

Chapter 1

What If This Is As Good As It Gets?

Sooner or later, if you haven't already, you and your spouse are going to wake up one morning, look at each other and ask: *When we got married, did you think it was going to be like this?*

Or, as a hit movie once put it, *what if this is as good as it gets?*

But that's not the worst of it. Today, most families are two-income, meaning that there are *two* people in the same situation. That's double-trouble! Couples spend the time they aren't at work shuttling children to and from band or soccer practices (or imposing on friends and relatives to do so). They prepare and eat quick dinners (or grab non-nutritious fast food from the nearest corner outlet).

Once home, they rush from homework to lawn work, from washing the clothes to bathing the children, from making lunches to making three dozen cupcakes for a Girl Scout meeting, from cleaning the house to cleaning the garage. Make your own list.

And at the end of this chaotic day, they collapse in bed – too tired to be intimate, too tired to read, and many times too tired to even talk. Their reward? They get to do it all again tomorrow. It's a fairly common occurrence. And why shouldn't it be? Think about it for a moment:

The average person who works for the typical American corporation spends between 45 and 60 hours each week working. Factoring in a liberal three to four weeks of vacation (which most people do not get), that translates into three to four continuous months of work for every week off!

Now, during that same 48-week period, if the same person spends 6 hours each weekday and 16 hours each weekend day with his or her spouse and children, that person will enjoy four continuous months of family time for every eleven. But that means six hours *every* week day, and 16 hours *every* day of *every* weekend. So at the *very best*, the average person works as much or more time than they spend with their spouse and family.

For Better or Worse, in Presence or Absence?

That's not the way most of us had it planned when we said our *I do's*. Our vision of marriage may not have been the Cleavers, but it wasn't the Jetsons either. We wanted something pretty simple – for our lives to get better, and for us to be together.

The tragedy is this – the average husband and wife spend most of their time apart from each other and apart from their children! We know, because we used to be the average couple.

Six years ago, we got tired of being average. For Chuck, there was a single moment that defined his search for a new direction. Some might say it was a flash of brilliance, while others may call it a mark of stupidity. We know what it really was – *a glaring realization of the obvious*.

Chuck

It happened one evening while driving home from yet another long day at the office. Who knows why, but I started doing a short life assessment:

- I am 30 years old.
- I have a beautiful and charming wife whom I love with all my heart.
- I have a nice home in a wonderful warm-weather climate.
- I have a really funny basset hound named Elmo who is always ready to play.
- I live two hours from the southern Appalachian mountains, and three hours from the Atlantic coast.
- I have four guitars and a piano.
- I have an active church involved in more good works than I can even list.
- And, I have virtually no time to enjoy any of them.

I was home before I knew it – one of those frightening driving experiences when you don't remember any of the usual landmarks, none of the instances of the particular trip. You just suddenly arrive without remembering anything. That's how hard it made me think.

Aprill and I would soon celebrate our 9th wedding anniversary, and it had become common for us to spend only one or two hours a day together. And those were the leftover hours – the ones with a lot of yawning, sighing and glassy-eyed stares. It was about all I had left after 14- to 16-hour days. Some weeks were even worse with two to three nights of overnight travel.

Because Aprill's job was more 8:30 to 5:30, she had hours and hours alone. Most days she woke up after I had already left for work, and she got home first every day. Dinner time was never a constant. Trying to predict when I would arrive was impossible. Some nights it was 7:00, others 9:00. Some times he would call at 7:00 and say he was on his way, only

to be snagged at the door for an impromptu one hour discussion. Late again.

But for April, her biggest frustration was that she had lost control of her day to day life.

April

I found myself in a fairly good job situation. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to make me get up every morning and put on those pantyhose, squeeze my feet into those pumps, endure lower back pain from the commute, and make me smile on payday.

But things could be better – a lot better. It would be nice to have a more flex time, the ability to make my own schedule, and to go grocery shopping at some time other than Saturday. Even though my boss was a very nice man, I still did not want him in charge of my life. But he was.

And as the pace seemed to get more and more chaotic, I couldn't help but feel there must be more to life than working and saving for retirement.

I found myself envious at times of my stay-at-home-mom friends, until I realized it wasn't a lot better for them. They didn't have a perfect situation either, but from my point of view, at least they did get to wear sneakers every day of the week and they didn't have to pay for day care.

Of course, many complained that they never got to interact with adults, never had a reason to stop eating between meals, and never had any extra money. But how would they ever find a job situation that would allow them to build a schedule around Mother's Mornings Out and pediatrician appointments? The pull of *the real world* was strong, and several of my friends didn't know how much longer they could wait for that *perfect* situation.

Regardless, I had come to agree with Chuck. *This wasn't how it was supposed to be.*

We married for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. We didn't marry for present or absent. In essence, we married to spend our lives together, not in separate, parallel pursuits of individual careers.

Don't misunderstand this – we had nine enjoyable years of marriage behind us. We were well-traveled and had bonded with some common interests. We laughed a lot, had a good network of friends, and liked our positions as *up-and-comers* in our respective companies. The future was bright. Still, something was wrong. We were wasting our lives by wasting too much time being away from our best friend – each other.

After time alone with our thoughts, a pivotal moment came. Chuck hadn't told me about his revelation during his drive home. I hadn't told him about my frustrations. I walked by the sofa one night and casually said "listen to this – no one on his deathbed ever says 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'"

The Start of Something Big

That simple statement did it. From that point, our lives' priorities did an immediate shift. We decided it was important to fulfill our marriage vows as we believed they were supposed to be made. We wanted to spend our lives with each other. And this was key – *we wanted it badly enough to overcome our fears of giving up regular paychecks*. Others call it job security. We now call it the myth of the paycheck. (More on that in chapter 2.)

We had the *what* covered. We even had the *why* covered. Now we had to figure out the *how*.

We weren't wealthy. We weren't even well-off. We weren't even well. We had a mortgage, two car payments, credit card bills and all the other symbols of middle-class American success. Quitting work and retiring at 30 was totally out of the question. We had to work, so why not *together*? And in the politically correct 1990s, where spouses

working for the same company was frowned upon, that most likely meant starting and running our own business. It wasn't just a shift for us – it was a total social and economic overhaul for our family unit.

Seven years later, we are certain of one thing – it was the best decision we ever made. We now spend our mornings, afternoons and evenings together. We have several hours every day to pursue our own individual interests, without the guilt of always being apart!

Jokingly, we tell our friends that there are four types of married people. First, there are those who don't work with their spouses and don't want to try. Second are those who work with their spouses and love it. Third are the ones who wonder if they could work with their spouses. And the last group are those who worked with their spouses, hated it, and now have new spouses because of it, with whom they refuse to ever work!

That leads us to a hidden truth:

Group three is full of people who could and should be in group two! They have the desire, the skills and the temperament to pull it off. And, they have the most important reason of all – the need to be in more control.

Which group are you in? Here's an exercise that may help you find out:

Exercise:

To how many of the questions below would you answer *yes*?

- Do you love your spouse?
- Do you ever wish your lifestyle was one that allowed you to spend more time with your spouse and children?

- Do your children's activities and life requirements (meals, preparation for school, etc.) take more than 25% of your leisure time?

- Do you ever find yourself thinking that life would be easier if you had more control over the necessities of living (going to the grocery, cutting the lawn, getting the car serviced, etc.)?

- Do you go to sleep every night with something you count important left undone?

- Do you frequently give up your daily quiet time for things that you are forced to declare more urgent.

Here's the surprise: if you answered yes to even *one* of the questions, you are a prime candidate for a happier life working with your spouse. But don't just believe us, read on!