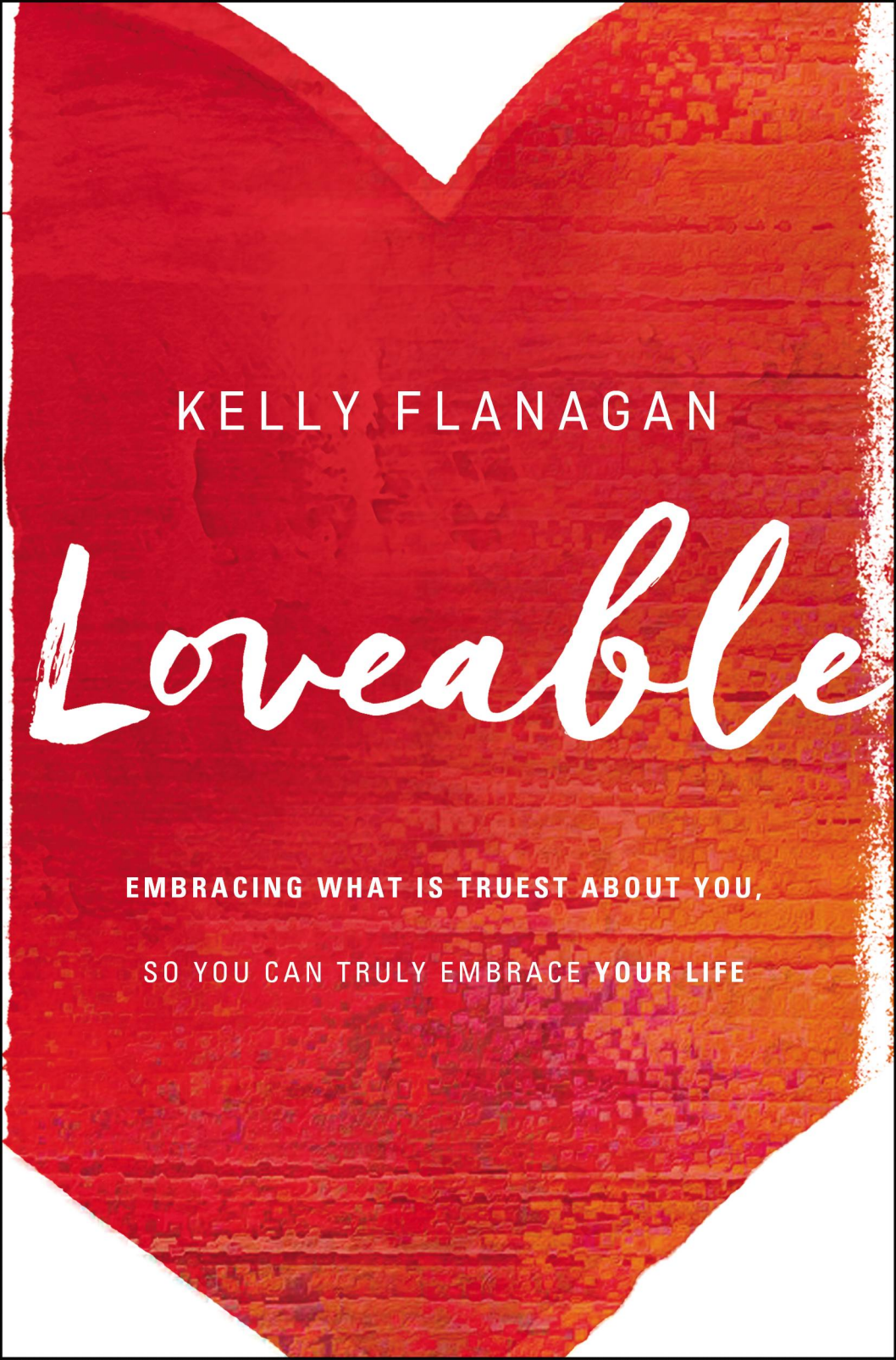
KELLY FLANAGAN
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EMBRACING WHAT IS TRUEST ABOUT YOU,
SO YOU CAN TRULY EMBRACE YOUR LIFE

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The two most important days in your life
are the day you are born
and the day you find out why.

MARK TWAIN

Contents

A Glimpse Behind the Scenes

Happy is he who still loves something that he loved in the nursery: he has not been broken in two by time; he is not two men, but one, and has saved not only his soul but his life.

