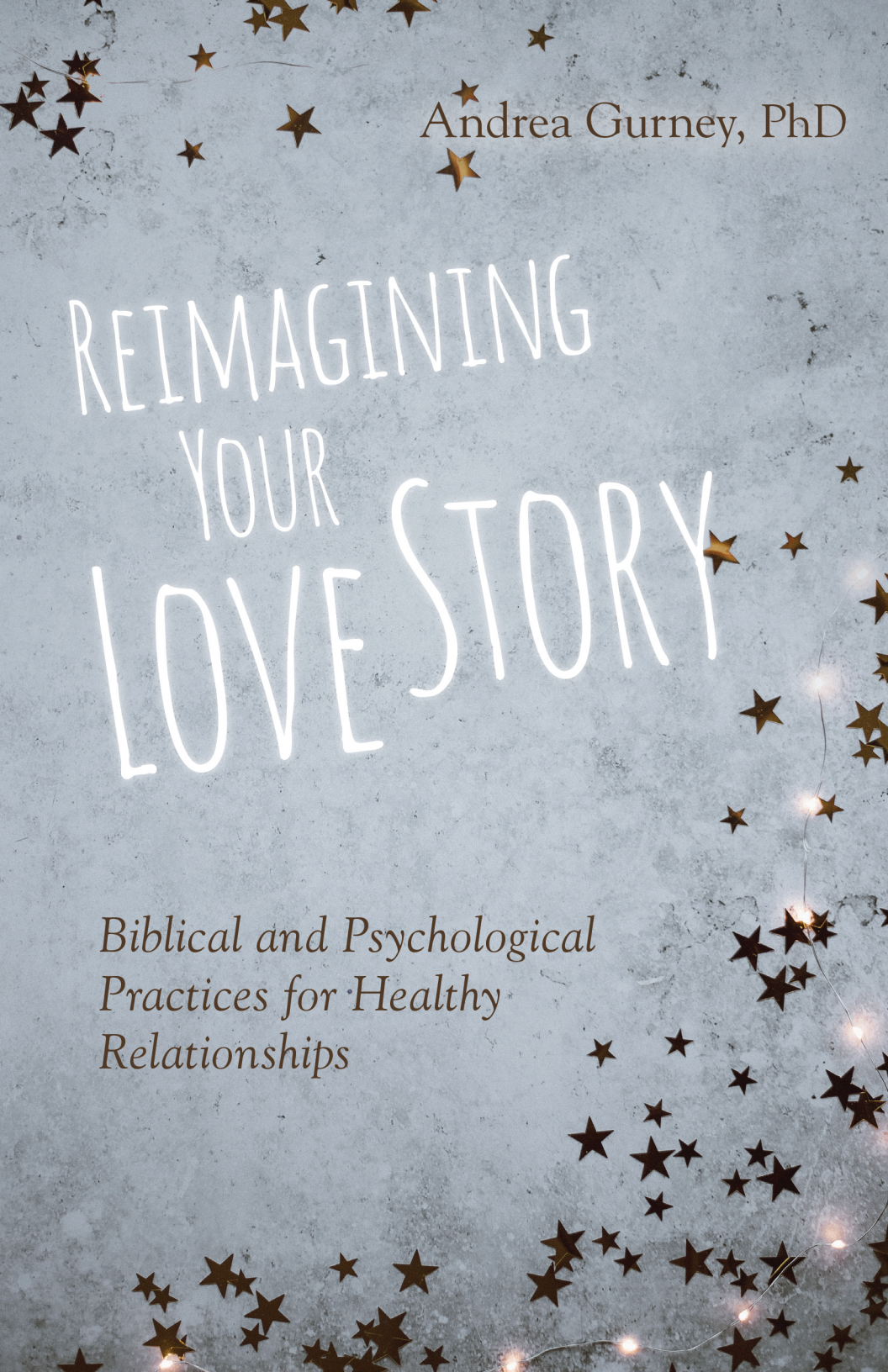
Andrea Gurney, PhD
Reimagining Your Love Story
Biblical and Psychological Practices for Healthy Relationships

"Masterfully weaving together psychological science and biblical wisdom, Andrea Gurney provides a practical and inspirational road map for all of us who are serious about our love story. She shows us how we can rebuild and rethink the ways we love. Don't miss out on her heartfelt message."

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott, #1 *New York Times* best-selling authors, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*

"Loving another person is beautiful but dangerous, requiring you to be both vulnerable and strong. *Reimagining Your Love Story* equips you to love others well. By combining leading research and engaging stories, neuroscience and theology, scriptural truths and practical application, Dr. Gurney helps you learn how to strengthen the relationships that matter most. I highly recommend this book!"

