to Lauren's. When John first told me I had to meet a certain young woman from his church, I wasn't really interested. I'd only just met John the morning of the breakfast at his church. I had been looking for a girl like my mom—someone who was energetic, athletic, smart, and loved the Lord—and I wasn't against getting help in the search. Just not from someone I didn't even know. Not only that, but I was so quiet . . . what would I do if I didn't like this girl? Worse yet, what if she didn't like me?

By this point, I was only twenty-five, but my career playing in the NFL was already over. Back in 1978, I'd started my second year playing for the Steelers with high hopes, determined to make the transition from an obscure rookie to an established veteran. I led the team in interceptions that year—the same year we'd finished as the champions of Super Bowl XIII. Even so, I was just a backup player, not one of the stars. After that, I was traded to the 49ers and the Giants before finally being cut in 1980.

Suddenly my career in pro football had ended, and I was trying to find out what the Lord had in store for me next. That's when Coach Noll called and offered me a position on his coaching staff. So here I was, back in Pittsburgh. The morning of that breakfast, I never would have suspected that God might be using a pastor I'd just met to bring me face-to-face with my future wife.

I wouldn't have arranged to meet Lauren if John hadn't been so insistent. I couldn't help but

wonder, *This is a church with five thousand people. There are no single guys she could get attached to in this church?* But while Lauren tried to avoid Pastor Guest, I tried to appease him. “Maybe you could just give me her number,” I finally suggested. I figured that would get him to quit calling me and make all this go away.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” he said, “but she’s not the type who’d take kindly to you calling her directly, and she definitely won’t call you. I really need to do it this way.”

Finally, in mid-July, I agreed to meet her. The Steelers were opening training camp that week, so I told John I could see her the morning before camp opened. He pitched the idea that we meet at her house, and she said that would be okay.

When I got to the Harrises’ front door, I took a deep breath and then rang the bell. I had no idea what to expect. When Lauren opened the door, I was *stunned*. She was far more beautiful than I could have imagined from John’s description. She was slim and athletic with medium-length hair. She wore a sundress and little makeup. All of a sudden, the meeting that I had been pushing back from so hard seemed like a really good idea.

If I’d expected a quiet, awkward morning, I quickly learned that wouldn’t happen. Lauren’s dad, Leonard, greeted me, shaking my hand and welcoming me to their home. Lauren led me into the kitchen so we could talk. Her mom, Doris, came in a few minutes later to say hello. She looked as if she could have been Lauren’s older sister. I got to meet several of Lauren’s siblings, too, and I noticed that everyone in her family seemed to do everything at a high speed and high volume, often talking at the same time.

In that way, they couldn’t be more different from my family. My parents, Wilbur and CleoMae Dungy, still lived in Jackson, Michigan, where I’d grown up with my brother and two sisters. My mom wasn’t particularly quiet—she was engaging—but she was more reserved than the Harrises. And my dad was really quiet. He was a listener who would take things in, especially in new situations, and you would have to work extremely hard to draw things out of him. My mom probably contributed about 70 percent of the conversation in our home, whereas in Lauren’s home it was the reverse: her dad was the talkative one. Beyond that, while Lauren’s parents have always been expressive, my parents often have asked our opinion before weighing in on a subject.

I’d grown up in a stable, quiet household. My mom was from Canada and was teaching there when my dad started dating her. He was out of the Air Force and living in the Detroit area, traveling across the border to see her. They were both educators and thoughtful, and their four children were all good students.

My older sister, Sherrie, lived in Jackson, and our set of twins, Linden and Lauren, were in college on opposite sides of Michigan—Linden at Grand Valley State and Lauren at Oakland University. We were pretty spread out. On the other hand, Lauren’s living arrangement was fairly common in the Pittsburgh area. Most of the communities had very close families, where people often stayed close to home after they left high school.

Though our families might have been different in some ways, both my family and hers clearly loved, respected, and supported one another. That made me feel right at home, and I was fascinated by everyone’s energy. The Harrises were so friendly that I didn’t even mind when Lauren’s dad and brothers asked me all kinds of questions about the Steelers.

As the morning wound down, I told Lauren that I'd be leaving for training camp soon but that Coach Noll always gave us Sundays off. That is when I got into trouble. To this day, I know without a doubt that I told Lauren I would call her and maybe we could play tennis. Now I realize that if a person doesn't talk loudly in the Harris home, he might not be understood, let alone heard.