G. K. CHESTERTON

In a way, I guess, the writing of this book began with a coffeepot. And a typo.

A few years ago, our old coffeemaker finally gave up the ghost, and we replaced it with a newer model featuring a bunch of buttons, a ceramic carafe, and no hot plate. According to the advertising, the carafe was so state-of-the-art it could keep the coffee hot without assistance. Like magic.

It was not magical.

The first pot of coffee was lukewarm. So was the second. By the third pot of tepid brew, my wife and I were turning to Google for answers. I intended to type "how to keep coffee hot," but accidentally typed "how to keep h," and before I could finish my question, Google autocompleted my search: "how to keep him interested." Curious, I hit enter, and was greeted by countless articles about how to be sexy and subservient, when to bring him a sandwich and when to bring him a beer. And most of them were written by *women.*

Suddenly, *I* was a little hot.

My daughter, Caitlin, was three years old at the time, and I imagined her as a young woman, searching the internet for ways to keep her boyfriend or her husband interested in her, only to discover it would require her body and her obedience. I imagined how sad and lonely she would feel as she read those articles, and I wanted her to know she is worthy of interest—and of a husband who *knows* she is worthy of interest—regardless of how she looks or what she does. So I wrote Caitlin a letter and, when I read it to my wife, it brought tears to her eyes. I had intended the words for my daughter, but it turned out my wife also needed to hear them. So I thought others might need to hear them as well.

I posted the letter to my blog, and within a week it went viral.

The second time I wrote a letter to Caitlin, I was standing in a makeup aisle. Several weeks earlier, a friend had texted me from a different makeup aisle. He had a young daughter too, and he said he was disturbed by the many messages about beauty surrounding him there. He said it felt oppressive. I wanted to understand what he was feeling, so I visited a beauty aisle myself.

As I stood in the aisle, I knew *exactly* what he was feeling.

Again, I imagined Caitlin, a decade older, standing in that same aisle, absorbing all the messages suggesting her worthiness is dependent on her prettiness. I wanted to challenge the voices of the beauty industry with the voice of a father, telling her that beauty isn't something she starts putting on her face in adolescence; it's something that was put into her soul from the very *beginning*. I wanted her to know worthiness isn't something you buy in a store; it's something you discover within yourself.

So I sat down in the aisle, pulled out my laptop, and wrote Caitlin a second letter.

When I got home, I read it to my wife and, once again, she

cried. So, once again, I posted the letter to my blog. This time, it went so viral that Caitlin and I ended up on the *TODAY* show. In the wake of our television appearance, I began asking myself why the world was so eager to hear the words I was writing to her. And slowly, it began to dawn on me: it's not just little girls who need to be reminded of their inner beauty—*all* of us need to be reminded of our worthiness and the power we have to live beautiful lives.

It turns out, there is a little one in all of us.

The little one inside of you is your truest self—the you who existed before things got confusing, before guys started telling you that you had to bring them a sandwich to be interesting, before an industry started telling you that you had to buy a product to be beautiful, before you had to be tough to be enough, before you had to be cool to survive in school. The little one inside of you is the you who is most aware of your worthiness. But it is also your most wounded you, because that little boy or girl was on the front lines when the world started telling you that you weren't enough.

Recently, our oldest child, Aidan, who is in middle school, walked up to me and, out of nowhere, said, "Dad, I wish I could remember what I was like when I was a little kid." When I asked him why, he said, "Because then I'd know who I really am. Middle school takes that away from you."

There is a worthy yet wounded little one in all of us.

To be honest, the love letters I write to my kids are also love letters to the little kid inside of me. The shame and loneliness and confusion I hope to ease in them are the shame and loneliness and confusion I already carry within me. As I invite my children to awaken to their worthiness, belonging, and purpose, the little one in me slowly reawakens to his own worth, place, and passion. If you're a parent, maybe you know what I'm talking about. If you're not a parent, maybe you know what I'm talking about too.

Because we all have a little one inside of us waiting on a love letter.

This book is a love letter to my children, but it is also a love letter to myself, and to you, and to anyone who has a little one inside of them waiting to be whole again. And it's a love letter written in a very specific order, because as a therapist—and as a human being who has needed some therapy of his own—I've learned over and over again that a life well lived is like a story well told: it has a certain order and progression to it. The four parts of this book reflect that story-like progression, from the *backstory* through three acts: *worthiness*, *belonging*, and *purpose*.