Peter Greer, president and CEO, HOPE International, and coauthor, *Mission Drift*

"Dr. Andrea Gurney always has a waiting list for her private practice. Once you read *Reimagining Your Love Story*, you'll understand why. In its pages, you are offered a guidebook to navigating the fairy tale while holding on to what's real, letting go of the myths without losing the wonder, and, most importantly, building upon your God-given gift of love and connection in healthy ways. I'm grateful for Dr. Gurney's work—and that readers can now access her insights without being added to a waiting list."

Laurie Polich Short, author, *When Changing Nothing Changes Everything*

"In *Reimagining Your Love Story*, Dr. Gurney effortlessly pairs foundational psychological and biblical principles in ways that are both practical and comprehensible for every audience. Whether you are single, married, dating, widowed, or divorced, this is a must-read! You will walk away with tremendous insight and tools to pursue relationships that can flourish."

Dana Allin, synod executive, ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

"We all know that love requires work and is never as easy as the beginning of a relationship. What we often fail to address is how our perceptions and unspoken expectations create a mass of weeds that can overtake the bloom of love. Andrea Gurney brilliantly invites us to an honest, deep, and abundantly kind walk through our garden to address how sometimes even hard work is not enough. We need an honest look at what things seed division and create unfruitful conflict. This book is rich in wisdom, research, and immense humor and will restore your hope in love."

Dan B. Allender, PhD, founding president, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

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Andrea Gurney, PhD

Kregel Publications

Reimagining Your Love Story: Biblical and Psychological Practices for Healthy Relationships
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Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group, Ltd., www.wordserveliterary.com.

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4562-0, print
ISBN 978-0-8254-7544-3, epub

Printed in the United States of America
19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 / 5 4 3 2 1

To Kate and Madeline,
who continually teach me
how to love well and love boldly.
To the moon and back.

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Introduction

The Fairy-Tale Dream

We had seventy-five minutes together. I knew the time would pass quickly, and I wanted to make sure that both Emma and Jake felt they could tell *their* version of the story.

"I'd love to hear how you two met."

They both smiled, eager to share their love story.

Emma began. "We first met when we were both in college. Jake was at Stanford and I was at Berkeley. Well, maybe you can't call it meeting," she continued with a flirtatious glance at Jake. "Jake was visiting a friend at Berkeley, and we both ended up at the same party. It was over Valentine's Day weekend, actually. Our junior year."

Jake reached over and grabbed her hand, putting it on his lap as he continued the story. "I saw her from across the way and knew I wanted to get her number before leaving that night. So I did," he said with a confident smirk.

Emma smiled. "Yes, he was successful. But—I do remember thinking, *Who is this audacious guy?* He was so . . . so sure of himself in approaching me. Little did he know, I was in a relationship already."

Jake playfully and quickly interrupted: "Come on, Em, you've got to admit. There was chemistry right away, and it was mutual."

"Oh, there's no denying that." She squeezed his hand, then looked at me. "We both immediately knew there was something there."

They were lost in the moment, remembering back to their first meeting five years ago.

"And . . . ?" I inquired.

"Oh, right," Jake continued. "Well, that was that, for the time being. I texted her occasionally, and we became Facebook friends."

"And I kept dating the other guy," Emma interjected. "But, if I'm honest with myself, Jake was often in the back of my mind. *What if he is 'the one'?* I used to wonder. I couldn't really shake it. I couldn't really shake *you*." She affectionately moved his knee back and forth as she turned toward Jake.

"Clearly I couldn't get you out of my mind all that easily either."

They enjoyed the back-and-forth, reminiscing as I listened in. He was muscular and tan—a former Stanford football player. She was taller than he was, with vibrant red hair and a smile that lit up the room. They both were articulate and talkative, yet respectful of the other person as they spoke.

"So, in short," Jake said, orienting his entire body toward me after realizing they were both facing each other on the couch, lost in the moment of their own love story, "we both ended up in San Francisco after we graduated. And as soon as we discovered we were going to be in the same city, Em broke up with that other guy, and we started dating. From the beginning—we knew we had something special."

"Yes, it really was love at first sight," Emma added. They both looked at me and grinned.

I couldn't help doing the same as I said, "It sounds like there was physical attraction from the get-go and neither of you could easily shake the image of the other."

"Exactly," Jake affirmed as Emma nodded.

"So, what brings you to my office today? Why are you two seeking couples therapy?" I inquired.

Jake sighed. "Well, we've lost some of our mojo and find ourselves struggling. Communication is hard, we fight more often, and things just don't feel right. Everything has become a bit more complicated than it used to be."

"That's often the case," I reassured them.

