

Final Paper:
“Jim” and “Mary”:
A Happily Married Couple

Joel Sullivan

Introduction to Marriage and the Family
Presvytera Dr. Kyriaki Karidoyanes FitzGerald
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology

Introduction

This paper is the fruit of interviews with a couple whose marriage has endured the test of time: we will call them “Jim” and “Mary”. The interviews were designed to get a picture of who Jim and Mary are, what their experience as a married couple has been like, and how they have resolved difficulties and kept the flame of love alight in their marriage.

Meeting, Engagement, and Marriage

Jim and Mary have been married thirty years. They met in Texas when Jim was at home on leave from the Army. They met at a bar—where they were introduced to one another by a common friend. After dating for less than a month, they got engaged. Mary remembers the moment when she felt that Jim was the man she wanted to marry: It was when he told her that “Christ is very important to me” and wanted to know if she felt the same way.

Mary grew up in a Greek Orthodox family, attending a church where the service was conducted in Greek. Jim was a baptist and Mary knew she couldn't expect Jim to become Orthodox. So they visited churches together looking for a “compromise”: a home they could share. Yet, when they visited a Greek Orthodox parish together, Jim knew he had found his home in the Greek Orthodox Church, even though the service was entirely in Greek and the language barrier was frustrating for Jim.

Stages, Difficulties, and Tools for Working Through Challenges

Mary says that a big part of marriage has been going through different stages together, and with each new stage or environment there are a lot of adjustments. For example, adjusting to changes in Jim's career and where they are living, also adjusting to children and later to the empty nest. However Jim and Mary agree that the biggest change

and most difficult event in their lives together was when their daughter died in 1998. They were both drowning in grief, grief that was so hard to bear that they had no emotional energy for one another. In the face of this great loss, they couldn't resolve even simple day-to-day difficulties. They had to do whatever they could to give themselves and one another time for the grief to heal.

Jim and Mary talked about some ways they faced challenges and disagreements. For Jim, a very important principle is choosing his battles. He learned to ask himself, "is this worth fighting for," and not to argue about things that he could accept. Another useful tool Jim mentioned, which he learned from a marriage class, is a formula for raising an issue and asking for a change: "When you do X, I feel Y; I want Z." This helps Jim reflect on how he feels about something and what he would like Mary to do differently, and share his thoughts in a way that invites dialog.

However, not all differences between Jim and Mary's ways of thinking were areas of conflict. Jim came from a family where celebration was minimal and rare, a small family without much tradition of spending time together. For Mary's family, on the other hand, holiday celebrations were huge. Jim came to enjoy these holiday celebrations; Jim and Mary followed suit in how they celebrated holidays in their own family.

Mary told a story about a past conflict with Jim that stood out in her mind. After she and Jim had been married for seven years, and were living in the city with two small children, Jim came home from work one day, and said "we're moving to the ranch." His plan was to move to a rural area two hours away from the city in two months. Mary was shocked. It was clear as day to her that this would be no place to raise their children. Her response was, "there's gotta be a compromise." Jim and Mary held to their respective

positions for a while before they started to really dialog. Then Mary started trying to understand why Jim wanted to leave the city and see things from his point of view. As she listened, it became more clear to both of them that the main problem Jim was facing had to do with his manager and responsibilities at work. The conflict was resolved when Jim changed positions at work.

The above story shows the importance of a couple conflict resolution principle that Jim and Mary rely on. One principle is to establish a common goal in conflicts of a compromise that is acceptable for both of them, just as they set out early in their marriage to find a Church where they would be at home. Another principle is to strive to understand the other person's needs and desires by listening in a supportive way. These principles stood out not only in this particular story, but in several of the other topics Jim and Mary talked about.