The Backstory. Over the years, I've come to believe most of what we call life is really just backstory—people, places, and pain that set the scene for our story to really begin. Here, we'll explore the frustrating and fruitless ways we spend our days trying to find worthiness *outside* of ourselves. And we'll begin to consider a blessed possibility: the time we've spent suspecting we're no good and looking for someone or something that will finally make us feel good enough is all just staging for our first act. It's the dark moment before the dawn of our awakening.

Act One: Worthiness. The first act of life, and of this book, is an invitation to pause—to stop doing and striving and proving—and to become present to ourselves once again. It's a chance to glimpse and to greet the worthy little one who has been living within us from the beginning. It's an opportunity to rest into the soul we've forgotten—this good and beautiful thing we were before life started convincing us we were something else. It's a long and slow embrace of the worthiness we've possessed all along.

Act Two: Belonging. Having begun to embrace our true self once again, we begin to make ourselves truly known to the world. In other words, we start risking the loneliness of rejection, because

the loneliness of never being authentically known is a far worse fate. Here, we will envision how, when we love and live from our true self, our relationships and communities are transformed from places of escalating conflict into places of enduring connection. Here, we will envision what it looks like to become unlonely.

Act Three: Purpose. The third act of life is made possible by the first two. Now, with clarity about who we are and support from the people around us, it's possible to spend our days awakening to the passions that have been hibernating somewhere deep inside us all along. Here, we will imagine the challenges and opportunities that present themselves when we lean into our worthiness, lean *on* our people, and choose to do the things we long to do.

As you journey through these pages, it's important to approach this book as a love letter, not an instruction manual. It's not about getting from point A to point B so you can retire from the challenges of being human. The progression from worthiness to belonging to purpose is not something that happens once—it happens over and over again. We cycle through it. We write sequel after sequel in this story we call life until, eventually, the final page is turned. This love letter is not about finding the solution to life; it's about stepping into the ongoing *rhythm* of life.

Readers of my blog know I don't write about the six simple steps to getting anywhere or overcoming anything. Shame, loneliness, and confusion aren't typically healed by new ways of thinking and doing but by new ways of *seeing*. I'm not as interested in opening your mind to a bunch of new ideas—though there are a number of those in here—as I am to opening your *eyes* to the you who has always been inside of you and the life that has always been available to you.

Because the really good news is, once you see it, you can't *un*see it.

Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life

are the day you are born and the day you find out why." There is a reason for your life. Yet you cannot truly awaken to it until you have first loved yourself well and allowed yourself to be loved well by others. I hope this book will initiate an awakening for you, or if your awakening is already underway, I hope it will bring clarity to the story you are already living. Like any awakening, it will require patience and determination and courage and risk and a little bit of adventure. But it will be worth it. Indeed, *you* are worth it.

Because you, dear reader, are *loveable.*

The Backstory

The Wound, the Search, and the Healing

All grown-ups were children first.
(But few of them remember it.)

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

CHAPTER 1

The Original Wound

Sometimes it is necessary to
reteach a thing its loveliness.

GALWAY KINNELL

The whiteboard advertised our wounds.

In Illinois, licensed clinical psychologists are required to accumulate twenty-four hours of continuing education every two years. I'd signed up for a weekend seminar about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy—a cutting-edge cognitive-behavioral therapy—figuring I could complete half my hours in just two days. Continuing education classes are typically tedious and boring and not terribly educational.

The weekend of the whiteboard wasn't typical . . .

The instructors begin the seminar by telling us we will be learning the therapy by *experiencing* the therapy. So we start with breathing exercises and periods of silent, mindful reflection. During one exercise, we identify painful words and phrases that have become embedded in our core, and then one of the instructors asks us to say our words out loud as she writes them on a whiteboard. What emerges is a breathtaking array of pain encapsulated in two words: *not enough.* We are a roomful of psychologists who feel not smart enough, not attractive enough, not tall enough, not successful

enough, not popular enough, not influential enough, not powerful enough, not strong enough, not *anything* enough. What words are embedded like shrapnel in my soul?

Not interesting enough. Boring, forgettable, expendable.

Gazing at the words on the whiteboard, I'm beginning to wonder if there is something emotionally toxic in the Chicago drinking water when the instructor reaches up and pulls down a movie screen. After tapping a few keys on her laptop, she projects a photo of another whiteboard onto the screen. The words are arranged differently and written in different colors, but they are all there—the same not-enough words—on a different whiteboard in a different state.