Messy Love

Jake was right: relationships are complicated. Fostering a healthy, intimate relationship is one of the hardest things for a human to do. And yet it is also one of the most rewarding things we can ever be a part of, integral to the way we were created. Love makes us vulnerable, but it also makes us strong. I am reminded of this every day in my work as a clinical psychologist and college professor, but also as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend. As I sit with individuals, couples, and families, listening to their stories, yearnings, fears, and questions, the refrain is clear: we need one another. We are designed to be in relationships. *Imago Dei*: we are created in the image of God. And at His core, our God is relational.

But more often than not, relationships are messy. I hear it all the time:

- "I married the wrong guy. Why didn't I see it when we were dating?"
- "I'm terrified of screwing things up—my parents divorced when I was three and my mom remarried three times before she got it right."
- "I'm scared I'll never meet the right person . . . and end up all alone."
- "Things started so well between us—where did we go wrong?"
- "I look at the marriages around me and think, *No, thank you. I'll stay single!*"
- "We both share the same values. Why isn't this working?"
- "I'm worried if I keep dating him, I'm settling. But what if there is nothing better out there?"
- "How can I be sure she's the right one? I'm not even sure I'm cut out for marriage or what I should look for in a life partner."
- "I can't imagine adding kids to the picture. We've got to figure out our own stuff before we even think about starting a family."
- "I really believed that Jesus brought us together, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

If you or someone you know have faced any of these issues—welcome to this thing we call life. It's complicated, right? We are more connected than ever before in history, and yet we are lonelier. Somehow we are missing the mark on the very thing we were created for: connection and intimacy.

As we'll see over the course of this book, we are born wired as relational beings, dependent on one another for survival yet ill-equipped to establish and maintain healthy and lasting intimate relationships. Instead, we pursue "the fairy tale." We want so badly to believe there is one perfect person out there, and once we find each other, our problems will disappear, we will be "complete," and life will be easy. Or at least easier.

At the end of the day, none of us has a fairy godmother or pixie dust at our disposal. So we must do the work ourselves; we must work on understanding our own story, the cultural messages we consciously (or more often unconsciously) have believed, the places where these messages have been at variance with God's intention for our life, and the ways these things have shaped our relationships. We must work on acquiring skills to be in healthy, intimate relationships. And that is what this book is all about.

Reimagining Your Love Story is divided into three sections, each comprising four chapters. In the first section, "What's Your Once Upon a Time?" we examine both classic and emerging research and also journey through your early relationships to establish their critical role in all subsequent relationships. You'll be encouraged to reflect on how early relationships in your life have affected where you are now and what areas might need to be addressed to promote healthier relationships going forward and a stronger marriage in the future. Building on this foundation, part 2, "Deconstructing the Myths of Love," considers how some of the messages you've internalized about love, romance, and sex are straight-up fiction and an actual hindrance to developing healthy relationships. Part 2 also offers alternative ways of thinking about these topics that can lead toward fuller, more satisfying human connections. Finally, "Working Toward Happily Ever After" will equip you with skills to communicate honestly, fight fairly, make time for play, and remain curious. Although we'll be focusing on romantic relationships, the principles and practices discussed are also applicable to parent-child relationships and friendships.

Several useful sections appear at the conclusion of each chapter: "Summing Up" lists key takeaways, "So What?" offers commentary on the chapter's significance, and "Now What?" offers practical applications, questions, and exercises. Finally, if a chapter's topic resonates strongly

with you, there is a "Further Reading" section at the end of the book that suggests additional resources—separated by chapter—for exploration.

To help you identify patterns and focus on opportunities for growth, I encourage you to record your thoughts, observations, and answers to specific questions and exercises as you progress through each chapter. My hope is that you will see the connections between the theoretical and practical, the day-to-day and big picture, and the seemingly mundane and necessary.

Even more, may you see that this book was born out of a desire to help you create and maintain healthy, intimate connections—kingdom relationships—that honor and glorify God. It's grounded in research and best practices of relationship science, and it includes voices of college students, young adults, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, husbands, wives, aunts, and uncles. (All names and details of clients' stories have been changed to protect their privacy.) While many of my clients and students claim Christianity as their source of strength and hope, the relational truths explored in this book hold true for anyone seeking relational wholeness, no matter their faith. And so, my hope is that as you examine your own "once upon a time," consider the ways cultural messages have acutely influenced your perceptions, and learn simple yet profoundly transformative relational principles, you will be able to embrace your humanness and love without fear. In other words, my hope is that the pages within will help you love boldly and love well as your own story is written. This is, after all, the message we have heard from the beginning: we are to love one another (1 John 3:11).

Part One

What's Your Once Upon a Time?

Chapter One

Wired for Love

"I'm heartbroken and confused. I've just broken up with the man of my dreams. Or, really, he broke up with me," Samantha told me at our first meeting. "At least I think that's what just happened. I don't really even know—but it feels scary." She was twenty-six years old, smart and sophisticated, with an initial air of confidence that was admirable, especially given the circumstances.

