

the controlling husband

WHAT
EVERY
WOMAN
NEEDS
TO KNOW

DR. RON WELCH



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*To my wife and soul mate, Jan,
whose love, forgiveness, patience, selflessness,
and kindness have given me
the courage and motivation to become
the husband she so richly deserves*

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Introduction

Jan Welch

If you're holding this book, deep in your heart you are yearning for more in your relationship with your husband. Perhaps this was a gradual change or perhaps you suddenly woke up to the fact that your marriage is on a shaky foundation. You do remember the man you couldn't wait to marry, but the honeymoon is definitely over.

You may feel smothered and unable to make the simplest decision without his approval. You probably feel that nothing you do is ever good enough for him. You may have even given up hoping you could be the wife he wants. More often than you would like to admit, you ask yourself, *Is this the best my life can be?* You are clutching this book tightly in your hands, afraid to hope that you can still have the marriage you dreamed of. You don't want to rock the boat and make things worse.

How long have you been feeling this way? One year, five years, ten years or more? If I told you that it is never too late to rebuild the foundation of your marriage, would you believe me? You don't know the man who wrote this book, but I do. You may not trust him yet, because, well, he's a man. I think you will learn to trust him as you hear his story in this book. For now you can trust me, because I'm not just saying that I know how you feel—I've been there.

As you read this book, you will be walking in my shoes and discovering that we share a common experience of feeling powerless in our lives and marriages. The details of our stories may be different, but our desire to be empowered, to be heard, and to have a say in our lives ties us together.

I believed that when I said “I do” to the man of my dreams, everything would be wonderful—all the old hurts and disappointments from my childhood would be left behind. I quickly discovered that the baggage from our past, including my feelings of low self-esteem and Ron’s anger and insecurity, had made the journey with us. Unfortunately, we were too naïve, too stubborn, and too proud to ask for help early in our marriage.

I felt alone and ashamed that I had allowed myself to become controlled in so many ways and given up my voice and my dreams in the process. Divorce was never an option for me, so I decided to make the best of the situation. I learned to live with the limitations on my life and found happiness in being a mom, but I knew my children would grow up and the emptiness would remain.

I should have been more honest with my husband. I should have told him things had to change, instead of settling for the status quo. Fortunately, Ron made the decision on his own to become a better husband and began to create change in our marriage. At first, I would not believe that he was serious. I was afraid to get my hopes up and be disappointed. That may be where you find yourself.

Looking back, I might not have believed myself if I had read what you are reading now, but there were no books around like this back then. I was afraid to believe that things could change—you’ll read more about that in the coming pages. For now, you can find hope in the knowledge that you can learn from our story and not make the same mistakes.

I want you to know that you are not alone. You *can* have the marriage of your dreams. In fact, you have taken the first step by choosing to read this book. Change starts with believing that your husband can change and you can change. You can put aside the

pain and frustration of the past and embrace the possibility of a true partnership in marriage. Take what you learn in this book, put it into practice in your marriage, and share this book with your husband. Together, you can find healing, hope, and love in your relationship.

Part One

Why You Can Believe Transformation Is Possible

Our Story





1

Why This Book Is for You

Power doesn't corrupt people, people corrupt power.

William Gaddis

I never wanted to be *that guy* . . . you know, the one who thinks the world revolves around him and lets everyone else know it, the man who always wants to be in charge and drives people nuts because he always thinks he's right. Somehow, without even realizing it was happening, I became *that guy*. I've heard all the names—control freak, egomaniac, narcissist, know-it-all, controlaholic (okay I made that last one up)—but you get the picture. For many years, I was the poster boy for controlling husbands.

I don't consider myself to be a particularly bad man and I don't believe I suffer from any specific mental illness. I can be narcissistic at times, I have problems with anger control, and I can be extremely selfish, but I'm not evil. What I have done is spent much of my marriage caring more about myself than my wife and children.

If you are in a controlling relationship, then the journey my wife, Jan, and I have been on can be helpful to you. We know what you are going through—we've been there. In this book I will share my

own experiences and those of my wife, with the hope that our story will encourage you, empower you, and motivate you.

