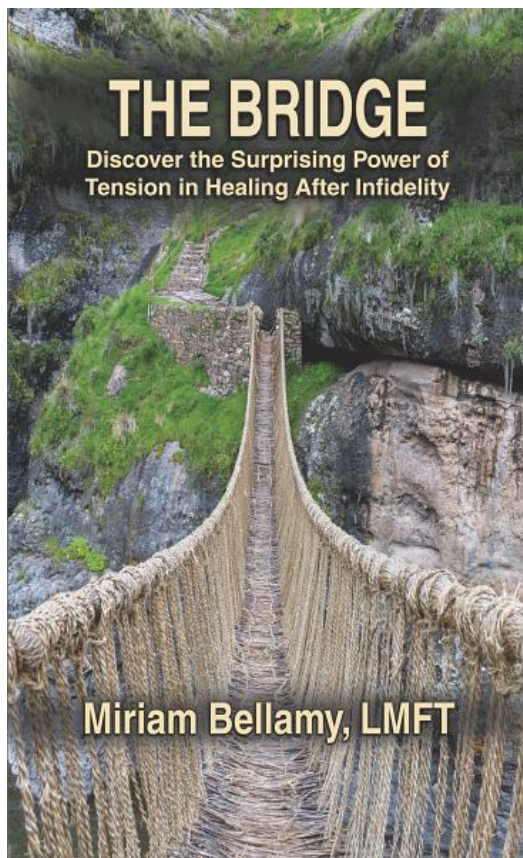




Infidelity can shatter a marriage, but rushing to repair often deepens the damage. The Bridge shows couples how to pause, rebuild self trust, and find steadier ground after betrayal.

The Bridge:

Discover the Surprising Power of Tension in Healing After Infidelity

By Miriam Bellamy, LMFT

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THE BRIDGE

Discover the Surprising Power of
Tension in Healing After Infidelity

Miriam Bellamy, LMFT

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Introduction

Before We Begin

There is a moment after infidelity is discovered when the ground gives way beneath you. For some couples, it happens in an instant—a text message uncovered, a confession blurted out, a truth that can't be taken back. For others, it arrives more slowly, through suspicion, fragments, or a dawning realization that something fundamental has been broken. Either way, the effect is the same: The relationship you thought you were standing in is gone.

Most couples move quickly.

Understandably. There is an urgency to prove remorse. To prove trustworthiness. To make the relationship safe again. But the real work takes time.

This book understands that. I understand that.

I also understand that important decisions are yet to be made as to whether you will stay together. So I am not here to pressure you toward reconciliation nor to frame separation as failure. I am here to help you slow down long enough to understand what this rupture has actually done—to you, to your partner, and to the relationship itself—so you can make better decisions about how to move forward.

In the aftermath of betrayal, urgency often creates new roles. One partner becomes the penitent. The other becomes the warden. Both lose their footing, and neither feels truly secure. What looks like “repair” on the surface often deepens the damage underneath.

I offer a different starting point.

Rather than asking you to do more, try harder, or return to the relationship you had before, I invite you to pause. To turn inward toward clarity, dignity, and self-trust. Because without steadier selves, no relationship—whether it continues or ends—can move forward cleanly in whatever direction it goes.

Throughout this book, I hold compassion for both partners: for the one who was betrayed and for the one who strayed. That compassion does not excuse harm or minimize pain. It recognizes infidelity as a profound rupture—one that exposes patterns, pressures, and vulnerabilities that must be faced honestly by each of you if anything solid is to be built.

Some couples who do this work will choose to rebuild their relationship. Others will not. This book does not require a particular outcome. It asks only that whatever path is taken is chosen with integrity rather than urgency.

In the chapters ahead, I use the metaphor of a bridge—not as a promise of reunion, but as a way of understanding what it takes to cross a rupture without

losing yourself in the process. A bridge that cannot bear the weight of truth will not hold. One built slowly, with strong anchors and clear limits, might.

If you are looking for guarantees, this may not be the book you want.

If you are willing to slow down, face what is real, and move forward with steadiness—whether together or apart—you are in the right place.

Take a breath.

There is no rush here.

When you're ready, we'll begin.

Chapter One

After the Fall

“In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood.”

-Dante, Inferno

Gina, a young writer living in small town in Virginia, told me that for months after her husband's affair, she felt like she'd been in a car wreck, one that left her still dangling upside down and spinning with no end in sight. Sam, her husband, a master plumber and business owner, told me he felt the same. When I met them, they were just stepping out, looking around dazed, trying to get their bearings. The analogy made total sense. After infidelity, it can feel as though everything is broken beyond recognition.

Nothing hurts like infidelity. Nothing. It rips apart the life you thought you knew, removing the very foundation beneath your feet, and leaves you in a free fall of pain, confusion, and doubt.