"I don't even know who ended it—or if it's over. I just know this sucks. I'm both angry and sad. But then I have moments in which I think, 'Maybe this is for the best—maybe we should break up.' I don't know. To be honest, I'm not sure he really loves me anyway. At least not recently." She paused to catch her breath before continuing. "But when we first started dating, it was natural and easy—as if it was meant to be. Something changed a couple of months ago, though. I began to worry that Peter was interested in someone else. I don't even know what initially ignited this fear, if anything. But I became so anxious and preoccupied with the idea that Peter was going to leave me. It haunted me and, at times, kept me up at night. I'd think, *I'm not good enough for Peter*, and, *Once he really gets to know me, he's not going to love me anymore*. When I had nights like that, I couldn't help but share my thoughts with him in the morning. He'd reassure me that he loved and cared for me and wasn't interested in anyone else. And in the moment, I'd believe it. I'd believe

him. But—" She stopped herself abruptly, as if she was scared to even continue her own train of thought.

"But what?" I gently probed.

"I don't know!" Samantha's tone changed from somber and pensive to annoyed and angry. She seemed fed up with her own thoughts, which she couldn't control.

We sat in silence for a moment.

"What happens in the quieter moments, Samantha? When Peter is not there to reassure you that he loves you."

"Well, that's just it. I go to a crazy place, and I don't know why. It's so incredibly infuriating. He's given me no actual reason to think he's going to leave me, yet somehow I have this horrific gut feeling that I'm going to wake up one morning and he's not going to be there. No note, no explanation, no goodbye. Just gone."

"I can see why those thoughts would both frighten and sadden you," I said with understanding. "It's as if you are worried that someone you care for very much is going to vanish, with no chance for you to even say goodbye."

Samantha's eyes filled with tears as she nodded. I breathed deeply, slightly audibly, and let the sounds of sadness fill the space.

In the Beginning

We all want to be loved. We want to have someone by our side who knows us and cares for us immensely. We want to be pursued. We want to know that someone selects us. And like Samantha, we want to rest in the security of being loved by another. This is nothing new. Since the beginning of time, humans have paired up. Adam needed Eve and Eve needed Adam—it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). God made us to need one another. Natural selection favored people who needed people; those who were alone didn't fare as well. Humans are more social than other mammals and need to be good at cooperating to develop what neuroscientists call our "social brain."

Bottom line: we are created to be in relationship. And yet we are scared to be a part of the very thing we were created for. We are fearful of commitment. We are worried about being hurt. We don't want to be seen as

needy or dependent. Yet we don't want to be alone either. We want to be chosen. We don't want to repeat the mistakes our parents made; we've witnessed the pain of divorce firsthand and don't want to go down that same path. We are skeptical about intimacy because it never seems to last. And conditioned by media and popular culture, we've been duped by cultural love myths.

This strong and deep God-given desire that we all have within is about connection. It's not about sex, selfishness, or fear. Cutting-edge research in relationship science reveals that the first and foremost instinct of all humans is to seek and maintain contact and to establish comforting connections.[1]

Attached at the Heart

Let me introduce you to John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist who worked with children in postwar Europe, pioneered the field of attachment theory, and paved the way for current research on love. In contrast with the dominant psychoanalytic wisdom of the time—which suggested that problems arose as a result of unconscious desires and fantasies—Bowlby asserted that problems were rooted in relationships with real people. He reasoned that all babies and young children would innately display what he termed proximity-seeking behavior (attachment). When he was then commissioned in 1949 by the World Health Organization to write a report on the emotional and mental health of homeless children in Europe, he found that when children were separated from their parents, they underwent three increasingly unfavorable stages of response to separation: protest, despair, and finally detachment.[2] His findings, then, confirmed his previous claims that *loving relationships are key to mental health and survival*. Drawing on Darwin's natural selection, Bowlby concluded that keeping loved ones close is an ingenious survival technique wired in by evolution. We need one another to survive.

Researchers since the time of Bowlby have confirmed that he was right when he talked about effective dependency from the cradle to the grave. Findings from many empirical studies today illuminate this fact. Perhaps the most striking results come from mortality studies conducted in industrialized nations; these studies consistently find that individuals who are

emotionally and socially connected live longer, healthier lives.[3] Social connections reduce illness and relapse in individuals with preexisting medical and psychological conditions. Whether it's depression, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's, cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, or cancer, we do better when we are in supportive relationships. And then there's married folks; people who are in a *satisfying* marriage live longer and have fewer psychiatric problems, a decreased risk of infection, quicker recovery from injury, and a lower rate of mortality following a life-threatening illness than those who are unmarried.[4]

Individuals who are emotionally and socially connected live longer, healthier lives.