Though Lauren was upset at what she saw as my arrogant attitude, she gave me her number, and I did call her that week from the hall phone in the dorm at camp. I picked Lauren up the following Saturday night, and we went to the Red Bull Inn, a chain restaurant near her home, for a quiet dinner. We talked and got to know each other a little, away from her family this time.

That was the start of a routine that continued into the fall. I would go straight to Lauren's house after practice on Saturdays. We usually played tennis, went bowling, or just hung out. I'd pick her up again on Sunday mornings for church. After that, we'd go out to lunch.

I found out later that since I'm naturally quiet and don't talk a lot about my feelings, Lauren wasn't sure during those first few months whether we were hanging out as friends—or as something more. I certainly thought we were dating. I was the first one off the practice field every Saturday, driving 85 mph on the Pennsylvania Turnpike to get to Sewickley and take her someplace. *Every Saturday!* To me, that was definitely dating, and I was loving it.

And to me, that was the perfect dating situation. Hanging out, having fun, talking with someone I liked. It was different than with any other girl I had ever met. It just felt natural.

We may not have openly discussed being serious or exclusive, but from the earliest days of our relationship, I was certain I had found my future wife. I knew I wanted her to meet my parents, so when they came to town for a game at the end of August, I took them to Lauren's house to meet her and her parents.

Considering how different our parents were, it's amazing how well they hit it off right from the start. They found plenty to discuss. Lauren's dad carried most of the conversation, but he and my dad talked a lot about sports and their time in the service during World War II. Our moms had a lot in common too. Both were proud of their families and talked about their children's accomplishments. Since my mom was a teacher and Lauren's was a nurse practitioner, they also swapped stories about their jobs in two different helping professions.

Lauren

Meeting Tony's parents was eye-opening in that his mom and dad were exact opposites from each other. His dad was very reserved—polite and more of a listener than a talker. His mom was bubbly and extremely outgoing. I could see the personality of a caring schoolteacher in her.

Though Tony's parents were extremely friendly, I couldn't tell if they liked me. Tony says he could tell they loved me from that first meeting, but they didn't share their feelings as readily as my family did, so I wasn't sure. But I definitely cared about how they felt about me.

That evening together confirmed what I'd begun to see: although Tony and I were raised with the same Christian guidelines, our family backgrounds were quite different. And that made our personalities and expectations—not to mention our childhood experiences—distinct.

For instance, I was surprised when Tony told me that, although his parents had always given him presents, he had never had a birthday party. When I was a young girl, birthdays meant celebrating with

my family at Howard Johnson's over dinner and then digging into the complimentary slice of coconut birthday cake. We'd continue the celebration that weekend by inviting our friends and classmates to a festive themed party where we played games, ate lots of food, and had a wonderful time. So I couldn't believe that Tony had never experienced the fun of a birthday celebration. I decided right then to throw a surprise party for him.

For his twenty-sixth birthday in October, I invited some of his friends and former teammates, including the Shells and Stallworths, to my parents' home for a birthday celebration. The house was decked out with black and gold streamers and balloons. I'd planned the party around an Italian theme so I served lasagna with Tony's favorite chocolate cake and ice cream.

That night Tony came in through my parents' kitchen door as he always did. He didn't suspect anything, so when everyone jumped up and yelled "Surprise!" he was totally shocked. He'd just left John Stallworth and Donnie Shell at practice, and now they were right here with the rest of us, waiting for him.

I think Tony appreciated the party, not only because it was his first one but because of the fun and laughter that night. When Tony saw how much joy it brought to me and everyone else to plan his party, it made an impact. He realized that celebrations—and not just for birthdays—were important to me and all the Harrises. In fact, every holiday was a major production when I was growing up. Our house was full of people celebrating and having a good time of fellowship.

Not only did I work to invite Tony into my world, I wanted to know more about his. I started reading the sports section of the *Pittsburgh Press* daily so that I could get a better understanding of what was going on in the football world. The Steelers were important to him, so I read the paper to make sure we could talk about what was going on in his life. I couldn't wait for Saturday to arrive so I could see Tony again. He was so down-to-earth and different from the other guys I spent time with.

Although we were spending a lot of free time together, as Tony mentioned, if somebody had asked if we were dating, I would have had to confess that I had no idea! About a month after his birthday party, Tony and I finally had the "talk." We were sitting in my parents' living room when Tony asked me where we stood—basically asking if we were exclusively seeing each other.

I asked, "Are we even dating?"

We finally got it straightened out that night. The answer to both questions was yes. We were dating, and we were exclusive. I'm glad Tony was willing to broach the topic of our relationship when he did. One thing that attracted me to him was his consistency and steadfastness. Sometimes, though, he had difficulty showing emotion, which made it hard for me to know where we stood. As we edged toward marriage, I noticed Tony becoming more expressive. And he taught me an important lesson: not everyone finds it easy to reveal his or her deepest feelings.