There is a particular agony for those who have been affected, and it cuts like nothing else in marriage, or possibly, in all of life. This agony visits each partner differently, but it visits, nonetheless. It's like your heart and mind are on fire, and no matter where you turn, you

can't escape the burning. If you betrayed your spouse, you can't undo what you've done, and you're probably just beginning to realize the scope of the pain your actions have caused, both to your partner and to yourself. If you've been betrayed, everything you thought you knew about your life, yourself, and your partner now likely feels *wrong*. The panic and desperation can consume both of you at times, like a fire consumes a forest.

No matter what you do, you can't seem to outrun it.

If you're the betrayed spouse, infidelity has likely called everything into question. You've probably spent full days or weeks trying to reconstruct your relationship history. *Have they really been where they said they were? How many times has this happened? What are these charges on our credit card? Did they really look me in the eye and lie this whole time?*

You're also likely feeling deeply disturbed about how much you didn't know or feeling shame about how many times you ignored your suspicions. Maybe you knew things weren't quite right in the marriage, but you never imagined infidelity. On top of all of this, you may be wrestling with a deep, private embarrassment—about who you thought you were or the partner you believed you had chosen. And in your darkest moments, you may be questioning your worth, your attractiveness, or whether you were somehow not enough. Many people

do in the aftermath of betrayal. It's profoundly disorienting, touching nearly every part of how you see yourself.

You may have also believed if your spouse ever cheated, you'd be gone. But you're still here.

And you're wondering why.

Now, in your pain and overwhelm, you are probably struggling to think clearly about pretty much anything.

So let me ask you a question: What's been the hardest part so far? Take a second to consider your response. If you're like most of the clients I've consulted with over the years, it's not the details of the affair itself. For most people, the most difficult part, and the hardest to overcome, is the feeling that your life isn't what you thought it was. What cuts the deepest isn't the details themselves, but what they represent. And the slow realization that the life you were living was never fully what it seemed.

*Was the life we were living not meaningful to them?
Have I been living in a completely a different reality?*

It's the breaking of trust that creates the profound sense of self-doubt, fear, and anguish. It's the energy it must have taken your partner to hide it all, to keep track of all the stories and the omissions. Lie after lie after lie.

So now you question *everything*. Perhaps it's the anniversary trip that you thought meant one thing and now discover meant something else entirely. Perhaps it's

the music you shared that no longer lands the same way. Perhaps it's the family you believed you were building together that now feels fundamentally ruptured. For so many of my clients working through infidelity, this fracturing of their sense of reality hurts far more than whatever may have happened between the sheets.

But you, if you're the betrayed spouse, you aren't the only one wrestling with questions. If you're the one who strayed, you have questions too. Yours will be different, but unsettling all the same. *Was it worth it? Was anything worth this? Am I the person I thought I was—or have I been lying to myself too? What if I've destroyed the very thing I need most? Will my spouse ever be able to forgive me? Will I?*

You are likely overwhelmed, desperate, and wondering if there is any hope. And if you're like so many of my clients, you're scrambling to undo the damage and get things back to the way they were. Even though you are in a very different position from your spouse, my question to you is the same: What's been the hardest part for you? Is it the pained look on your partner's face? The fear that you may never be trusted again? The embarrassment you carry? And if there are children involved—does the fear deepen? Do you worry that you've blown up your family, that you might lose your kids, or that they'll no longer respect or love you?

For you who betrayed your vows, the hardest part seems to be a combination of all the above. The cloud of shame that arises seems to rain on you like a never-ending storm. It can be unbearable. The lies you told your partner, the lies you told yourself, the lies you told to anyone who might suspect something. They may now be echoing back to you in mocking tones. And you may wonder how you'll ever again feel a sense of being able to stand in your own dignity and self-respect.

For both of you, these questions and feelings are likely stirring up a deep and disorienting doubt. The confusion is overwhelming; you may feel unsure of where you've been and where you're going. Perhaps neither of you even recognize yourself anymore. You may both be asking *Who the hell am I, and how did I end up here?*

Before we go any further, I want you to know, despite all this pain and confusion, there is a way to deal with this. There is a way to heal from this pain and move forward. Believe it or not, your life having burned to the ground has something to offer you.

Something you didn't ask for.

Something you *never* would have asked for.

But something extremely valuable, nonetheless.

To be clear, I'm not going to dress this up or pretend it's anything other than what it is—a profound rupture. This rupture has torn you apart, and yet, as painful as it

is, it's offering you an opportunity: a new perspective on your relationship, on your life, and on yourself. Right now, that perspective is likely pretty dark and distorted. But hear me out—if you are each willing to do the work, this rupture can actually be used as a building block for something different—something meaningful. Possibly even something richer and more intimate than it was before. It must if you want a way through that leads to something steadier, not just survival.

What is undeniable is that the relationship you once had is broken. The bridge between you two—the bond that used to connect you—is irrevocably broken. There's nothing you can do to force it back into place. Take a minute if you can. Breathe that in and allow it to settle. The old relationship is gone.

Gone.