The good news we have to share with you is that *it doesn't have to be this way*. I am not the man I was, and our marriage is now so much closer to the relationship we always dreamed we could have. You can have hope because controlling husbands *can* change. There is no magic cure—we must work every day to make our marriage the best it can be—but there are clear steps that both husbands and wives can take to get out of the rut they are in.

If you have chosen to read this book, you have likely been in relationships with controlling people, are in one now, or see issues of power and control in yourself or those around you. This book is not a light read; it addresses heavy subjects, forces you to evaluate yourself and your marriage, and will likely make you want to do things differently. Your interest in this book means that you have a desire to change your relationship, help your spouse grow and change, and make changes yourself. If you are looking for solid, practical tips for this type of relationship transformation, then you have come to the right place.

Control and Power

It can happen in the car, at the ball game, in the grocery store, on the phone—you name the place—and if the conditions are right, you and the one you love can end up in a disagreement. It may start as a minor difference of opinion, and sometimes it ends right there. There are times, though, that the disagreement turns into an argument and the argument into a major conflict. Some of you can get into arguments that would make your mother (or at least your grandmother) blush. Others of you have perfected the silent treatment. Regardless of your technique, you are probably concerned about how conflict is being handled in your relationship.

Control and power in relationships are best seen on a continuum; they will be present in all relationships to some degree. Sometimes

the power struggles are very small and easily resolved, while others can last for hours or even days. In a world of finite resources, there is no way we can have everything we want. There are times when negotiation is possible, but often, one party (or both) has to give up some of what they want. If the power struggles are resolved well, through honest and direct communication, couples can move on and be no worse for wear. However, when resentment builds up and scorecards are kept, trouble is just around the corner.

Power comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some individuals use the frontal assault and knock down the door to get their way. Others come in the back door in a stealth attack. Still others utilize those around them to do their dirty work for them. Our selfish human nature leads us to want to have our way, but power is a finite resource—when you gain power, someone else loses power.

This was not what you signed up for, right? When you said, “I do,” you didn’t plan on all these conflicts and power struggles. But the desire to control our own destiny seems to be intrinsic in human nature. The problem with this is that we simply can’t all have everything we want, and when needs overlap, conflict is sure to follow.

In my work as a psychologist, marriage therapist, and professor, many discussions center on power and control. I believe that you can learn from the experiences of other couples and that you do not need to make the same mistakes others have made. With experience comes wisdom, and with wisdom, transformation. I am living proof that change is possible, as I have personally experienced the power of the principles in this book and seen them change my marriage.

No matter where you find yourself in your relationship, take heart. You may be a wife who feels helpless to change her husband, believing, *That’s just who he is*. You may be a husband who was given this book by your partner and you are reading it under protest and have to admit some of the concepts hit a bit too close to home. You may not currently be in a relationship because you

lived through the pain of being controlled and now fear getting back on the horse and trusting a new partner. Even if you feel your marriage is going well, you will still find many suggestions that can strengthen your marriage as you understand how control and power dynamics play out between a husband and wife. This book is a testament to hope and transformation and the possibility of your marriage becoming what you have always dreamed it could be.

I should say up front that when I use the words, “I had a client . . .,” I hold my clients’ trust in utmost confidence and respect and I would never reveal the identity of any individuals who have allowed me the privilege of hearing their story. So to that end, the stories that you read in this book will not contain any identifying information or any details that might give clues to a person’s identity. To quote a well-known philosopher (Joe Friday of *Dragnet* fame), “The names [and the details] have been changed to protect the innocent.”

Benefitting from This Book

Let’s talk about who will benefit from reading this book.

First, it is written for those of you married to an arrogant, selfish man who cares primarily about himself or a narcissistic man who is trying to cope with feelings of insecurity. It is vital to understand what is happening in your marriage. If a man is married solely for what marriage does for him, then he may choose divorce over the opportunity to change, but then again, he may not. A narcissistic husband may consider an alternative way of living if he believes he can still protect himself in the process. In my experience, you find out whom you are really married to through a process of elimination—if he rejects all of the principles I suggest in this book when you try to incorporate them into your marriage, you may very well have your answer.