Additionally, those who feel connected and supported fare better in the face of threat, danger, and terror. Captors have used social isolation as a means of torture for decades. And the unit of survival in concentration camps was a pair—in other words, interpersonal bonding, social reciprocity, and sharing with another victim were sources of strength and survival among inmates in the Nazi concentration camps.[5] Is it any wonder, then, that one of the best predictors of recovery for children who have been sexually abused is whether or not their mothers believed and supported them?[6] Similarly, the best predictor of whether or not an individual will overcome trauma is what happens afterward—namely, can they seek comfort in the arms of another? Secure attachments are a natural buffer and antidote against threat, terror, helplessness, and meaninglessness—for when we have somebody beside us, the darkness is less terrifying. In other words, a deep sense of belonging results in the taming of our fear.

Consider the promise of connection Jesus left with His disciples before He prepared to return to the Father: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). In the same way, God tenderly reassures the nation of Israel in the Old Testament: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isa. 41:10). And God offers the same reassurance to us. He is here. Present. Always. Thousands

of years later, scientific studies affirm the truth of God's promise: we are made for deep relationship.

There is a protective power of relationships. We are designed to love a few precious others who will protect us through the trials and tribulations of life. As researcher and psychologist Sue Johnson writes, "Sex may impel us to mate, but it is love that assures our existence."[7]

Think about it. Think about your own life. From the moment you entered this world, you were in a relationship. You interacted with those around you. As a newborn, you imitated the faces of your caregivers; you learned to open your mouth and make your eyes big and raise both your eyebrows, imitating the look of excitement and delight that you saw reflected in your caregiver's face. We learned as infants that a smile brought positive attention, so we smiled more. We quickly found out that when we cried, someone responded. And when our parents made a funny face or cooed, we waved our arms, kicked our legs, and babbled back at them. And round and round it went, in a two-way feedback loop.

We were created in the image of a triune God, whose very nature is relational.

I don't expect you to remember your earliest days. But if you are among the 65 percent fortunate enough to have a secure attachment with your primary caregivers, then that's what your feedback loop looked like. I like to think of it as a dance—two people holding each other close and seamlessly engaging with one another, mutually taking turns, gently leading and following, respectful of each other's space but also not afraid to become one. It's an automatic and innate call-and-response system that is wired into our brains and nerves to keep us emotionally attached to each other. It's an emotional dialogue that is absorbed in the beginning days of our lives—before we can even hold our head up on our own, let alone speak words. It's our first instinct—to make contact and to connect. And considering that we were created in the image of a triune God, whose very nature is relational (in fact, C. S. Lewis described the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity as "a kind of dance"[8]), this makes complete sense.

Whom Do You Run To?

Picture this. You are at a family reunion. And let's pretend—if this isn't your reality—that your extended family is bursting at the seams with kids ages five and under. There's a big game of hide-and-seek going on, with running, chasing, and happy squeals filling the air. Until *boom*, *crash*, and *ouch*: two kids collide head-on and bounce off each other, falling to the ground with a thump and simultaneous tears. What happens next? That's right—they scan the crowd to find their person. And although family surrounds them—aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers—they won't suffice. They are looking for that *one specific person*. And as soon as they find Mama or Daddy, they run toward them.

No matter what our age, most of us have a certain person we run to. Whether we've just found out about a grad school acceptance, a work promotion, devastating news of our mom's cancer, or that our fiancé wants out, there are a select few that we turn to and confide in. They are the ones we seek comfort from. God has given us one another to be a shelter from the storm.

For some of us, however, we hesitate. We're not so sure anyone can be trusted. We've been hurt too badly in the past, and it seems too risky to depend on others. Or we've learned to rely on ourselves because—at the end of the day—that's all we've really got.

Undoubtedly, life experiences and the collateral damage of humanity's brokenness have taught us different things, and attachment looks different for some of us. Perhaps you didn't have a reliable, stable caregiver that consistently met all your needs. Maybe your mother experienced postpartum depression. Or your father turned to alcohol as a way to cope when children came along. Perhaps you were in foster care for the first couple years of your life. Maybe genuine love and care was expressed but because of personality differences or temperament, the message was lost in translation. Or maybe both of your parents were too busy working to really pay attention to you. The question then becomes, Did you still form healthy attachments?

Mary Ainsworth was a psychologist who asked that question in the late 1960s. She was a student of Bowlby's and was interested in individual differences in children's attachment. Do all of us attach in the same way? And is attachment always positive? Remember, according to Bowlby, we

all form attachments; it's nature's plan for the survival of the species after all. Ainsworth, however, built on Bowlby's work and found that not all of us form *healthy* attachments.