And here's something of value. A nugget of truth: The old relationship *needs* to be gone. It needs to be let go. And the more you can let the old one go, slowly and deliberately, the greater your ability to figure out how to move forward. To build a new bridge. To create something you couldn't before this: A deeply trusting, thoroughly tested, meaningful relationship, IF that's what you each decide to do.

To be clear, letting go of the old relationship does not mean putting the affair behind you as if it never happened. Quite the opposite. I'm talking about doing

the hard work of embracing the brokenness rather than sweeping it aside. I know you may not be able to feel this right now, but there is heart-wrenching, identity-shaking, relationship-building power in the rupture you are facing. But you can't fully access the power until you let the old relationship go—until you let the old bridge between you be washed away.

Moving forward will not come from trying harder, fixing faster, or returning to how you used to be in the relationship. It will come from something far more demanding: learning how to stay rooted in yourself no matter the challenge before you. This rupture is asking you to develop a relationship with yourself that is steadier, more honest, and more self-directed than anything you've relied on before.

It's a monumental task that asks each of you to step onto unfamiliar ground. One that asks you to build something different, something stronger and more reliable than before—whether with each other or with someone new. And that's what this book is about: building a new bridge.

To learn how to do this, we'll need to explore what it takes to let go of the old and what it really takes to build something sturdy and steady, able to withstand even the stormiest of times.

To get us there, I'll invite you to consider an actual bridge, the last of its kind, that I visited high in the Andes in the District of Quehue [keh-WAY] in southern Peru.

The Bridge of Q'Eswachaka [kes-wah-CHAH-kah]

I first learned of the bridge of Q'Eswachaka, (literally *grass bridge*), through my editor, Jenny Runkel, who saw uncanny parallels between its yearly renewal and the kind of “bridge building” and renewal I was describing in couples recovering from infidelity. As she spoke, something inside me lit up, and I had to go see it for myself. So, in June 2025, I booked a solo trip to Peru. Once I was there, standing beside the road with the Inca people, something in me came alive. My understanding of tension in marriage—and the surprising role it can play in healing—began to deepen. I could see how instinctively we run from tension, believing it to be the problem, when in fact learning to lean into the right kind of tension is often what makes something entirely new possible. Peru, my time with the Inca people, and this remarkable bridge changed me. It changed how I thought about helping couples, and it changed the book I was writing.

Every year for the past five centuries, four Incan communities have gathered at the edge of the Apurímac River. In this time-honored tradition, the people use only

the ancient and ancestral methods passed down from generations to cut down and then rebuild the bridge spanning the canyon. When I witnessed it in person, as the final knots were secured after three days of hard labor, the celebratory whoops rose up from the cliffs, echoing across the valley: The bridge was alive again. Crossing it on the day of celebration, once all the work was done, I felt more alive as well.

To be sure, this was not a casual stroll. The grass floor rose and fell with each step; the rails swayed in rhythm with the breeze as the canyon stretched out below. I was aware of being high above the river. One hundred feet up, in fact. On a rope bridge made of *grass*! It was precarious and unfamiliar but somehow knowing how the bridge was so carefully constructed made me feel completely safe.¹

What the Incan communities are doing in Quehue is not simply construction; it is ceremony, inheritance, and

¹ For several days, Inca women had braided strands of tough *q'oya* [*KOH-yah*] grass into cords. Men had twisted those cords into thick ropes, and then those thick ropes into cables. As a community, they stretched and tested the cables until they were strong enough to hold. At the canyon's edge, in a moment of ceremony, the broken bridge was cut down and released to the river below. Only then could the new bridge begin to take shape. Cables were pulled taut, anchored on both sides, and floor and handrails were slowly woven together until the workers met at the center. After three painstakingly long days, the bridge was completed.

love braided into form. And it struck me that couples too need this deeper kind of perspective. Without a sense of something larger to hold them, the weight of pain and betrayal can feel overwhelming, even like drowning. But when they can glimpse the possibility of this feeling in their own lives—something that can hold steady and outlast the worst—then the work becomes not only survivable, but sacred.

The master engineer, Victoriano Arizapana, whom I met briefly in Quehue, says his father began teaching him at age twelve, and that even now he looks at the bridge as a son he loves. Few of us have had elders at our elbow, teaching us how to weave a life together. You may or may not have had parents or grandparents who helped you or who can help you now. But the bridge offers us something: a way to imagine what it takes to rebuild—not by patching the old bridge, but by creating a new one. Slowly. Painstakingly. Deliberately. Through authenticity, and through the natural tension authenticity creates.

Like the Incas, we will begin with a “gathering.” For this ancient people, gathering means collecting the raw materials needed to start the rebuild. Similarly, you will need to gather *yourself* together before you can weave anything meaningfully with another. You’ll learn to pause, notice the common mistakes couples routinely make in the raw aftermath of infidelity, and then, like the

Incas rebuilding a bridge, you'll start to prepare the ground for a better beginning.

From there, we'll move into weaving the first strands of a more solid sense of yourself, using the power and intelligence of your feelings. That's right. Your feelings. Intense as they are right now, they hold something essential for you. For each of you. Learning their language is the groundwork needed to learn to trust and respect yourself in ways you perhaps never have.

