

Creative Nonfiction



For Better or Worse

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"For better or worse."

The chances are you have heard these words before, perhaps even spoken them. This short little phrase, when uttered at the right time and place, works like a secret passcode that lets you in to the mystery of marriage. I remember saying these words on my wedding day. Of all the things memorable on that memorable day, the words I remember best were "for better or worse." The rest, I don't remember.

I don't remember what my best man said, what the pastor preached. From an arm's length away, they spoke loud and clear. Yet their words remain vague in my mind. I dimly remember my vows, eloquent though they were. Marriage promises, spoken intentionally, were understood superficially. Their existential significance was hidden, obscured by the dazzling visual galore. I meant what I said, but although my lips captured the vows, my brain did not yet understand their meaning.

Dazzled by the beauty of my bride, I stood there at a loss for words, at a loss of meaning. All I could think of was *that* moment. It was a "better" moment then, filled with the "better" parts: the "you get to kiss your bride" part, the "honeymoon" part, the "healthy" part, and the "happily ever after" part. Back then, I also had a choice: better *or* worse.

Four years later, I didn't.

When my wife and I lost our daughter, it was the *worst* day of our lives. The world fell silent, leaving us at a loss for words, at a loss of meaning. I cannot describe that overwhelming sense of despair, that subduing sense of hopelessness. It made the air heavy,

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difficult to breathe. There was nothing that could make things easier, or happier, or better. No number of words, or hugs, or prayers were enough to ease the pain.

Loss. The *worst* feeling of all.

The experience was disorientating. It left us confused and out of touch with reality. Our brains tried hard to process the feeling of absence but failed. Our bodies were in limbo, with no solid ground beneath our feet. We were floating down a river of tragic circumstances, going with the flow, not knowing where it was taking us. We also didn't resist; I think we were too tired.

The sense of loss put a strain on our relationship. It was an invisible pressure, but one that was whenever there was conflict or misunderstanding. To maintain intimacy, both emotionally and physically, we had to work extra hard. One day it felt better, the next *worse* than the day before.

I grieved alone. Like a wolf, wounded in battle, I would retreat deep into the woods to bleed, to lick my wounds. I would withdraw into myself, then out again, then back into myself again. I found it difficult to tell my wife how I was feeling. Sometimes I didn't want to. Often, I didn't know how. Sharing feelings wasn't my "thing"; too embarrassing, too painful - I didn't want to cause more pain than already existed.

It took time, sweat, and tears to heal. With the help of words, I started to give shape to the formless jumble of thoughts and emotions inside me. These were the feelings of despair, shattered dreams, and unanswered prayers. These are the kinds of thoughts that make you sick, that make you feel depressed. The *worst* kind.

One day I felt heard, understood. I felt *felt*. The next day, I didn't—my wife was hurting too, some days *worse* than others. We were both in pain, bleeding, screaming. Alone and together, we were at our *worst*.

But as the two of us listened to each other and felt each other, the cloud of resentment began to dissipate. And although the pain of loss didn't go away, it was the pain that brought us closer. It was the pain that bound us together more tightly than we had been before.

Holy matrimony.

Today we know the meaning of vows, that promise of a lifetime: "For better or worse." We have had the chance to experience the better part and the privilege of tasting the bitter one. We were joined together, by those sacred words and by the silence of our shared loss. Today I can look back and say: together we were broken, together mended.

For better, *not* for worse.