Ainsworth's classic experiment is known as the Strange Situation, a series of eight episodes in which she covertly observed mothers interacting with their twelve- to eighteen-month-olds.[9] But to add a different variable, she'd throw a random stranger into the mix and then ask the mother to leave the baby alone with the stranger for three-minute episodes. Ainsworth was interested in what occurred when the mother departed and when she returned (the "reunion"). Did the baby notice when the mom left the room? Was the little one distressed, or did she readily separate and explore the toys in the room? Did he engage with the stranger, or was he cautious? And when the mom returned, did the baby go to the mother for comfort? If so, did the baby *actually receive* comfort? Based on her results, Ainsworth described three attachment styles: *secure*, *insecure-ambivalent*, *insecure-avoidant*. One of Ainsworth's colleagues later added a fourth style, insecure-disorganized/disoriented.

- *Secure attachment*: These were the babies who were content in the presence of their mom, distressed when she left, and comforted and calmed by her return.
- *Insecure-ambivalent*: The most significant observation for these babies occurred during the reunion episode: the baby went to the mother for comfort, just like the securely attached baby did, but then pushed their mother away. Even if genuine comfort was offered in the moment, the child couldn't trust it and communicated, "I need you—I need help from you—but I can't trust you to give it."
- *Insecure-avoidant*: These babies were okay with the stranger, and they showed no signs of distress when the mother left the room (as if they didn't even notice) and little interest when the mom returned. These babies had learned—at an early age—to fend for themselves.
- *Insecure-disorganized/disoriented*: These babies had contradictory responses and appeared to be emotionally unstable. Some approached the mom but then froze or overtly displayed fear. At times they had tense, jerking movements and appeared to dissociate.

All Grown Up

You might be asking, "And so? What does my early relationship with my mother or father have to do with the way I engage in intimate relationships now? Does it really make a difference?" These are all fair questions! And here's the thing: we all developed mental models based off of our early relationships that are embedded into the very architecture of our brains. In other words, in our earliest days we internalized an image of what relationships look like and how they work. And we learned, dependent on the response and availability of our parents, whether or not we were valuable and worthy of care. If our cries and needs were consistently met with a comforting response, we internalized a sense of worthiness and competence. But if no one came when we cried and reached out—or if they were inconsistent in coming to our side—we learned to be skeptical of relationships and, moreover, people; they can't always be trusted.

In our earliest days we internalized an image of what relationships look like and how they work.

We call this our internal working model. It's a representational image of our own value based off the way we were treated when we were young. The internal working model is a set of expectations, inscribed in our brain outside of our conscious awareness in that first year, and lays the foundation for the way in which we relate to the world.

Here are some questions for you to think about from your own history.[10] I'd encourage you to write down answers to these, either now or once you finish this chapter. In answering these questions, you can start to form an awareness of how you might have internalized ideas about attachment at a young age, and how that might continue to affect the way you approach relationships today.

1. Describe your relationship with your parents as a young child, starting from as far back as you can remember.
2. To which parent did you feel the closest and why? Why doesn't this feeling exist with the other parent?

3. When was the first time you remember being separated from your parents?
   a. How did you respond? Do you remember how your parents responded?
   b. Are there any other separations that stand out in your mind?
4. In general, how do you think your overall experiences with your parents have affected your adult personality? Are there any other aspects of your early experience that you consider a setback to your development?
5. What is your relationship with your parents like currently?

There is a family legacy of sorts regarding attachment styles.

The research behind these questions indicates that attachment styles remain consistent over the years. So if a child had an ambivalent attachment style in childhood, that same style is evident in their adult relationships. Furthermore, if there was attachment rejection or trauma in the mother's childhood, her relationship with her child is characterized by similar attachment issues. In other words, there is a family legacy of sorts regarding attachment styles.

★ ★ ★

My work with Samantha continued. We picked up where we'd left off—with the unrelenting fear and worry that her person, Peter, was going to leave her unexpectedly.

"Samantha, can I change course a bit and ask you to tell me briefly about your family of origin?" I inquired of her.

"Sure. I'm happy to talk about something different." What she saw as a change of subject I saw as an integral piece to the puzzle. And integral it was indeed. I learned that Samantha's mom died after battling cancer when Samantha was four years old. Samantha and her older brother were raised primarily by their father, who purposely chose—despite opportunities to the contrary—not to get remarried until Samantha was in high school.

"In some ways, I don't know any different since I was so young when

my mom died. Most of my memories are of my dad, my brother, and me. And my dad . . . he's a rock star." Her face lightened, perhaps for the first time that hour, as she recalled times with her dad. She spoke of camping trips, wrestling, surfing, and biking with her dad.

"Sounds like your dad loved doing things with you and Jeremy and did his best to move on, if you will, as a family of three."

"Yes, I don't think he wanted to dwell on the loss of my mom. Or if he did, he certainly didn't share it with us too much."