The nine chapters that follow promise more perspective and direction and will help more than you can even anticipate. But let's not get too far ahead of the process. You are still in your pain, questioning whether you can trust me as your guide and wondering if you can rebuild much of anything right now. And that's okay. In fact, it's totally normal. Learning to do this will take effort and patience, and the process may move more slowly than you'd like, but slow is smooth, and smooth is fast. We won't be skipping any layers. This process won't let you. This process will expect nothing but excellence from each of you. From excellence will come relief, sorrow, joy, honesty, humility, contentment—and a bridge you can rely on.

Are you ready?

Underneath all of the pain and noise, the brokenness you are now experiencing is asking something of you. It's *inviting* you forward.

Come with me.

It's time to wake up.

It's time to live and love in a new way.

The noise of your pain may be drowning out this calling. But it's there. And it's not going away. This book recognizes that. It recognizes and values what is. So it's not a book about making you feel better just to feel better. It's a book about *being* better. It asks of you what your life is already asking of you: to heal, yes, but also to grow. To decide who you are and what you believe in, what you stand for, and what any of that actually means in love. Should you each decide to not turn away from this rupture and agony but to face it fully, you will be changed. The rupture is calling to both of you—it's calling to the strongest, deepest parts of you. How will you answer?

If you're still with me, I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you are considering a new way to heal and move forward in the midst of all your heartache. Your future life depends on it. I mean that sincerely. What I'm about to present here in these pages is going to sound so radically different from most everything you've already

heard or read—so much so there may be times you want to cut and run. That’s normal too. It’s not an easy path.

All I ask at this stage is for you to stay with me for a few chapters. I’ve helped so many men and women walk (or, sometimes, crawl) through the remains of their relationships, and I’ve been so honored to watch them emerge with newfound life and strength that I’ve dedicated my professional career to guiding people just like you. In the midst of your profound agony, allow me to offer you a way through it. I promise not to waste your time . . . or your hope.

Again, I’m so glad you’re here. Let’s get started.

Chapter Two

Quit Trying to Save Your Marriage

*“There are far, far better things ahead, than any we
leave behind.”*

- C. S. Lewis

As we dive into this together, I'd like you to consider something radical, not reckless, not hopeless—but brave, counterintuitive, and unlike anything you've likely heard from a marriage counselor before. I'm asking you to stop trying to save your marriage. Yes, you read that right. Stop. That might sound insensitive, misguided, or even dangerous. I know even reading those words may feel like someone just knocked the breath out of you. That's how deeply we all need to feel the hope of repair. So you might be wondering what kind of professional would tell you to lay down the very thing you've been fighting for—the very thing you've been clinging to, the lifeline that sometimes feels like the only way you can keep going. It's exactly because this feels so tender that I want you to keep reading. Because when you stop trying to save the marriage, the real work begins.

It's possible that at this moment, you would give just about anything to save your marriage. It is also possible that later tonight or tomorrow, when things aren't going

so well, you might wonder about ending the marriage. Both of those are normal attempts to end the pain you are in, the pain that is constantly triggered and seems to hit you out of nowhere and can knock you to your knees.

That's what infidelity does. It knocks the bridge between you down. That bridge includes your history, the affection you have for each other, your memories, your trips, your music, your intimate connections—not to mention your families, your finances, and your kids if you have them. It's down, but it's not out altogether, which is actually part of the agony. There are still cables running across the canyon connecting you, and you are wondering what the hell they even mean anymore. Some of those cables are stronger and more powerful than others, but no matter how important or long-standing those individual cables may be, nothing is the same. The bridge has been broken. And trying to continue to cross it—to try to force things to stick together—keeps couples free-falling into new depths of pain.

A new bridge is required.

In fact, in my experience with couples in your situation, trying to repair that broken bridge of a marriage with too much vigor at the start often becomes the very thing that prevents either partner from moving forward. Why? Because your approaches are usually diametrically opposed.

One of you may want desperately to move on—to look ahead to the future, to focus on possibility, and to avoid the agony you see in your partner's eyes. Perhaps too you want to avoid your own.

Or you may be the one who feels compelled to dive headfirst into the abyss—to discover every detail, every thought, every feeling, every hidden activity. You may want to unearth every darkness in the hope of finding the light, to get back to trust. But more often than not, the way you are going about it takes you further away from yourself—even though that's the very thing you swore you would never do again.

One of you says: *Don't go into all that pain. Neither of us will survive it.*

The other says: *The only way back to us is to dive into the pain. I must know everything—or we won't survive it.*

This conflict keeps you circling each other in an agonizing tug-of-war, making the existing knots even tighter instead of healing and growing. Often, one or both of you capitulates just to reach a fragile peace—dropping your own needs, biting your tongue, pretending you're fine just to stop the fighting. To stop the pain. But capitulation is no way to build a trusting alliance. The approach is emotionally exhausting for both of you, and not building what needs to be built.