Though I was more outgoing and social than Tony, even I was taken aback by the interest people had in professional athletes and coaches. Tony never appeared annoyed when we were interrupted by a fan, but I remember an early disagreement we had over this issue. We were at church when he got caught up in a conversation with someone who wanted to talk football. I was waiting for Tony in the parking lot by his car. The fan took advantage of the fact that Tony was too polite to walk away, and he kept talking. Eventually, I had to walk home because I couldn't find Tony.

I might not have been thrilled with the unexpected attention from sports fans, but by this point I

had changed my mind about athletes. I realized I had been guilty of stereotyping them all as cocky and self-absorbed. Tony was so different from what I had imagined when John Guest first described him to me. I always knew that my knight in shining armor would be a stable, steady guy who loved the Lord. I never pictured anyone flashy. Tony fit every part of that role. I was quickly falling head over heels in love with him. He was definitely the type of guy whom I had dreamed about for so many years. I thought Tony and I were headed toward the altar, but he was still so guarded with his thoughts that I couldn't be sure.

TONY

John Guest had been right. He thought Lauren and I would hit it off, and we did. I like to think of it as a divine intervention! She and I met in July but saw each other only on weekends until Labor Day. When training camp ended, we were able to spend much more time together.

Once I recognized that Lauren was the woman I'd been looking for, I knew I was on the path to marriage. So many people, especially today, live together before they're married, which seems like a mistake to me because the commitment isn't there. It takes commitment to make it through the tough times that come along when you're under the same roof with someone. Without the bond of marriage it's too easy to just walk away.

As sure as I was that Lauren was the one I wanted to commit my life to, I have to admit that proposing to her was not my finest hour. The two of us were in her parents' family room when I began talking to her about the kind of woman I'd like to marry. I told her I was looking for a woman who loved the Lord, who wanted to use biblical principles to raise a family, and who was generous and caring. Lauren put on a good face, but she later told me that it wasn't at all clear to her at the time that I was talking about her. She thought I was asking for advice on how to find the right woman.

Of course, I had been describing Lauren as a way to lead into my proposal. After talking about the godly type of woman I was looking for, I told Lauren that she had all those qualities. Then I asked her to marry me.

Lauren said yes, despite my failure to be eloquent—or even to get down on one knee.

While I was still seated, I began fishing in my left front pocket for the ring I had bought her. Since I knew nothing about jewelry, I had gone to Don Duffy, a jeweler and the husband of one of Lauren's coworkers, and asked him to pick out a ring for me. Then I swore Don and his wife, Debbie, to secrecy until after I had asked Lauren.

We scheduled our wedding for summer 1982, eleven months after we met. During our engagement, we completed a premarital class through the church, which John required of any couple before he would marry them. Those sessions were extremely beneficial to us. Not only did we learn a lot about each other and the ways we would need to communicate, but the classes reinforced the fact that God's design was for marriage to be permanent. John emphasized that we would have to be totally committed to each other to make that happen.

Because our wedding would be in June, Lauren wouldn't have much time to finish wedding preparations after the school year ended, particularly since she loved her students and wouldn't shortchange them, even to plan her own wedding. But we knew if we pushed the ceremony back to July or August, we'd bump up against the Steelers' training camp and the beginning of a new school

year. Lauren didn't want to return from her honeymoon and go right back to work or have me immediately head to training camp. She knew we needed some time as a married couple before resuming our busy work schedules.

Lauren

Thankfully, I didn't have to do all the preparation for the wedding myself. My mom acted as wedding planner and did a fabulous job. We enjoy a close mother-daughter relationship, so she knew me and my tastes. Together we planned a beautiful, intimate, Christ-centered ceremony.

My mom was so organized and meticulous that she handled the details and kept me updated on the progress while I finished the school year. I still remember her box of three-by-five index cards with the names and numbers of all the service providers and participants. She used tabs to divide the cards into sections related to some aspect of the day, such as the ceremony, the dress, or the caterer. I didn't have a wedding consultant, per se, but with my mom around, I didn't need one.

Tony and I agreed that we wanted an elegant wedding, but we didn't want it to become large and unwieldy. We quickly realized that between all the people I grew up with in Sewickley, all my coworkers from school, and all of the Steelers players, coaches, and staff, we were going to have a megawedding unless we had clear guidelines on whom to invite. But there was no way to do that without hurting people's feelings, so we limited the invitations to family only.