I asked if Jim and Mary found it helpful to talk to other people about the struggles in their relationship. Jim said he tried to avoid talking to other people about marital conflicts as much as he could. When he and Mary are in conflict, he says, "I know I need to love her through it." When tension is high, he copes by clamming up; sometimes things escalate to the point where he and Mary need to write notes to one another. However they know that it's not from a lack of love, but from an emotional overload. Jim sometime says, "emotionally, I just can't be there for you now." In these situations, Jim and Mary need to let time pass for their emotional pain to dissipate. There's a country song, Jim mentions, that says it perfectly: "I just wanna stay mad for a while."

Parenting

Jim didn't really have any idea about how to relate to kids. Fortunately Mary had lots of experience. She came from a large family and had five siblings. In fact, her dad

said that she took care of her youngest sister so much that she was practically a mother to her. What Jim lacked in preconceived notions about parenting, he made up for in his dedication and willingness to learn. Over time he learned how to be Mr. Mom when his wife needed him to take care of the kids. Jim said that once they had kids and started spending time with them, time flew by really quickly.

Spiritual Aspects of the Marriage

When Jim talked about the life in Christ that he shared with his wife, he touched on four themes.

The first theme was a focus on the common ground of Christian faith rather than the differences in certain areas of belief. Jim has found this very important in his marriage and other aspects of life. He feels it is easy to fall into a pit of focusing on differences in other Christian traditions and looking down on the adherents of those traditions, and this is a particularly dangerous temptation for those at seminary. “There's a temptation to hone in on the differences,” he said, “and forget we're all Christians.”

The second theme was that his conversion to Orthodoxy was a process of gradual change. “At first,” he said, “it was just a different place to go to Church; it wasn't a quantum jump.”

The third theme was that of making faith a priority. He and his wife made it a priority to attend Church faithfully, and did so, even when they didn't have a place where they both felt at home. They made it a priority to pray together before meals and at bed time.

The fourth theme was spiritual growth. Through their marriage, Jim feels that he and Mary have grown in the depth of their common faith and have come to a closer relationship with God.

Pastoral Experiences

Jim and Mary had a couple negative encounters with Orthodox priests that stood out from among their experiences together.

The first has to do with the priest who married them and baptized their daughter, who was also involved in their lives in other ways. Sadly, he was defrocked for sexual misconduct, and the scandal related to his behavior ended up costing the Church a lot of money and seriously wounding the parish community where he had served. Jim and Mary were pretty upset with the Church for some time after this happened. However, they have gradually come to see that “it is Christ's Church, it doesn't belong to the people who are 'running it'.”

The second negative experience had to do with a priest in another city where Jim and Mary lived for a while. The priest “barely acknowledged Mary's existence.” Mary felt very hurt by this. “He had a crowd of people he wanted to impress—he cared about what those people thought of them. He didn't seem to care about anyone else.” Jim stressed that a priest needs to show concern for all the people in his flock. He can't pick and choose—he represents Christ, who loves everyone.

The Joy of Marriage

Throughout Jim's comments it was clear that he felt a deep joy in his union with Mary, but he found it difficult to put this joy into words. “The thing is, I just can't imagine life without her... She is so much of a support for me. Now that we have grown so close together, just to be in her presence is a great joy for me. She hurts, I hurt.”

For Jim, God's answer to the question, “should I get married,” was Mary.

Some Key “Take-Home Points”

The following are some of the main points I took from my talks with Jim and Mary.

1. Focus on commonality with others, whether it be in a common Christian faith or other aspects of shared values, etc.
2. Drawing closer to another person (and to God) is largely a process of gradual change
3. We can learn a lot from the people who God puts in our lives: Be open to listening and learning.

Principles for working through conflict:

1. Give ourselves and one another some time to emotionally depressurize first. If necessary, switch to non-verbal communication (notes, email) when emotional tension is too high. Make it clear to the other person: I love you and I want to work this out, but emotionally, I can't be there for you right now.
2. During this time, try not to share too much of the conflict with other people since perceptions are distorted by emotions, and other people may buy into these distorted perceptions and hold on to them after the conflict is over.
3. Choose your battles.
4. Start by establishing a common goal: to find a mutually workable solution.
5. Try to listen and understand what is going on with the other person—try to understand their desires and needs.