No, the work of building a trusting alliance requires something else. Something new. Something deeper. Truer. And more grounded. You may feel you can't possibly do more than you are doing right now. Let me reassure you, this work isn't about doing more. It's about doing differently. And that's what *The Bridge* is all about. Doing it differently.

And it starts with stopping.

As crazy as it sounds, right now is not time to be working on the broken marriage. It's time to realize *the broken marriage is working on you*. If you'll allow it, it is calling for you to do some deep and refining work. The marriage is asking you to gather yourself, like the first step in the Incas' annual ritual. The first step toward building a new bridge is gathering, and nothing more. The new raw materials need to be collected; the tough grasses required to build the bridge need to be brought together. And it's the same for each of you.

In Quehue, I watched on day one as the gatherers passed by with giant bundles of tall *q'oya* grass that had been collected, dried, and stacked in perfect lengths. As each parcel was delivered, the women's calloused hands—made tender by the work—expertly braided long cords that would eventually become thick ropes, and later, one-and-a-half-ton cables. As the bridge rose day by day, new bundles were continuously required, each

stage depending on them. This gathering is where it all started—and continued throughout the entire three days.

Gathering yourself back together is the most important work you'll do throughout this entire process. In fact, it's the very foundation of moving forward. It's a change in mindset and focus from your *relationship* to *yourself*—to how *you* think, how *you* feel, and how *you* act. And in case you're wondering, turning back toward yourself isn't selfish—it's smart. This isn't about abandoning your marriage. It's about finding the ground under your own feet so you can make real choices about it. This change is a process, and it's going to take a lot of effort, new knowledge, and new perspectives. You can't do it all at once, in one fell swoop. But without that strong sense of *self*, the work is going to be far less productive if at all.

I know those are strong words. It doesn't mean that anything and everything you've done so far won't "count" if you don't have that strong sense of *self*. Rather, it means your frantic repair efforts keep you exhausted without ever truly changing the structure of your relationship. It means the most effective work will begin once you turn and gather energy back toward your own center.

The gathering is not about pulling the shards of your marriage back together. It is about gathering you back together. This work with yourself is your hope and

guiding light throughout the entire process—whether you betrayed your spouse or are the betrayed. It's work that ensures that whatever path either of you decide upon, it will be a better one.

So where do you begin this work of gathering? Right here. Right now. And how do you do it?

You pause.

Only in pausing can you recognize *you might be trying to force something*. In fact, if you aren't trying to force something, you'd be the first couple I've met who hasn't fallen into this trap—who hasn't plunged headfirst, in fact, into this very normal reaction to infidelity. How do you know if you've fallen into this trap? How do you know you're forcing something? Maybe you're having the same long arguments over and over, deep into the night. Or you're turning yourself—consciously or unconsciously—into exactly what you think your partner needs so they'll stay, or so they won't cheat again. Perhaps you're repeatedly demanding the truth from someone you don't think you can trust anyway. I'm not necessarily saying any of these things are wrong; I am saying they aren't working.

Now, before we go any further, I want to be clear about what I am *not* asking you to do. I am not asking you to give up on your marriage, to minimize what has happened, or to pretend the pain isn't real. Nor am I

suggesting that trust can—or should—be rushed back into place.

What I am asking is simpler, and harder: to stop trying to fix everything right now. To pause the frantic effort to save the relationship long enough to gather yourself. This pause is not giving up. It is the beginning of doing this work with clarity, dignity, and intention rather than panic.

Things like healing and trust simply won't be forced. Rather than taking you forward, trying to do so will just take you in circles. We tend to get ourselves even more entangled with each other when in deep marital crisis. This is why the work is not about pausing *together*; it's about pausing *to gather*. The heat of the moment and the pain of your wounds can send you straight into intense feelings that threaten to overtake you both. Only when you stop forcing and learn how to pause can you start to see past your pain and into your situation, yourself, and your patterns with actual insight. At that point you can begin to find your way to real solutions.

If you and your spouse are finding yourselves at the same dead ends, trapped in a cycle you can barely get your mind around, pause. It's such a simple concept, but I promise you it's one we cannot overlook.

You are in a place in your life where you stand to lose . . . and lose big. You could lose your marriage, your partner, the life you've built so far. Not to mention your

home, your finances, and even your ties to friends and family. You have probably already begun to think about the changes in relationships with your children if you have them. When it comes to these pillars and stabilizers, trying to heal your marriage with great urgency and intensity can actually shake them even more.

I wonder if you've also considered the possibility that coming in with urgency—trying to force things—could actually cost you time. Precious time. Because when it comes to relationships, the good stuff takes time. (And sometimes the bravest thing you can do is pause, right here, right now, and let that truth settle in.)

The good news is that if you can pause, you stand to gain, and gain big. You stand to gain a relationship with yourself. And if you have a relationship with yourself that is respectful and deeply honest, you are primed for a meaningful, fulfilling life. And pausing is the key. Pausing puts you in charge of your own life. That's right. Pausing helps you recognize and regain the strength and independence most people in your position seem to have lost along the way. Notice you are not in charge of your spouse—of what they do or don't do, of what they will share or not share with you, and certainly not of whether they tell you the truth or whether you'll be extended trust.