Since even our closest friends hadn't been invited, we didn't talk about the wedding much with other people. We knew they would wonder why they hadn't gotten an invitation. Still, our family and friends were excited about our big day and blessed me with several bridal showers. My mom and sister threw a shower for close family and friends. The parents of my sixth graders organized a surprise celebration, and the teachers at school threw a lovely shower for me as well. Tony even came to that shower, and I was so pleased that he had taken the time to stop by the school. I wasn't quite as thrilled that he showed up wearing his favorite shiny, brown-and-white checkered polyester shirt.

Oh, no, he didn't, I thought. I just saw "the shirt" yesterday, and he is wearing it again today. Tony loved that shirt because it was reversible—brown and white or white and brown. To him, that meant two shirts for the price of one. I may not have been crazy about the shirt, but I knew it was just a sign of Tony's practical side, and I loved having him there for the party.

Before we knew it, it was June 19, our wedding day. We were married at St. Stephen's, with John Guest officiating. My twin brother, Loren, proudly drove me up the street in his sparkling navy blue Chrysler New Yorker with its powder blue interior. He had hand washed and detailed every inch of the car to make sure it was perfect just for us. The service was at one o'clock. It was so beautiful and so meaningful—everything I always imagined my wedding would be. I cried tears of joy as we exchanged our vows and thanked the Lord again for answering my prayers.

Afterward, we had a reception in the church's lower level, which included a catered five-course meal. My mom wanted to be sure that Tony's family, who'd come in from out of town, were well fed.

Tony and I had a wonderful time at the ceremony and reception, and we looked forward to leaving on our honeymoon. Tony had told me that he had always dreamed of a romantic honeymoon in Hawaii, and he had suggested spending our wedding night at the Pittsburgh Hilton and flying to Honolulu the next day. I loved the idea of honeymooning in beautiful Hawaii, but the Steel City didn't

strike me as a romantic starting point for our marriage. I had visions of getting married and boarding flight that day. So we decided to spend the first two days of our honeymoon in San Francisco and then fly to Hawaii.

Once the reception was over, Loren drove us to the Pittsburgh airport. Earlier that day, my sibling had decorated his car with a “Just Married” sign and tin cans streaming from the back, just like in the movies. Talk about a different era—our entire family escorted us to the airport. We wouldn’t have had it any other way!

Since security screening wasn’t much of an issue back then, the Harrises and Dungys, still dressed in their wedding attire, waited at the gate to see us off on our flight. We were in high spirits when we boarded that plane. If we had known what a long day (and night) was ahead of us, we might not have been quite so lighthearted.

TONY

Thanks to careful planning by Lauren and her mom, the wedding had gone off without a hitch. When we left for San Francisco at five that afternoon, we had no reason to think the day wouldn’t continue to run smoothly. After all, I’d made our hotel reservation and even arranged to borrow a car from Paul Hofer, one of my former 49er teammates.

The trip to San Francisco was a long one, since we hadn’t been able to book a nonstop flight. Our plane finally touched down at about midnight. Paul and his wife met us at the airport and sent us on our way in their white convertible.

The first few minutes of the drive to our hotel were great. *How romantic, I thought, to cruise up the 101 Freeway in this sports car, the wind blowing through our hair.* But then Lauren told me she wasn’t feeling well, so I stopped at a convenience store to pick up some medicine. Despite our weariness, the evening still might have turned out fine if I had not broken the car key off in the door. I called Paul from a pay phone, asking him to bring us a spare key.

We finally arrived at the hotel at 1:00 a.m., fifteen hours (with the time change) after our wedding ceremony had begun. When we stepped off the elevator on the eleventh floor, we looked at each other and smiled; we had survived the trip. Seconds later, the power in the hotel went out. With no light to see by, Lauren and I felt our way down the hallway until we found our room. But the truth of it is, with the lights out and nowhere to go, we were able to have the romantic evening we’d been looking forward to anyway!

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

TONY

Just as our honeymoon hadn't started the way we'd expected, my first season as defensive backs coach turned out a bit differently than I'd anticipated, thanks to a players' strike.

Lauren and I didn't see that coming, though, when we returned from Hawaii. We were just glad to have several weeks to focus on each other before training camp and a new school year kicked off. I was grateful that Coach Noll insisted that his staff take off between the last minicamp in late spring and training camp in late July. He told us to make the most of that time—to get away from the game and concentrate on our home life—because he knew our focus had to be on football all season long. I was more than happy to focus on Lauren in the weeks just before and after our wedding!