When she taps the keys again, the image of still *another* whiteboard appears. This one had been captured in a different country. Another tap. Another whiteboard. A different *continent.* She and her colleague had conducted the same seminar in widely diverse settings around the world, and yet they still mined the same not-enough words from the hearts of human beings everywhere. Apparently, at least one thing is universal: we all share an experience so powerful and ubiquitous it has wrapped its invasive tendrils all the way around our bruised and broken planet.

It's called shame.

For millennia, the word *shame* has connoted dishonor and disrepute. Still today, we tend to think of shame as a rare, complicated, and disgraceful emotion. But shame is not rare; it is actually quite common, even universal. And shame is not terribly complicated either. Shame is simply the belief we are not enough. It is the core conviction that we are without sufficient value—that we have somehow fallen short of this thing called worthiness. This belief then takes many forms,

including thoughts and feelings, and it is most palpable as a haunting whisper issuing from the shadowy corners of our mind, telling us life is a test that we're failing and a competition that we're losing. Usually, the whisper has been there so long, we don't experience it as a deceptive intruder distorting our reality. Instead, we experience it as our trusted *narrator*—the familiar voice in our head, telling us the truth about who we are. So, when it tells us we are less than enough, we believe it.

However, at the center of every human being is a spark of God—a smoldering ember of the divine—and regardless of the mess we make of things, the wreck we make of our lives, our insecurities and doubts and fears and mistakes and transgressions, nothing can extinguish it. We are, each of us, a uniquely embodied soul made in the image of God, and that part of us cannot be unmade. The dictionary defines *worthy* as "having adequate value." As the living, breathing bearers of the eternal, transcendent, and limitless Love that spun the planets and hung the stars, we qualify. And then some. The foundational truth of our humanity is that we are worthy enough to participate in this "cosmic dance," as author and Trappist monk Thomas Merton calls it. It is this truth that our shame relentlessly calls into question.

Shame whispers in all of us, and it usually begins whispering *early*, which is why I call it our "original wound." Most of us first experience it sometime in toddlerhood, before we're old enough to decide what we let into our tender hearts and what we keep out. If we were mistreated or abused in our early years, the doubts about our worthiness are likely to become central to our identity—we don't know who we are without them. But even if we lived a fairy-tale life—and some of us do—we are never completely spared from the effects of shame because, somewhere along the way, someone whose opinion mattered to us failed to reflect the worthiness within us.

For instance, I'd like to believe middle school is entirely responsible for Aidan beginning to forget who he is, but I know, despite my best efforts, I've played a part in wounding him too. He is a free spirit, much more like his mother than like me. He is always forgetting something or misplacing something or leaving something unfinished. And I regularly express—in both subtle and not so subtle ways—my disappointment that he is not as meticulous as me. Disappointment is the most common delivery system for shame, like a Trojan horse you roll into a kid's heart. When night falls, shame climbs out. I love my son, but I've unintentionally rolled Trojan horses into his heart. When a parent or a friend—or anyone we look to for our sense of identity—expresses disappointment with who we are, the Trojan horse rolls in.

None of us emerge from childhood unscathed.

Is it any wonder, then, that the symptoms of shame are everywhere? Is it any wonder we compete for worthiness in virtually everything we do? When kids form cliques. When bullies bully. When teenagers compete on athletic fields as if they're battlefields. When young girls dress seductively. When young boys flex their muscles and their machismo. When we chase careers like our salvation depends on the next promotion. When we covet a certain house in a certain neighborhood as proof we've "arrived." When we dread being known, yet fear being forgotten. When we bury our mistakes, and our feelings. When we look out at the world from behind the masks we wear and wonder if we measure up.

Almost daily, my three kids come to me competing for my approval, angling for the experience of worthiness they think I can bestow. They act as if worthiness is a scarce resource for which they must search—like hidden, colored eggs on Easter morning. They think they must find it somewhere outside of themselves and fill their baskets with it, and they fear someone else will get to it first.

Their shame is already obscuring the truth: worthiness is the *least* scarce resource in the universe. It has been lavished abundantly upon all of us. It can't be given *to* us; it can only be glimpsed *within* us. But my kids are human, so I expect they'll do what the rest of us are doing: they'll live their own backstories, exhibiting all the usual symptoms of shame, trying to overcome it in so many frustratingly futile ways.