The truth, often hidden in plain sight, is that neither of you has control over the other. You never have and

never will. But you can be in charge of yourself again, and pausing does just that. It's where your empowerment lies. Slowing down allows thoughtfulness to return, and from there, the journey becomes what it was always meant to be about: your healing, your growth, your dignity—your lifelong journey to peace and freedom. And this requires delicate pacing even when you want to roar ahead. It requires patient steadiness even when you feel the most ungrounded. It requires pause even when everything else in you is screaming for you to GO!

You might already be thinking: *But what if my spouse doesn't do this work?* That question is understandable. It's also one of the hardest traps to avoid, because your future feels like it depends on their effort. For now, I want to reassure you that this book will address that fear in good time. But in these first steps, the most powerful thing you can do is turn toward your own gathering work. Your spouse may or may not come alongside you right away—but your own clarity and steadiness will change everything, no matter what.

At times, pausing may feel like you are trying to stop a freight train given all you have been through and all you are feeling right now. But remember, this work isn't about doing more. It's about doing it differently. Like most of my clients who have built this bridge, I'm confident you will find that you are up for greater things than you ever thought before.

This may sound impossible to you at this point, but guess what? You're already doing it. Simply by reading this book and trying another viewpoint on for size, you are gathering yourself and creating the pause necessary for real change to happen.

Each of you has significant work to do, which must begin with the gathering phase of rebuilding the bridge, in the pause between stimulus and response. Each of you must work on restoring personal dignity. Each of you must work on self-awareness and accountability. Each of you, *each of you*, needs a transformation. And if you do it right, you will be different enough to truly make an authentic decision about the future of your marriage. You will have gathered yourselves in order to begin the difficult task of weaving things back together, both within and between.

I invite you now into my consultation office to meet Tim and Kari. This couple will show you how actively pausing to gather a self back together can bring about a fresh perspective and will give you a glimpse into what kind of hope might be available down the road.

Tim and Kari

When Tim and Kari sat down for their first consultation, Kari had just found out about Tim's affair. In fact, she'd learned of it just a couple of days before our session. As I do with all couples, I started by asking

an open-ended question to both of them: “How can I help you?”

Tim spoke first. He was tense, almost frozen, with a rigid body and shallow breath. He laid out the details of the affair, stating that it began as a friendship and escalated from there much later.

“I don’t want my marriage to end,” Tim said, his voice tight. “I don’t know what to do.” Terrified of losing his wife, he pressed on. “I want Kari to trust me again, but I keep messing things up. I want someone to tell me exactly what to do and if I’m doing it wrong.”

He went on to give me a brief history, and I noticed how pervasive his tendency to want things to be “right” was. Tim was a classic people pleaser. And on the surface, this people-pleasing had worked. In high school, Tim was voted “most popular” and seemed to have friends in every social circle. With three sisters, one older and two younger, and parents deeply woven into their Ohio community, he had learned early how to play his part. He was a successful business owner, operating a chain of restaurants. When he and Kari met, he had just opened his first one. They were both newly divorced, Kari a regular customer. She was wary of getting into another relationship, but she was lonely and Tim seemed different. They married after a year of dating. It was a small and intimate ceremony as they each had very little contact with their families. Like so much else in their

lives, the reception was executed with excellence—every detail polished, every expectation met. It was the same drive for perfection that would later shape their marriage, for better and for worse.

Over their eleven years together, they had both been quite busy but made the most of their time. Tim opened two more restaurants, and Kari became a stay-at-home mom to their son and daughter. On the outside, everything appeared to be unfolding perfectly. But here, sitting in my office, was the first time in his life Tim didn't know what role to play—and he could barely tolerate the one he'd stumbled into: the villain.

I was beginning to see just how sensitive Tim's self-image really was. I leaned in gently. "There's a problem with your answer, Tim," I said. "Want to hear it?"

He nodded, his eyes searching mine for hope.

"You've said part of your struggle is always trying to be what others want. But when you ask me to tell you what to do, you're still asking for the same thing—still playing the part you think you should play. I suspect that's part of how you got here."

Tim looked startled. His posture shifted, his breath caught. "So I gave the wrong answer," he said, his voice edged with sarcasm—but also with a hint of recognition.

"It's OK to have the wrong answer," I said. "Maybe that's the best damn thing—because 'getting it right' has never been the real answer anyway. Sometimes the only

way forward is to *stop performing* and let yourself be *human*.”

Kari watched all of this closely. She knew the layers of pretense Tim usually lived under, and the relief on her face was unmistakable when I spoke to it so directly. She relaxed a bit and took a deep breath before she leaned forward and started to share about their history from her perspective.