In early August, I opened the paper to read an article affirming my instincts and potential as a professional coach. In fact, Chuck Noll said that my coaching future was unlimited, that “[Tony could go as far as he wants.”

Pretty heady stuff for me. My new, young wife seemed very impressed too.

Once training camp started, my routine was set. After spending all week at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, I would drive home on Saturday night, stay through church on Sunday, and then head back to camp. Occasionally Lauren would pack a picnic lunch and drive the fifty miles to camp to watch practice and then eat with me. She always brought my favorite foods—fried chicken, potato salad, and homemade chocolate chip cookies. However, she quickly learned that training camp was business time for the players and coaches.

The silver lining for us that year was the NFL players' strike. Seven games were canceled between late September and mid-November, so I was home much more that fall than I ever would be in the years to come.

That enabled us to make one change sooner than we might have otherwise. Now that we were living in Pittsburgh, we wanted to find a church there. Of course, since John Guest had introduced us, it felt a little awkward to thank him by leaving the church! At the same time, we knew we needed to find a church community that was closer to home and that fit us as a couple.

After we started praying about it, one of the Steelers' chapel speakers recommended Bethany Baptist Church. From the first time we visited, we loved Bethany, which was Bible-based, small and intimate, yet full of life. It was exactly what we were looking for.

Pastor Richard Allen Farmer and his wife, Rosemary, were special people. We met plenty of couples our age, but we also looked to some of the older ones to model marriage for us. We developed a close relationship with Mike and Barb Cephas, who had five children and were very active in the church. They welcomed us not only into the church but into their family as well. We became so close that we would later ask them to be the godparents of our children.

No one treated us like celebrities at Bethany. The families did a lot together—whether picnics or bike rides, potlucks or playing games—and while people were interested in discussing the Steelers, it was never the main focus of our conversations. That was refreshing for us. We weren't celebrities; we were just Tony and Lauren. An important part of our growth as a couple was being treated like any other people in the church.

If I had to name the number one thing that got our marriage off to a great start, it was finding the right church home. It provided a solid foundation for us as a newlywed couple. At Bethany, we established the habit of spending time talking about God—and to God—together.

Wednesday night was Bible study night, and Pastor Farmer would have us read different Scripture passages and pray in small groups. It was great for us to see so many couples, like the Cephases, praying together. Through their example, we learned how a marriage becomes stronger when couples make praying and spiritual conversations a priority. After all, spouses talk about everything else—why not their number one priority?

During our marriage, we've learned that how and when we connect spiritually may need to change. When we were first married, Lauren and I began praying together in the evenings after I'd come home from the office. Once our kids began arriving, we waited until we'd tucked them into bed. Now that I am no longer coaching, we find the best time for us to pray together is in the mornings. We make a point to get up fifteen to twenty minutes before the kids do so we can pray and read a devotion together.

Early on, we learned to ask God for two things when praying about decisions: first, that He would give us His infinite wisdom and direction, and second, that He would put us on the same page. Over the years, we've come to realize that when we are frustrated with each other, it's because we haven't spent enough time praying or communicating about spiritual matters to understand each other's hearts on something.

Because of the players' strike, we were able to establish the practice of regularly praying together right away. Once the strike ended that November, however, Lauren was reminded what it meant to be a coach's wife when I would leave on Saturday morning for a road game. Weekends without her husband could be lonely.

Fortunately, she had company during my absences. Just before our wedding, I had decided to make the ultimate sacrifice and buy her a dog as a wedding gift. Growing up, Lauren's family had always had a German shepherd. Though I had never had a pet—not even a goldfish—I could tell while we were dating how much Lauren loved her family's dogs.

So even though I was not a dog lover and was even a little cautious around them, I decided to buy Lauren a German shepherd to show her how much I loved her. I asked her mom to help me but to keep it a surprise. Lauren's mom saw an ad in the paper for German shepherd puppies at a reasonable price, so I gave her the money and asked her to pick one out for me. The next time I came over to visit Lauren, her mom excused herself, drove over to pick up the puppy, and brought back the surprise.

Lauren was surprised all right. After gushing over the puppy and telling me how much she appreciated the gift, she said, "That puppy is so sweet and precious, but she doesn't look like a German shepherd." Her mom assured her she was, despite the dog's fluffy red coat. Lauren named her Casey because she looked more like an Irish setter than a German shepherd. In fact, after a few weeks

had gone by, we still weren't sure what Casey was, but one thing was clear: our puppy was not a German shepherd.

