Letters to My Daughters

The Art of Being A Wife

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Barbara Rainey, Letters to My Daughters
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This book is dedicated to

Marsha Kay Rainey

Who, on the eve of her wedding, asked if I would share some of what I have learned about being a wife. It was never intended to be a book, of course, just letters, sharing lessons of failures and triumphs, for encouragement and hope.

May you, my sweet daughter-in-love, hear love, always love, in these words.
“We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

2 Corinthians 4:18
And for
my daughters,

Ashley, Stephanie, Marsha Kay,
Rebecca, Deborah, and Laura

and all your friends,
dear gifts of God to you and to me

I love them for loving you:
Lincoln, Sarah, Katherine, Kate, Maggie, Amy, Beth, Margaret,
Ann, Emily, Sara, Andrea, Clara, Hanna, Elizabeth, Christy,
Kacey, Sheri, Natalie, Betsy, Johanna, Amy, Karthi, Teresa,
Brett, Christa, Kathryn, Janeen,
Marissa, Beth, Anjanette, Ellen,
and many more, including new friends I have yet to meet.

For my sweet young friends
Korie, Carrie, Janel, Erin, Kathryn, Tracy, Julie,
and all my reader friends who filled my inbox
with great feedback to my survey.

For you, your friends, and all daughters of Eve,
May these lessons learned give you encouragement and vision
to create with abandon in your marriages
that all may see the image of the Invisible
the hope of redemption
and the beauty of God’s magnificent design for your union.

May your married love draw many to see Jesus.
Preface: Welcome to the Rainey Round Robin 11

1. Marriage Is a Masterpiece 15
2. Marriage Is Like Fine Cuisine 25
3. Marriage Is Like Grand Architecture 47
4. Marriage Is Like Elegant Music 75
5. Marriage Is Like Beautiful Dancing 103
6. Marriage Is Like a Secret Garden 135
7. Marriage Is Like Masterful Photography 171
8. Marriage Is Like Watercolor Painting 191
9. Marriage Is for Ever After 217
Welcome to the Rainey Round Robin
Dear Daughters,

Across the landscape of time, women have depended on other women for answers to the questions we all face. We’ve bravely asked one another about husbands and children, about work and worth, about cooking and cleaning, about friendships, finances, fears, and failures. And if we found ourselves in a time and place without anyone we could ask, we found that we were a bit lonely, a bit lost.

Mary, a young teen about to become a very young mother, went to her cousin Elizabeth’s house to seek comfort and wisdom. She stayed for three months. We can only imagine the questions she asked, the conversations they had. And I wonder, Why didn’t Mary ask her own mother? Or did she? Did Mary run to Elizabeth because her own mother couldn’t get past the out-of-wedlock pregnancy
and personal disgrace to really be there for her daughter? To listen to her thoughts and questions and fears? Or was it because Mary knew only Elizabeth could relate to her experience of carrying a child anointed by God?

There are some things you just can’t talk to your mother about. So you talk to sisters, friends, other women who are older, wiser, and more experienced in life. Someone safer. I will freely admit my girls are cautious with their questions to me, and they should be. Women help each other find the right paths, and I would never want to be their only confidante.

Several years ago I took four of my six daughters and daughters-in-law away on a weekend without husbands and children. On the last night, as we were getting ready for bed, the three married girls started talking about sex. It was decided that they’d all meet in one bedroom and talk. They did not exclude me, but I knew the conversation would be different if I was there. So I excused myself and went to bed. Sometimes we need peers; sometimes we need someone older and wiser. I get that.

In 2001 I began this book as a series of email letters in response to sweet Marsha Kay’s request for my advice on marriage. I included all my married daughters: Ashley, Marsha Kay (married to son Ben), and Stephanie (married to son Samuel). My goal was to encourage them as they began their marriages and were learning what it meant to be called wife. I hoped to impart some small doses of wisdom I’d acquired in my then three decades of marriage. More importantly, I wanted to give them a vision for the value gained from a lifetime of marital fidelity.

Since then, Dennis and I have celebrated our forty-first anniversary, and we’ve seen two more daughters, Rebecca and Deborah, marry. Laura, our youngest, is waiting her turn, and what a party it will be!

When my mother was a young bride in a faraway state, she was part of a round-robin letter with six or seven other women from back home. She always looked forward to seeing the thick legal envelope in the mailbox,
I long to put the experience of fifty years at once into your young lives, to give you at once the key to that treasure chamber every gem of which has cost me tears and struggles and prayers, but you must work for these inward treasures yourselves.