The weekend of the whiteboard is nearing its conclusion as one of the instructors guides us through a final exercise. We sit in silence, close our eyes, and breathe slowly. I hear a few muffled sobs and sniffles from around the room. We've learned a lot about the therapy and our shame, and almost everyone is feeling a little fragile. I haven't shed a tear though.

I'm pretty proud of myself.

The instructor asks us to envision standing outside our childhood home. "Imagine you are once again the age you were when you lived in that place," he says. I imagine the house we lived in when I was eleven.

"Look down at yourself," the instructor continues. "Notice your knobby knees. Open the door to the house. Notice your small hand on the door handle. Once inside, take in the sights and sounds and smells of your history. Then go to the room where you're most likely to find your mother. Ask her for what you need from her." I go to the kitchen. I want to ask her for a hug.

I ask her for an orange instead.

Because when you fear you're not interesting enough and believe you're a burden, you find ways to compensate. I compensate by making as little trouble as possible. By being a good boy. By being

convenient. By asking people only for things I know they can easily give. Even in my own imagination.

I'm still not crying, and I'm still proud of myself.

"Now go to the room where you're most likely to find your father," the instructor says. "Ask him for what you need from him." I imagine my dad is in the living room watching television. I want him to reassure me I'm becoming a man, and a *good* man at that. I consider standing in front of the television to get his attention, but I've been told I make a better door than a window, and I don't want to block his view. Again, I refrain from asking for what I need, and when the instructor tells us to leave the house and walk back outside, I do so happily. No tears. Still proud.

Except the exercise isn't over.

"Walk out onto the road in front of your house," he says, "and you'll see someone off in the distance walking toward you. This is your adult self." I watch the distant figure as he gets closer and finally stands in front of me. It's the me I am now, looking at fifth-grade me, and he sees right past all my accommodating behavior. He *knows*. He sees the fear that I'm not interesting enough, that I'll be abandoned, that I won't make it on my own in this scary and uncertain world. And as the instructor begins to speak again, I know it's coming—the same instruction as before: "Now ask your adult self for what you need from him or her." Suddenly, I can't hold back the tears. "Please," I say to adult me, "just tell me I'm okay and I'm going to be okay." And adult me squats down. He takes fifth-grade me gently by the shoulders, looks me directly in the eyes, and says, "Kelly, you *are* okay, and you are going to *be* okay."

Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, indeed.

Maybe you're like me and that room full of psychologists and the world full of people represented by the not-enough words on

the whiteboards. Maybe, over the years, you've come to believe your mistakes and failures and disappointments and loneliness are the only true things about you. Maybe, like me, you are needing to relearn what is *truest* about you. Maybe you, too, need to rediscover what you are made of despite the messes you've made. Maybe your whole life is an invitation to get reacquainted with that divine spark at the center of you, to blow on the embers, to fan the flames. Until one day you begin to hear within you echoes of your worthiness, echoes resounding with the truth:

You *are* okay, and you are going to *be* okay.

CHAPTER 2

The Search for Healing in Our Relationships

We must be our own before we can be another's.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

When shame tells us we're not good enough, we do the natural thing—we start searching for worthiness elsewhere. And there are two places we search for it most: the people in our lives and the purpose of our lives. Let's talk about people first, because that's usually where we search first. Having been wounded by people, we seek to be healed by them as well. But it rarely works. Because the search for worthiness is not a group project.

I'm making the bed and grumbling because, once again, the sheets and blankets have all been pulled to my wife's side of the bed. I've spent another cold, winter night clinging to the edge of the bedding, fighting for scraps. As I pull up the sheets, nursing my habitual resentment, suddenly it hits me: last night my wife slept in a bed almost a thousand miles away. The day before, she and the kids had left town for a vacation. They're gone and I'm home alone.

I've been married for almost fourteen years and, for all of those fourteen years, I've blamed my wife for stealing the covers. Fourteen years can't be wrong, can they?

I decide this one night was a fluke. I finish making the bed and assume it's still true—my wife is a hoarder of warmth and I've been the sleeping, shivering collateral damage. Until the next morning, when I awake to discover the same thing. And the morning after that. And the next. Apparently, my wife doesn't pull the covers to her side. Apparently, I *push* them.

It makes me wonder how much of what I blame on my wife is not really her fault at all. How many times, for instance, have I accused her of stealing my worthiness away from me, and how many times was I actually *giving* it away, like bedcovers on a cold night? How many times have I acted like it's her job to make me feel good enough? How many times have I searched for my worthiness in the way she looks at me or responds to me or thinks about me, instead of searching for it in the only place it can be found—*inside* of me?