"So, what do you remember about saying goodbye to your mom? Or even processing her death?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How did you say goodbye?" I thought I'd start with the concrete—the content—and then move to the process.

"I didn't."

I looked at her with curiosity; she continued.

"One night mom got really sick, unexpectedly. It was the middle of the night so my dad called my grandma, and she came over to be with Jeremy and me while he took mom to the ER. She died that night." Samantha remained stoic as she shared.

"And so you woke up in the morning and . . . ?"

"We were told that mom was at a doctor's appointment and would be back soon. So off to preschool I went. I remember getting home from school and running into the house, down the hallway right to my mom's bed. And I distinctly remember feeling panicked and confused when the bed was not only empty but the sheets and covers were gone. It was just a bare mattress." Samantha's demeanor changed; she was no longer telling the story—she was there, as an almost-five-year-old, standing frozen at her mother's empty bedside. Her eyes became big and wide as they filled with moisture. She sat motionless on the couch. It was as if she was in a trance, reexperiencing the trauma and loss that occurred twenty-two years prior.

You could hear a pin drop.

Then her head fell into her arms, her feet drew up onto the couch with her knees touching her forearms—in a fetal position—and she began to sob. "I never got to say goodbye . . . I never got to say goodbye. I never got to say goodbye to my mom."

Adult Attachment Styles

Samantha experienced a tragic loss during her childhood. At a young age, she lost her "person"—her emotional bedrock. And although she was close with her dad, her primary caregiver literally disappeared from her life suddenly and unexpectedly. As I learned during our work together, she never processed the death of her mother; they just "moved on with life," almost as if it never happened. One day her mother was there; the next she was not. Talk about unpredictable. She had a caregiver who was attuned and responsive to her needs—and then unavailable. Is it any wonder she was now preoccupied with the fear that one day she was going to wake up and Peter would be gone?

Our childhood attachment styles impact our adult relationships and, without awareness and intervention, insecurities from our early years can remain with us as adults. Children with an insecure-ambivalent attachment style, for example, often grow up to have preoccupied attachment patterns. As adults, they seek reassurance from others, yet self-doubt continues to persist. They are worried, like Samantha was, that their partner is going to stop loving them, reject them, or perhaps simply disappear from their life. And so, in an attempt to feel safe, they become clingy and dependent on their partner; this overly clingy behavior that results from their neediness and insecurity tends to push their partner away. Because they grew up distrustful of their inconsistent caregivers, they almost anticipate abandonment and look for signs that their partner is losing interest. In a way, they end up seeking a sense of security at the expense of emotional intimacy.

When secure adults are in a romantic relationship, they can experience both togetherness and solitude.

Secure adults, on the other hand, do not doubt that their partner is a safe haven. Just like children when their parents served as a secure base from which they ventured out and explored the world—knowing there was a safe haven to return to—the same security carries over. As adults, they feel confident and connected and are more satisfied in their relationships. When secure adults are in a romantic relationship, they can

experience both togetherness and solitude; there is freedom within a safe connection. Additionally, secure adults are able to offer support when their partner feels distressed. They also go to their partner for comfort when they themselves feel worried or hurt. Their relationship tends to be honest, open, and equal, with both people feeling independent yet loving toward each other. Their working model consists of the view that "others are helpful" and "I am worthy of respect."

And then there is the adult version of Ainsworth's insecure-avoidant attachment style; this is known as "dismissive." These are the adults who tend to be distant and independent, pretending as if they don't have any needs to be met. It's easier and more familiar for them to deny the importance of love and connection and detach from loved ones. This pseudo independence is both an illusion and defense mechanism. (Remember, as children they had to detach and fend for themselves in order to survive, so what was once a healthy coping skill becomes an unhealthy defense mechanism.) Often as adults they are psychologically defensive and can shut down emotionally. Even in heated or emotional situations, they are able to turn off their feelings and not react. For example, if their partner is distressed and threatens to leave them, they might respond by saying, "I don't care." Additionally, adults with a dismissive attachment style tend to take on the role of caring for themselves and consequently are overly focused on their own needs and comforts. At the end of the day, though, their internal working model consists of the beliefs that "I am unworthy," "I am unacceptable," and "I am unlovable."

Lastly, there is the fearful attachment style in adults whose childhood was defined by frightening and unpredictable behavior displayed by their primary caregiver. This corresponds to the fourth childhood attachment category: insecure-disorganized/disoriented.[11] These are adults who have incredibly tumultuous and often dramatic relationships, characterized by their own unpredictable moods and fears. They are both afraid to get close and worried about being distant. This tension between their fears of intimacy and abandonment leads them to cling to their partner when they feel rejected, and feel trapped by their partner when they are close. And so they are overcome by intense feelings and emotional anxiety, feeling as if there is no escape. They often feel overwhelmed by emotional

storms that are unpredictable, even to themselves. The working model from which they view relationships may sound something like this: "I need to go toward this person to get my needs met, but if I go too close, they will hurt me." The person they want to run to for safety is the same person they are terrified of. This working model provides them with no organized strategy to get their needs met.