Second, this book is *not* written for those in a marriage in which violence is currently happening or is a real possibility. It is important

to understand the difference between violent individuals who willingly injure their wives physically and insecure individuals who act in controlling ways out of anxiety and fear. Insecure individuals will use bravado to cover up their insecurity and they will control others, needing someone to depend on them. An insecure, narcissistic husband can learn a different way to meet his needs without hurting his wife. In stark contrast, a violent, sociopathic man will do whatever is necessary, including engaging in violence, to force his wife's compliance.

If you are married to a man who is violent in any way, you need to seek protection for yourself and professional interventions for both of you immediately. As a clinical psychologist, I know firsthand the trauma that confronting a violent individual can cause. If there are real risks of physical violence, you should not confront your spouse on your own. It is extremely important for the potentially violent individual to engage in an intense program of domestic violence intervention, while the other partner seeks individual counseling in a safe and protected place. Confrontation and healing can occur only after the potentially violent individual has learned to control his anger issues and there is safety in the relationship.

Third, this book *is* written for those of you who are overwhelmed by your husband's controlling behavior, those who are not sure that your husband can change, and those who don't know how to talk to your husband about his controlling behavior. In this book you will learn how to approach the subject of control with him, how to help him see the value in changing his controlling behavior, and how to believe that he is capable of change. You will learn how to choose the right time for these conversations, how to get around his resistance to the topic, and how to prevent the discussion from becoming confrontational. You will also learn how to set boundaries in your marriage and hold your husband accountable for transforming his behavior.

Fourth, this book *is* written for husbands who have received it from their wives, husbands who discover their wives are reading

this book, and husbands who realize they tend to act in controlling ways. You may read many things you don't like or things that offend you, and some of what you read may hit too close to home. I know. I have been where you are. That is exactly the reason this book is perfect for you. You just have to keep an open mind and believe me when I say that change is possible. I've seen it happen in my life. I've seen it happen in the vast majority of men who have sought my help with their marriages. You might as well keep reading. What do you have to lose?

Fifth, this book *is* written *both* for those of you who have seen the role religion plays in encouraging controlling behavior by husbands *and* for those of you who have no religious faith system at this time. The core principles of Transformational Marriage, the term I use, are consistent with biblical teaching. I am a Christian and my faith will be evident throughout this book. However, the principles of power and control, as well as the suggestions offered for changing controlling behavior, will be beneficial and useful to all readers regardless of their faith tradition.

At the same time, it is important to note that this book *will* address the many ways in which churches and religion affect power and control issues in marriage. For instance, many husbands see passages in the Bible that address submission as giving free rein to husbands to exert control over their wives. The various understandings of submission, and their effect on how control issues play out in marital relationships, will be addressed in great depth.

Last, this book *is* written for spouses of controlling partners and the controlling partners, regardless of whether the man or woman is the most controlling. You may be in a relationship where the wife is the controlling spouse. If you are a wife and are also the more controlling person in the relationship, my comments to controlling husbands will be relevant to you. Trying to write to every potential type of relationship style is impossible. My high school English teacher always encouraged me to “write what I

know,” so I have chosen to do exactly that. I know what it’s like to be a controlling husband and I know what my wife had to deal with being married to me. My experience may not be the same as yours but it can still be helpful to you.

The Source of Marital Conflict

You and your spouse don’t wake up in the morning and say, “I think I’ll get in a power struggle with my spouse today.” Given the opportunity, you would probably choose a less hurtful, less stressful, and more loving marriage. However, you now find yourself in a place where your relationship does not feel the way you know it should. The good news is that there is hope for a new life through transformation in your relationship.

You may have gone to counseling to address these relationship issues and experienced some short-term gains. You may have even tried to “fireproof” your marriage, as the popular book *The Love Dare* suggests. Often these changes don’t last, and the harsh reality is that many couples return to a life of anger, resentment, frustration, and unmet expectations. You may have even considered contacting an attorney, having concluded your marriage will never change.