As a therapist, I've watched it happen over and over again, as well-intentioned people unwittingly push the responsibility for healing the wounds of their hearts onto the people they love. We expect others to rescue us from our shame. We demand others fix our feelings of unworthiness. After all, we experience our original wound in our earliest, most vulnerable relationships, so why wouldn't we expect our subsequent relationships to heal it?

So, having our enough-ness thrown into question by the people we love most, we venture out into the world and embark on a search for love and acceptance, hoping someone out there will restore our

sense of worthiness. We seek it from our friends and teachers and peers and coaches and boyfriends and girlfriends and lovers and coworkers and bosses and even strangers on the street. We look for it in everyone.

In fact, it's the most common reason for getting married.

Most of us believe our search for worthiness ends on our wedding day. Ultimately, we don't make a lifelong commitment to someone because they make us feel loved; we commit to them because, for a time, they have made us feel *loveable.* We think we have found the person who will, at last, make us feel forever worthy. But a marriage can't bear the burden of our search for worthiness. No relationship can.

The Greatest Commandment declares, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Why does self-love come first? Because when we try to love someone else before we have first embraced what is loveable in ourselves, our love *for* them inevitably devolves into an ongoing effort to get *from* them the kind of love we imagine will make us feel worthy. Then even our most sincere attempts at love turn into manipulation. At best, we give love in order to get love, which turns love into a commodity, and a cheapened one at that. At worst, we try to coerce love from one another in a million little ways. Personally, I prefer listing the ways my wife has disappointed me, screwed up her priorities, or treated someone else better than she has treated me. Of course, I do so passive-aggressively, so I can deny it if she calls me out.

When we're searching for our worthiness in the person to whom we've committed, it can quickly become the central struggle of the relationship. Some of us resign ourselves to this lifelong drama. Others tire of it and go searching for worthiness in other people. Sometimes we look for it in our children: we might bend over backward to earn their approval or we might use the worthwhile things

they do—trophies, honor rolls, Ivy League degrees, and impressive careers—as proof of our own worthiness. Sometimes we look for our worthiness in affairs. Sometimes we just get divorced and begin the search again in a second marriage. There's a reason second marriages have an even higher rate of divorce: the search never ends well.

Like I said, the quest for worthiness is not a group project.

Several days into my family's vacation, I'm in my home office writing, the bedcovers forgotten, when I hear a strange crackling noise coming from the bedroom. I follow the sound and find our dog on the bed, gnawing on a Cadbury egg. My wife had left my favorite Easter candy underneath my pillow as a surprise—a gift to remind me I'm loved and *loveable*. What I'd failed to discover, even after sleeping on it, the dog had sniffed out.

As he looks up at me with puppy-guilt in his shiny eyes, I feel tears well up in my own, and fourteen years of mornings flash before them. My wife is not responsible for hoarding the covers, and she is not responsible for the doubts I have about my worthiness. They existed long before I even knew *she* existed. And in fact, she's been trying to reteach me my loveliness for fourteen years. But even after fourteen years, I don't see it. I'm still much more likely to grumble about the covers than I am to search beneath them for a gift.

Shame is a wound that pours salt on itself.

When I believe I'm unworthy, I expect the covers of life to be pulled away from me. I expect to be left cold and alone, and my expectations become a self-fullfilling prophecy, because I fail to recognize the reminders of my worthiness being offered by the ones who love me. Then I blame them for not loving me well. But

the truth is, it's up to me to recognize such gifts when they've been offered. It's up to me to open them and to savor them.

It's up to each of us.

In most relationships, we show up on the other's doorstep with an open wound of shame, and some people will add salt to the wound, while other people apply salve and a bandage. In other words, some people continue to shame us, while others see our worthiness and give us grace—the kind of grace that sees the good in us even when we can't see it in ourselves. Without a doubt, my wife is a salve-and-bandage kind of person. The question is, will I allow her to apply her balm? Will I allow the grace with which she sees me to change the way *I* see me?

Or will I complain she's not doing it well enough?

Loving yourself well—embracing your foundational worthiness—is a prerequisite for allowing yourself to *be loved* well by someone else. Until you can see your worthiness for yourself, you won't be able to see it through the eyes of anyone else, either. No matter how long you search for the right pair of eyes. Reclaiming your worthiness—and living from it—is your responsibility. You can take it back.

Like missing bedcovers after a long, cold night.