As you can see, our internal working model embodies either a secure, confident attachment (based on the dependability and proximity of our caregiver) or an insecure, anxious stance (resulting from an unavailable, inconsistent caregiver). It depends on the history of our actions and interactions with our primary caregiver. And in turn, attachment style helps ground our sense of self; a secure attachment leads to a sense of competence, mastery, and a healthy self-image in adulthood, whereas an insecure attachment causes us to question our self-worth and value. The underlying assumption, then, in applying attachment theory to later relationships is the notion that the attachment bond continues throughout life based on these internal working models developed in our early years.

Curative, reparative relationships not only heal us but also grow and change us.

Although we cannot erase our childhood experiences and subsequent attachment style, we can take steps toward change. Awareness is the first step. Acknowledging your attachment style means recognizing not only your role in a relationship but also how your insecurities are impacting it. By identifying the emotions that arise when you feel insecure, you can learn ways to regulate them through prayer, mindfulness (discussed in chapter 12), and cognitive behavioral practices (see the "Now What?" section at the end of this chapter). Taking time to study past relationships means you can break old emotional patterns and behaviors, setting a new course for current and future relationship dances. And it is precisely within this new dance that your attachment style can be reshaped—curative, reparative relationships not only heal us but also grow and change us.

★ ★ ★

Samantha and I sat in the sorrow that filled the room. She never had a chance to say goodbye to her mother. There she was, an almost-five-year-old girl, coming home from preschool excited to snuggle and share her new song with her mom, and she was met with a bare mattress, soon to be followed by rooms full of people, some familiar, some strange. But none were her mother.

And here she was, a twenty-six-year-old woman, who had been in a loving relationship with a man but living in the worry that one unforeseen day that person too would disappear from her life.

Indeed, our early relational experiences are embedded in the architecture of our brain and lay the foundation for the way we experience the world. And from cradle to grave, when we reach out our arms for help, we want to rest in the assurance that someone is going to pick us up. We are, after all, wired to love.

Summing Up

- Universally, humans have an innate need to establish connection with one another; this is a lifelong survival technique hardwired by God into each of us!
- Early relationships are incredibly important as we form attachments—innate emotional bonds. Our attachment to primary caregivers has a lasting impact on child development and future relationships as we develop mental models that guide the way we relate to others.
- Attachment styles include:
  - Secure
  - Insecure-ambivalent
  - Insecure-avoidant
  - Insecure-disorganized/disoriented
- When we feel secure and confident in relationships—in other words, when we know someone has our back—we are more likely to explore the world around us.

So What?

Understanding our innate wiring and attachment style offers insights into adult relationships.

By examining the importance of early relational experiences, we understand how foundational they are for later intimate relationships. Our brief review of both classic and cutting-edge research in the field of attachment and child development illustrates how deeply love is embedded in relationships and how it is necessary for survival.

With this understanding, we can review our own early relationships and consider the patterns, pitfalls, and strengths within our adult relationships. Considering our own attachment style equips us to critically examine our posture—reactions, insecurities, fears, and responses to conflict—all with the goal of developing healthy relationships.

Now What? Practical Applications

- If someone disappoints you or betrays your trust today, how do you respond? If you pull away, go silent, or retaliate in some way, what might you be able to do differently?
- How were you comforted as a child? What did this teach you about emotional interactions? About love? Think through how you give and receive comfort.
- If you are in a relationship currently, discuss your answers to the five questions in the "All Grown Up" section with your significant other. Then have him or her also answer the questions. Can you see connections or patterns related to your current relationship functioning?
- Are there any childhood hurts or wounds that may underlay current behaviors and beliefs that are keeping you stuck or fueling problems in your intimate relationships?
- What is your image of God? Does God resemble either one of your parents? If so, how? Think about ways your views of God may limit your understanding of who He really is.
- Be aware of your insecurities in your relationships. What are you afraid of? What do you worry about? Be mindful of the ways they preoccupy your thoughts at times (even subconsciously). Awareness is often the first step to change.
- When your insecurities come to the forefront of your mind, replace them with "I'm okay, it's okay" and then "I am worthwhile" as you

take three deep breaths. You can also use statements such as "God loves me, God knows me, and God cherishes me."

- Practice self-care as a way to remind yourself that you are worthy and valuable! And remember: God loves you; He chose you (John 15:16). God knows you; He calls you by name (Isa. 43:1). God is with you; you are safe in Christ (Josh. 1:9).