“Tim spends so much energy trying to be what he thinks I want that . . . somewhere along the way . . . it’s like *he* vanished,” she said, her voice trembling. “Every Friday night, he’d race through a long list of errands for me on his way home—so determined to be ‘helpful.’ But I would have traded all of it, every bag and receipt, just to have him walk through the door early . . . to feel his arms around me . . . to wander the neighborhood together with no rush, no list, just us. We could’ve gotten the damn milk and bread tomorrow. What I wanted was *him*.” Her voice cracked, and the years of missing him—while he was right there—rose up, raw and undeniable. We paused, letting the ache come forward and take up the space it needed.

When Kari spoke again, her tone was softer. “He’s steady, reserved. I’m sensitive, intense. But with him, I pull back. I set my feelings aside. I stop asking for what I want.”

Tim interrupted. "I've only seen her cry like this twice—when her mother was dying, and now. She hasn't stopped for three days."

"I can't," she said simply. "I can't stop crying. I can't stop being so angry. No one knows what's going on—not our families, not our kids, not the restaurant. I feel like I'm unraveling."

"So it sounds like your feelings are flooding in, and Tim is having trouble finding his," I said.

She nodded.

Turning back to Tim, I asked, "If we take 'getting the right answers' off the table, what do you want help with?"

His shoulders relaxed a bit, and his feet stopped shifting. I could see slightly deeper breathing. "I want to learn to express what I really feel," he said, taking a little more time with his answer now. "I want to be authentic." It wasn't lost on me that Tim may even now have been sensing what the new "right answers" were, but it didn't matter. The direction had been established. Our work set out for us.

"That's something I can help with," I told him. "Not by saving your marriage—not directly, anyway, but by helping you become more you. If there's a way forward together, that's where it starts." The air shifted. This wasn't the answer either of them expected. In the middle

of the wreckage of an affair, I was asking them to shift from repairing the marriage to rediscovering themselves.

Kari listened, then quietly admitted, “I’ve carried the weight of making this marriage work for a long time—kept the days fun, watched his moods, sacrificed parts of myself. And now this. . . . It’s like a tear right through the center of me.” She looked down at her hands. “I had his back, but I don’t think he’s had mine. At least he hasn’t for a long time.” After a pause, she added, “I built my whole life inside his, and now I’m realizing there’s no real space for *me* there.”

It’s the danger that comes after betrayal but also after years of subtle accommodation: the slow erasure of self. Tim’s affair tore open the wound, but the wound was already forming in Kari long before.

I let the moment breathe before asking, “Kari, when was the last time you felt important to yourself?”

Her eyes filled. Something about the question connected to her childhood experiences that had convinced her she didn’t matter—until, as a young adult, she began to see her own worth. She had built dreams, reached her goals, and, yes, experienced a divorce, but she had met Tim during a season when her self-belief was regrowing and strong. Somewhere along the way, she said, she’d lost it again.

“I want *me* back,” she said.

“That’s the work, then,” I replied. “It might be harder than you expect, but you’ll know it because it will feel right. You’ll start to feel like you again.”

And So We Begin . . .

Tim and Kari help us consider that the starting point is not to attempt saving the marriage, but with reclaiming the *self* that was lost along the way. For Tim that meant rethinking his people pleasing, something that we later found out contributed to his having an affair in the first place—and something that would get in the way of rebuilding trust. For Kari it meant interrupting the persistent erasure of self for the sake of soothing others—and something that would also get in the way of rebuilding trust. This is what pausing is about in the beginning of recovery: stepping off the frantic and urgent path of repair, understanding automatic patterns that keep you stuck, and stepping back into yourself.

In this way, pausing also opens the door for much needed self-care—for both partners. Kari was raw and she was not sleeping. I encouraged her to prioritize getting sleep any way she could, and we brainstormed some solutions. Tim and I had the same discussion. Anything either of them could do to take care of their bodies would help them during this time—and would constitute their early efforts to replace the frenetic and misguided attempts to save the marriage.

In their first few sessions, they were beginning to understand how very persistent their patterns were and how they were getting in the way of progress. Even in the first hours of the affair being found out, they had been trying to force something that simply can't be forced. They had been trying to "get it right" when what they needed was to pause and reconnect with self.

Before we go much further. . .

I need to let you in on a little secret. You're going to be terrible at pausing at first. Tim and Kari certainly were.

That's OK.

You are likely incredibly raw—your pause muscles likely pretty weak. And your relationship with self possibly something that hasn't gotten the attention it has needed. The urgency for some sense of control probably feels overwhelming.

That's OK too.

Just *thinking* about pausing is enough of a start. It's the beginning of a kind of rewiring of easily accessible, but perhaps no longer needed neural pathways. A moment of pausing in an argument—or before an argument begins—is a start. Any form of self-care, even if it's just going to the store for a candy bar or taking a walk around your neighborhood instead of launching into the same hurtful arguments, is a start. Wherever and

whenever you CAN pause, do it. Like any positive habit, it will take time, patience, and consistency to become embedded. The good news is that it works on you, even if on a very subtle layer, almost immediately. And the more you do it, the more you will *continue* to do it, the more of a difference it will make.