I knew Lauren wanted a purebred shepherd, so I suggested we go to the breeders her family had always used so she could pick one out. She was ecstatic and selected a beautiful black and tan male puppy, which she named Corey. Now all along I assumed that once we got Corey, she would give Casey back. When I asked her about that, she said, "You let me fall in love with Casey, and now you want me to give her back? No way. I love that dog, red coat and all."

So now we had Casey and Corey, who got along great. But it didn't stop there. Lauren had been researching and reading about shepherds, and she said that if we were going to show and breed them, we needed both a purebred male and female. Months later we added Kippy, the female. My sacrificial wedding gift had wound up being *three* dogs.

Our stint in the dog show ring didn't last long. We competed with Corey until he outgrew his breed standards, and Lauren cared for the one litter that Kippy had. She didn't breed the dogs again, though because she couldn't bear to see the puppies go to new homes when they reached eight weeks.

We did agree on some ground rules for our dogs. For instance, Lauren assured me she would not let them in the bedroom. That's why I was sometimes surprised when I called her from training camp or a road game at night.

"What is that breathing in the background?" I would ask. "The dogs aren't in the bedroom, are they?"

Lauren

While Tony was traveling with the team that first year, I used to have both Casey and Corey in bed with me. When he called at night and asked me if they were on the bed with me, I didn't deny it. I told him, "It was just so quiet, and I thought I heard something." My parents' home had always been filled with talking and laughter; now I was alone in a home near woods that felt pretty remote. Also, I knew if anyone was paying attention to the Steelers' schedule, they'd know that Tony was out of town and that I was home alone.

I also remembered what Paulette Shell had told me. The year Tony played for the 49ers, she and her husband, Donnie, who was still playing for the Steelers, rented Tony's house. Paulette told me she was always afraid when her husband was gone. She'd hear noises and put chairs against the doors to feel more secure. I used to tease her because the neighborhood seemed so quiet, friendly, and safe when Tony and I were dating. But that was because Tony was always there with me. When he went away to camp that first night, I started hearing strange sounds too. But I had my loyal and faithful dogs to keep me company and protect me.

During the early months of our marriage, I began redecorating Tony's bachelor pad, remaking it into our family home. His three-bedroom brick house was charming and spacious but needed a woman's touch to bring out its potential. In the living room, he'd stacked the television and lamps on cardboard boxes. I replaced them with end tables. And the colors in the house were dark and masculine, so my mom and I made the rooms brighter and cheerier and arranged everything so our home fit us as a couple.

Tony told me that he appreciated having a woman's touch around. Changing the decor was just one

of many transitions after getting married; we had a lot to learn about each other since we'd met only little over a year before. We wanted to spend good quality time together, growing in our relationship with the Lord as we grew closer to each other.

We knew we didn't want to start a family right away. Our differences reminded us why it was important that we get to know each other as husband and wife. Not only that, I was still teaching and wanted to continue developing my career. I enjoyed my students so much that I wasn't focused on having children of our own yet.

Tony and I had many opportunities to nurture kids as a couple, too, because Bethany embraced the concept that every child should be cared for by the church. Bethany had programs that reached out to the community, such as vacation Bible school and after-school tutoring and activity programs for young people. I was involved in the Sunday school program, and on top of that, many of our friends at church had children. So whether we were going to their houses or they were coming over to see us, we were always around children. Sometimes we'd even invite kids to spend a weekend with us so their parents could get away. We knew we would have kids of our own eventually, but at that point, with Tony coaching and me teaching, we were happy just to be a support system.

A couple of years into our marriage, though, God made it clear that He had other ideas for us regarding children. During one Sunday service, a group appealed for help from the congregation, telling us about the shortage of willing foster parents in Allegheny County.

Tony and I decided to meet with the guest speakers after the service. They'd set up a little table in the back of the church where they handed out information and answered questions. We also watched a video about foster parenting. We left feeling that we could give children some of the love and attention they weren't getting in large group homes.

We continued to pray about it and decided to investigate a little more. We had to have a home study and some background checks done, but soon after that we were approved to be foster parents.

It was such a natural thing for us to do. I guess in the back of my mind I remembered my parents hosting foreign exchange students or caring for kids from group homes in the Pittsburgh area who came to our home for a weekend. Later my mom and dad became foster parents and opened their home to over seventy children. In the early nineties, they would end up adopting two of them, Amanda and Devin, bringing the total number of my siblings to six.

On top of that, many young couples in our church were already foster parents. Because of the mutual support and encouragement Tony and I found at Bethany, we were both on board with the idea.