—Harriet Beecher Stowe

for it contained letters from each woman in the group. She read them all, enjoying each touch with that woman’s life. Then she removed her original letter, wrote a new one to the group, and sent the packet on its way to the next woman in line. For my six girls and their friends and anyone else who wants to listen in, welcome to this “round robin” of my original letters, plus many inspired by more recent questions from young wives not biologically tied to me, but still in my heart.

I’ve included questions presented as though posed by one of my daughters. These are not specific questions from any of my girls, but rather compilations from hundreds of conversations with married women of all ages.

I invite you, any woman who wants to create beauty in her marriage, to read these letters and see if my journey might provide you courage and hope. Just as no woman pretends to have all the answers, neither do I. Any good within these pages is what God, as the divine Author, has written through me. It is His work I share. As my mother used to do when the much-anticipated letters arrived, I hope you can set aside your work for an hour, pour a fresh cup of coffee, and read a few letters at a time as if they were written for you alone.

May you be encouraged, strengthened, and inspired, dear daughter, to see a vision of what God might create in your own unique marriage.

Sent with love,
Barbara
Marriage is a Masterpiece
To my daughters everywhere,

One morning in May I began collecting. From the bookshelves in the living room, the bedroom, and my laundry room/office, I gathered all my books on marriage, old journals, and several newer books I had just ordered. After piling them in stacks on the coffee table, I sat on the couch with pens, Post-It notes, and my coffee to begin awakening memories. I wanted to gather for you all that has been helpful to me on being a wife, pivotal lessons learned from the land of “I do.” I began with the oldest book, received as a wedding gift—its pink cover faded, its pages frayed and soft and heavily underlined, and its title still relevant: To Have and To Hold by Jill Renich (Zondervan, 1972).

Off to the side was a book I’d just ordered that had nothing to do with marriage. It was about art. It was about art. All morning it beckoned to me, calling me to hurry and finish my work so I could enjoy its play. Like the promise of a treat
to a child, its beautiful cover kept catching my eye, but I resisted to stay on task. Finally it was noon. I picked up the candy, Makoto Fujimura’s book *Refractions*. Almost immediately I was enjoying the sweetness: the paintings, his reflections on beauty, his call to create.

“A Parable of Roots,” the fourth essay, spoke not a word about marriage, but explored the making of Mako’s painting *Golden Pine*. As I studied the image in the book and read his words of description, I was surprised and delighted to discover that this painting does in fact express relational truth. In *Golden Pine* I saw an image of marriage. It summarized something I want you, my daughters, to know.

*Golden Pine* is simply an enormous painting. It is 16.5 feet x 22.5 feet in size, and executed with pure mineral pigments and more than two thousand sheets of gold leaf applied to Japanese handmade paper. *Sounds a lot like marriage*, I thought as I read the descriptive words *handmade* and *labor-intensive*. The longer I studied the image, the more it spoke to me.

You’ve glanced at the painting, but look again. A secure tree reaching heavenward is the kind of wife I want to be—strong, always growing upward toward the One who made me and outward toward those He gave me to love and shelter. Now count the panels. Nine large panels make up the whole image, each one necessary for the overall effect, yet each an incomplete work if removed from the whole. The separate panels represent so much of the complexity of marriage. Each panel must work with the others to create the finished image of *Golden Pine*. So, too, as a wife, I must work in a multifaceted way in my marriage. Some situations where I function as a wife call for empathy and silence, and some for strong yet kind words of truth. Sometimes I help my husband in practical, tangible ways; sometimes I help by backing off; and sometimes I help with words that are a gentle nudging, a reminder, an encouragement to keep trusting.

Just as one panel of the painting features roots, and another the trunk, I see my life in pieces, too: as helper and lover, one who respects, believes, and trusts. Yet all must work together, connected, intertwined daily—like the roots of a tree that dig into the ground and the limbs on the branches.
that forever twirl and twist outward. The panels of *Golden Pine* work together to create a complete image. Marriage is to be like this painting: strong, growing, multi-faceted, richly developed, and reflecting the Light of its Creator.