Remember when you both said, “I do”? You made some important promises to each other. If you are reading this book, I’m guessing one or both of you have not kept some of those vows. How do two people who stood up in front of their family and friends and promised to love and cherish each other forever end up so angry and disappointed with each other? Husbands and wives say things to each other in frustration that they would never say to a stranger on the street. Promises are broken, and the loss of innocence and trust is collateral damage.

Some say it is all about anger, that one or both need to take anger management classes. On the surface, this seems to make a good deal of sense, because when anger gets out of control, it can

be a frightening thing. Suppose that both of you controlled anger well—would your marriage problems be solved? I have worked with couples who don't get angry, at least externally, and still have significant marital conflict. I would argue that anger is only part of the problem, perhaps more of a symptom than a cause.

Others feel the big issue is communication. In their eyes, the main challenge these couples have is that they can't talk to each other, listen to each other, or understand each other. On balance, I can't argue with this logic. Learning to remain calm, talk about issues, and compromise helps, but I have seen couples who are masters at communicating that still have affairs, act selfishly, and abuse alcohol and drugs. Like anger, poor communication causes difficulties in a marriage but may be more of a symptom than the source of the problem.

There are those who blame marital problems on society and the current breakdown of the nuclear family. Their explanation for the conflicts we experience is that many of us did not have good examples of how to handle conflict when we were growing up. According to government statistics,¹ the divorce rate continues to hover around 45 to 50 percent, indicating that many children don't have the best role models for conflict resolution. Current societal trends seem to indicate a movement away from a traditional nuclear family rather than toward it. Even if this might change sometime in the future, you can't wait to solve the problems you have in your marriage right now.

A Different Explanation

Anger control, communication, and role models in the family of origin are all important factors that influence how couples handle conflict. I have come to believe, however, that these influences are best described as either secondary causes or symptoms of a much deeper issue. There is a stronger driving force that creates conflict in marriage.

*The Destructive Power of Selfishness—
“It’s All about Me!”*

I believe that selfishness, and the resulting desire for power and control, is the single most powerful force operating in controlling relationships. Sometimes it is a small decision, such as which restaurant to eat at or what color to paint the walls in your home. Other times the decisions have massive consequences, whether to have another child or take a job in a new city, for example. Regardless of the size or shape of the issue, a decision has to be made, which will be impacted by whose voice is louder and whether both parties will compromise or fight to get their own needs met. If one gives in this time, who will give in next time—and will the one who gives in resent what he or she lost?

Willard Harley, in *Effective Marriage Counseling*, talks about his Love Bank concept. He notes that in marriage, “Neither should gain love units at the expense of the other’s account. Control in marriage does the opposite. Instead of making simultaneous Love Bank deposits, control can cause simultaneous withdrawals.”² He describes progressive stages of controlling behavior, including selfish demands, disrespectful judgments, and angry outbursts. He describes all of these behaviors as “Love Busters” that interfere with trust, intimacy, and love in the marriage.

In today’s narcissistic, “It’s all about me” world, most people talk about wanting to get their needs met in a relationship as opposed to meeting the needs of their partner. Jean Twenge, the author of *Generation Me* and coauthor of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, studied sixteen thousand university students and discovered that 30 percent of them met the criteria for narcissism, as compared with only 15 percent in 1982.³ Across the board, people strive to achieve control of circumstances in their lives and of their relationships. From the extensive testing involved in relationship websites like Match.com and eHarmony.com to the plethora of relationship books out there, “experts” trumpet the theme of finding that one person who will meet your needs. The

expectation is that we are in relationships to get what we want and need from the other person.

*The Constructive Power of Selflessness—
“It’s All about You!”*

Throughout this book, you will hear me voice a different idea—one that conflicts directly with what society says we should look for in relationships. I want to suggest a different model that focuses on how you can serve the other person instead of on what you can get from her or him. The selfless model is not new or unique to me—in fact it has its roots in the biblical model of servanthood from the Christian faith tradition. This model of marriage is based on selflessness rather than selfishness—taking care of your partner’s needs before you worry about your own.

I can already see the emails coming in: “Are you kidding me, Welch? It’s already all about him—why on earth would I want to sign up for this? What about me? How do I get my needs met?” Fair point—if you give and he takes, how do you survive?