We completed the training program on a Friday, and that same night we received our first call. The social worker asked if we would be able to take in a little boy named Gypsy. He turned out to be an adorable little seven-year-old boy with curly black hair. He arrived with just the clothes on his back and an infectious smile on his face.

Although he was well behaved and extremely intelligent, early on I thought he might have a tendency to make up stories. For example, it bothered me when he told Tony and me about his eight brothers and sisters, whom he said were "living in California in a shelter with the nuns." When I expressed my concerns to his social worker, she said, "He *does* have eight siblings, and they *do* live in California." Apparently, he had been separated from them at the shelter and was sent back to Pittsburgh to live with his mother.

We ended up caring for Gypsy for over a year. His sweet sister Jayme was in our home for a number of months too. Several times the social worker informed us that a court date for a custody hearing had been scheduled. As the date rolled around, Gypsy would say, “My mom’s not gonna come. She’s too busy doing other things.” Each time the social worker picked him up, though, we’d say a tearful good-bye, thinking we wouldn’t see him again.

Gypsy was always right; his mom wouldn’t keep her appointment at the hearing, and he would be back with us that evening.

This little boy was used to being bounced around. It was troubling. After one court date, though, we didn’t hear a word until late that night. I told Tony sadly, “Well, that’s it. He’s not coming back.” As we were going to bed at about ten, the doorbell rang. By the time we got to the front door, Gypsy had his little button nose pressed up against the window, and when we opened the door he kept saying “What took you so long to answer the door?”

I had never imagined it would be Gypsy. As he walked in, he asked matter-of-factly, “Mom Lauren, what did you make for dinner? I’m starving.”

If the uncertainty was hard on us, it was excruciating for Gypsy. On the one hand, he just wanted to be reunited with his siblings. He wanted his family to be together. On the other hand, he liked the stable environment in our home. He appreciated having a predictable schedule and knowing what was going on every day. He loved the security of knowing we would be there when he woke up in the morning and when he went to bed at night.

One of Tony’s former teammates, Jon Kolb, owned a farm where he kept quite a few animals, including horses. Gypsy loved the peaceful and tranquil environment when we took him there one Saturday, so we went a few more times. During our visits, Gypsy purposely began leaving things behind, like a toy or piece of clothing. He’d had so many disappointments and broken promises that he didn’t believe us when we told him we could come back again. If he left something, he figured we’d have to go back and get it.

We finally had to let Gypsy go because the social worker wanted to reunite all nine siblings in one home. We felt that we were too young and that it was too early in our marriage to take on nine children. And that broke my heart. I remember crying for several days when Gypsy left.

The toughest part of fostering, in fact, was never knowing how long we were going to have a child with us. Sometimes we had a boy or girl overnight; other times, a child would stay with us until the parent’s next court visit.

We did sense that the Lord wanted us to help by being foster parents, but it was tough developing an emotional attachment and then watching the kids leave, never knowing what happened to them after they left our home. The rest of fostering was easy: there was a crisis situation and a child was in danger. The social workers needed to place them in a safe home, not a police station or an office building. Those children needed stability, and we could provide the room—it was that simple.

TONY

As God was bringing foster children into our lives and preparing us for our own children one day, He was also helping us learn to adjust to the differences in the families we’d grown up in. Because we lived in Pittsburgh, we spent more time with Lauren’s family. I enjoyed being around my brothers-in-

law, even though it was not at all like being with my own sisters and brother. While my family had opinions, they usually waited until someone asked what they thought before speaking up. Lauren's brothers didn't hesitate to ask personal questions, and nothing was off limits. When we'd make a major purchase—like a house or a car—they'd ask, "Where did you get it?" "How much did you pay?" and "What were you thinking?"

Their questions weren't limited to our home life either. As soon as Lauren's brothers walked through our door, they'd start telling me what defense the Steelers should run the next week or what had gone wrong the week before. While their probing caught me off guard at first, I quickly realized that was their way of showing that they cared about me and that they welcomed me into the family as a brother. They wanted me to be successful, and analyzing and scrutinizing everything I did was their way of helping. Also, I knew the Bible said, "There is safety in having many advisers" (Proverbs 11:14), so I was open to their advice.

While I adjusted to getting her brothers' input about everything, Lauren learned to accept my parents' unpredictability whenever they came to visit. The Harris home had been more structured than mine, with a fairly regular schedule and dinner hour. Early in our marriage, my mom and dad often drove from Michigan to attend Steelers games, but they didn't always let us know what time they would arrive. Sometimes they even stopped by the mall before coming to our home.