Before we move on to our next phase of bridge building, I'd like for us to consider an unlikely story. A taste of the work ahead. It's here to offer you more of that sense of what can happen when we face enormous problems with pause.

It's the River, Not the Raft

The year was 1832. The mighty Mississippi pulsed with hidden strength beneath a monstrous tangle of dead trees, rotted limbs, and ancient roots—something locals had come to call the Great Raft. The behemoth of debris was over one hundred miles long, strangling the river like a python and its prey. The river flooded regularly, making settling and commerce impossible. Members of the Army Corps of Engineers had been trying to clear it, one log at a time, for years. But as soon as they removed one, two more would take its place.

Captain Henry Miller Shreve was finally called to the project. Shreve paused and took time to listen to the frustrated engineers who had been doing this backbreaking and fruitless work day in and day out under

the unrelenting Southern sun. As he listened, taking in the tangled mess, he stood on the edge of the river, his boots sinking into the mud. Shreve was a man who often saw the bigger picture on things. As an engineer, he was adept at looking at things from a thirty-thousand-foot view, and he didn't see the Great Raft as much as he saw the river below. To Shreve, the river was less an obstacle and more the artery of a growing, thriving nation. Seeing the potential of the river, he realized they didn't need to clear the logs. They needed to free the river. He knelt down and took a handful of wet earth. The river was too shallow, too silted, and too clogged with ancient roots. With all of this obstruction, the current was too weak to clear the mess.

Shreve ordered the engineers to stop working on the logs and to start dredging the river bottom. It didn't matter that it was going to take years. It didn't matter that there would be flooding. Nothing was more important than freeing the river. As work progressed slowly but steadily, something unbelievable to the engineers started to happen: The water began to pull the Great Raft apart on its own. Freed from what was previously invisible to the engineers, the river started to act like a river again. In the end it wasn't muscle that broke apart the Great Raft. It was nature itself—and the ability to look at a problem differently.

Similarly, I'm imploring you now: Stop the work you've been doing to save your marriage. Stop trying to remove one log at a time. With each log you try to remove, two more will take its place.

If you can begin to look at your problems differently, you can stop this frustrating "work" on your marriage. You can see a bigger picture and a resourcefulness you haven't seen before, as you learn to settle into yourself. And don't worry if you don't know what to do just yet. We'll construct this bridge one step at a time, uncovering one layer at a time—chapter by chapter.

As the river starts to act like a river again, you will learn to act like you again—or maybe for the first time in your life. You can then see what clogs things up. You can then see what keeps the river from flowing freely, what keeps your inherent strengths—and your partner's inherent strengths—from flowing as nature intended.

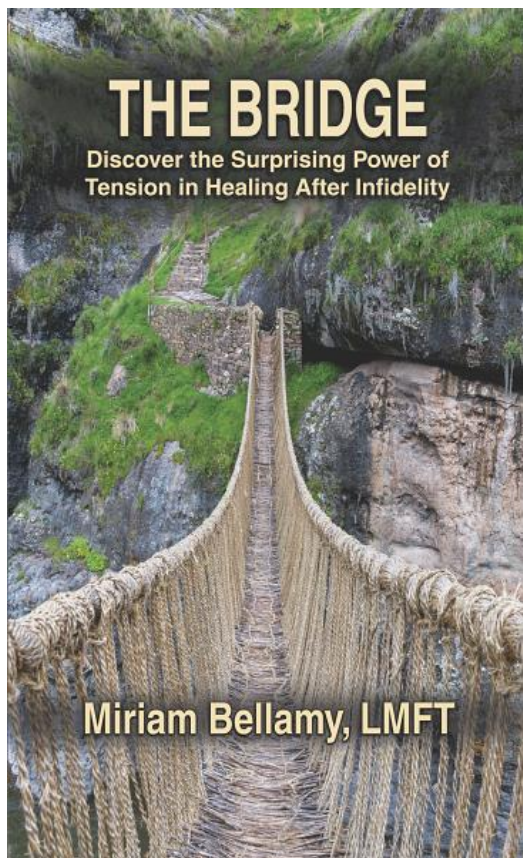
Like Captain Shreve standing on the riverbank, you too can pause and consider a bigger picture. You can consider the possibility that a powerful potential flows beneath the surface and that you can tap into that power.

You are caught in something that has taken on a life of its own. Now is not the time to force a solution. Now is the time to pause, to step back, to gather yourself together, and to prepare for the work ahead.

Since we aren't going to be working on your marriage, you might be wondering what's next instead.

For now, we work on unclogging the river. When it's flowing more freely, then, and only then, do we begin the work of building a new bridge between you. I promise you it will be uncomfortable, but I also promise you that it's the quickest, surest path to growing from this.

Let's keep going.



Infidelity can shatter a marriage, but rushing to repair often deepens the damage. The Bridge shows couples how to pause, rebuild self trust, and find steadier ground after betrayal.

The Bridge:

Discover the Surprising Power of Tension in Healing After Infidelity

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