Which reminds me of an important truth about marriage. I’ve not seen the actual painting of *Golden Pine*, since it hangs in Hong Kong. Someday perhaps. But viewing this reproduction seems so much like viewing any marriage from afar. We do not know the depth of beauty and grace in the marriages around us. Nor can we see in other marriages what the Artist might have done if not stopped by unbelief. But to see God create and rescue and redeem in my marriage is like the experience of seeing a Mako masterpiece up close, which
I have in New York City. His work is stunning and seems to glow from within as if touched by the Light of heaven. So, too, God wants my marriage and yours to inspire wonder in those who are close enough to see the radiant beauty only He can create.

How I want this for my marriage and yours—not only to see God’s design clearly but to experience His gifts deeply. Both husbands and wives are imperfect humans, and we often have a difficult time blending all aspects of our lives in a balanced way. I’ve often felt the need to focus on one aspect of my life so that I can get it right (I always tend to think there is a “right” way), but in doing so I neglect other areas. In Mako’s painting I see how each panel, like each function in marriage, is important and not interchangeable. When Mako was creating Golden Pine, he worked on all nine panels simultaneously so that what he executed on the lower left panel connected to the panel to the right and the one above. He had to keep the whole in mind while working on each individual piece.

We must do the same as wives. My gifts and my responsibilities in marriage cannot be isolated one from the other. It is part of the challenge and the mystery of marriage—how we cooperate with God, who designed us for this, remembering it is He “who is at work in you” to create a relationship of great beauty worthy of His glory.

Marriage, like painting or any of a million other creative ventures, requires time, money, energy, and effort along with ever-present risk. What if this idea doesn’t work as I envisioned it? What if it is not received? Many great artists have had their work criticized, marred, and even rejected. So, too, has God. His intricately
Our marriages are meant to be statements of wonder to the watching world, statements of the goodness, the power, and the beauty of God.
crafted union of male and female also posed a risk of significant proportions. He knew marriages would fail, that His hoped-for plans of glory would not all be as He envisioned. Many see His design as if it were diabolical, a piece of art they find ugly. They don’t see the loveliness of His Word to us, of His names for us, and instead call them restrictive and distorted. Even those of us who welcome God’s plan for marriage are often bewildered by some of the elements He adds to His chosen form. We question submission. We resent our differences. Rather than trust the Master Artist, the Supreme Designer, we critique his masterpiece, as if we know better. Yet with each pigment, each stroke, each design feature, God is speaking to the watching world about His character and love. Marriage is a mystery we will not unravel.

Marriage is so worth fighting for, so worth keeping and enjoying, giving oneself to completely. For God has planted marriage in every culture so that His message of love can be seen in unions of beauty generation after generation.

Just as we look with awe at Golden Pine and think, Wow, how did he do that? I can’t imagine, so our marriages are meant to be statements of wonder to the watching world, statements of the goodness, the power, and the beauty of God. My fascination with this painting leads me to want to know Mako the artist himself, to learn from him, to see his talent up close. And so it is that admiring a beautifully mature marriage makes us want to know both the couple...
and the Creator. And that is the eternal purpose for marriage, making Him known.

As we talk together about being a wife, it’s so important that we keep the big picture in mind. So as you keep reading, remember:

- Marriage is an unfathomable mystery with hidden rewards to be discovered together.
- Though there is a form to be followed by faith, there isn’t a foolproof formula.
- Come with an open heart, unafraid to hear the whispers of heaven.

Love and prayers,
Mom
An idea conceived
Before Adam and Eve,
Before Days, Stars and Nights
Before Darkness and Light.
Belov’d Splendor rebelled.
Cruel mutiny. Quelled.
Lo, betrayal divorced
Divine Love, rent by force.

Three in One then imagined
Fresh canvas and passion,
For Beauty, her Man:
A new story began.
Designed to show oneness
Create pure abundance.
Heav’ns hope now revived
Holy Sabbath arrived.
A dark shadow too shrewd,
Sly sin lied, trust unglued.
Not betrayal again!
When will rebellion end?

Witness thousands of years
Wedded joys and sad tears,
Watching gazes of angels
will these two be faithful?
The manger, the cross
Rescued, set free those lost.
Will my union reflect
His joy to resurrect?

Spirit, my Guide
Restore me, as His bride
To believe every word
Of the song yet unheard.
Our creation to be
Like Thee, O Trinity
Create, sculpt, refine
Me, my Savior divine.
Our marriage reflection
A pleasing redemption.
May we plant, paint and sing
Together for the King.

—Barbara Rainey