Lauren felt she should serve my parents a proper meal and make them feel welcome, but that could be difficult because she was never sure what time they'd arrive. Sometimes, when it was approaching ten or eleven at night and we still hadn't seen them, Lauren even worried that they'd run into trouble on the road. Rather than stay silent, Lauren eventually told them her concerns. When she did, my parents reassured her that they didn't mind eating late and promised to let her know if they were delayed on the road so she wouldn't worry about their safety.

I admired Lauren's willingness to speak up when necessary, and she sometimes encouraged me to do so as well. For example, when Woody Widenhofer, the Steelers' defensive coordinator, left to become head coach of the USFL's Oklahoma Outlaws, I thought I was in line for his job. Coach Noll had never talked to me about it, but he wasn't interviewing other coaches either.

Lauren kept telling me, "If you want the job, go in and discuss it with Chuck." But I've always felt that if you have to come out and ask, you're not going to get the position.

A couple of weeks after Woody left, Chuck and I were in New Orleans for the Scouting Combine, an opportunity for NFL scouts to watch guys who will be in that year's draft work out together. One evening Chuck asked me if I wanted to take a walk with him to Preservation Hall. I agreed, and I was sure he would use that occasion to tell me I was going to get the job, but he really did just want to go listen to jazz, one of his passions. He said nothing at all about the defensive coordinator position.

I went back to the hotel and called Lauren. She asked, "Well, do you have the job?"

"I don't know!" I said.

Lauren was shocked. "What did you two talk about? How did you end the conversation?" She finally convinced me to at least talk with Coach Noll to find out if he was going to promote me or if he'd decided to go in a different direction. He looked surprised when I finally got up the nerve to ask him about the opening.

"Of course I'm promoting you," he told me. "You know more about the defense than anyone else

on the staff.” Apparently his decision was so obvious that he hadn’t even mentioned it.

Along with the new responsibility, I got a raise, which enabled Lauren and me to look for a new house. We both liked where we lived, but in the back of Lauren’s mind, she wanted to select a home together, as husband and wife. Because her dad was a real estate and insurance broker, he often told us about new developments and offered to show us new listings—all of which coincidentally happened to be closer to the Harris family.

We finally settled on a four-bedroom colonial home in the North Hills area of Pittsburgh, not far from Lauren’s family. John Kolb loaned us his flatbed truck from the farm, and it seemed as if everybody from Bethany turned out to help us pack and load the flatbed. It was like a big church-wide event, with friends loading up our belongings and driving with us to our new home.

I’m not sure what the neighbors thought. Rather than watching uniformed workers and professional moving vans, they saw forty people and a big flatbed truck. We looked like the Beverly Hillbillies as we drove up the street with our possessions secured with ropes to the truck, but it was another great Bethany moment. And when we finished the job, Lauren spread tablecloths on our lawn to set up a lunch and feed the famished workers.

Lauren

With two acres of property, we had plenty of room to entertain guests in our yard. We also had room for a vegetable garden. As I was planning out the garden shortly after we’d moved in, I had my first long, in-depth conversation with Tony’s dad, who was visiting from Michigan.

I had taken him out to the garden and asked him how many inches apart I should plant the green beans. Two hours later, he was still telling me about soil content and photosynthesis. I was burning up in that hot July sun but I loved spending time with him and hearing his knowledge and wisdom. That was the day I discovered that Wilbur Dungy was indeed a man of few words—until you asked him about something he was passionate about. He was a biology teacher with a world of knowledge about the outdoors and plant life specifically.

Now that Tony and I had a couple of acres of rolling hills, we bought a riding mower. I’d always wanted to mow the grass when I was growing up, but that chore was delegated to my brothers while my sister and I were responsible for the laundry and indoor cleaning. I didn’t mind our defined roles and the order and structure they brought, but at times I would have enjoyed doing some of those things my brothers did. When neighbors would ask Tony or me why he made me cut the grass, I told them he wasn’t forcing me. I loved being outdoors, along with the instant gratification that comes from a nice looking lawn and the smell of freshly cut grass.

After Tony’s promotion and our move into a new home, I left my teaching position to be at home full time. We now felt ready to start a family. Beautiful Tiara Nicole was born in late 1984. She looked like a baby doll with her delicate features and angelic face. I would hold her for hours and marvel at how beautiful she was. Having a new baby in the family is a huge transition for most couples, but it really wasn’t for Tony and me. My mom stayed with us for the first few weeks to help out, and I was grateful for her support. But we had so much child-care experience and preparation from teaching and caring for foster children and babies at church that Tiara’s arrival didn’t seem to change much of anything. She was the ideal baby, sleeping through the night in no time.

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