My answer is this: two people looking out for themselves are actually less powerful than two partners looking out for each other. I realize this may sound like a fantasy in light of your current relationship, but it is the goal we are aiming for. I encourage you to look for small victories that show movement toward that goal.

Controlling husbands can learn how to value their wives over themselves, giving them priority. This involves baby steps for husbands who have been taught to “look out for number one” first. Wives will need to help their husbands learn to make changes in their daily thought processes and actions that will make selflessness a new way of life.

Hope for Wives

I have a friend who asked me what possible reason a woman could have for staying married to a man who controls her. In my friend’s

words, that is “just plain stupid.” I do not believe that wives of controlling husbands are intellectually challenged, so perhaps you remain in a controlling relationship because you don’t feel you can leave or because you receive some sort of benefit from your relationship. I am going to suggest throughout this book that you may have a lot more ability to control your relationship than you think you do. I am even going to suggest that power and control in relationships is a two-way street, with both parties participating in the process.

Perhaps your husband treats you well when he is not angry, aggressive, or domineering. Perhaps you feel that being unhappily married is better than being divorced and alone, as you fear loneliness most of all. Or maybe you have never known another way of being in relationship, as you have been controlled before and this feels familiar and comfortable despite the pain. Each of you knows your own heart and knows why you remain in a destructive relationship.

Our story, and those of the couples I have worked with, will provide you with the hope that it doesn’t have to be this way. There is a path that can lead to a marriage in which you feel valued, honored, heard, and loved. Your husband is not doomed to be the man you see before you now. With the right motivation and desire, he can become the man you have always hoped he would be.

The good news is that if you were married to a man who simply couldn’t care less about you and had no desire to be with you, you would likely already be divorced. But since you are still married, there is hope for change. It will not be easy; he will not change overnight. For now, just understand that there is another option besides the divorce behind Door #1 and the unhappy marriage behind Door #2. If you both are willing to put in the time and energy, Door #3 holds the potential for a transformed marriage.

Hope for Husbands

To husbands, let me say this. When I decided to write this book, people told me you wouldn’t read it. They said that wives would

read the book because they have to live with you, but you wouldn't pick it up. So kudos to you for looking for a better way to live.

Maybe your wife gave you this book. Maybe you are thinking about someone you know (the "I have a friend who . . ." phenomenon). Regardless of why you are reading this book, you will probably see some controlling traits in yourself. Maybe you make decisions based mainly on what you want. Perhaps you get too angry at times and you can be a scary guy. When it comes down to it, you have to admit that often you care more about what you want than what your wife needs.

It took a lot of guts to pick up this book and give it a chance. I know people say, "I know how you feel" too often, and they usually don't. In this case, though, you can believe me when I say, "I understand what you are going through." I can honestly say that I have been where you are (or at least someplace close).

If you live by any kind of moral code that says controlling the one you love is wrong, your behavior creates a problem for you. You have to either convince yourself you are not doing anything wrong or live with the contradiction between your thoughts and actions. Some of the things I say in this book may hit close to home, and I can promise you that I will probably offend you more than once. Do yourself a favor and just keep reading. The truth may hurt when you first hear it but it will also set you free.

You can take heart in the knowledge that you can change. There's a better way. If you keep reading, you will learn how. Don't settle for the status quo. Your wife deserves better; you deserve better.

Beginning the Process

I don't believe it is an accident that this book has found you at this time in your life. You, as a wife of a controlling husband, are ready for a change but you may not think your partner wants to change. Some of the principles in this book don't require your partner's cooperation—you can begin the process of change on your own.

In later chapters you will learn how to change your expectation that he will fail, how to set appropriate boundaries and hold him accountable for his behavior, and how to initiate conversations with him about these difficult issues. Other steps will require that both of you work together for lasting transformation.

First, I want to tell you the story of transformation in my marriage. My wife and I hope this will be blessing to you. Telling our story leaves us feeling vulnerable and exposed but we have chosen to do this in the hope that you can learn from our mistakes and gain encouragement from our successes. Every couple's story is unique, and yours is different from ours, but we are glad you are allowing us to share this journey with you.