

John M. Gottman and Julie Schwarz Gottman with Joan DeClaire, *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* (Three Rivers Press, 2006)

Reviewed by Bethany Meola

John and Julie Gottman, a husband-and-wife team of marriage counselors, craft their book *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* as a series of marriage therapy vignettes. Ten couples, ten dysfunctional marriages, ten visits to the Gottmans' Love Lab, and ten transformative lessons about marriage.

Each chapter is structured in a similar way. A married couple is introduced and their situation is described in brief: one couple is struggling to heal from an affair; another is adjusting to parenthood. Each finds themselves snarled in one dysfunctional habit or another. After this lead-in, the lights dim and the spouses take center stage: a dialogue between them is recorded verbatim beside a running commentary by the Gottmans, who highlight both negative and positive communication decisions. Then, after some focused coaching, the couple converses again, this time with far more positive interactions than before. Each chapter concludes with fill-in exercises and questionnaires designed to invite the reader into the Love Lab and experience the ten transformative lessons firsthand.

10 Lessons has some important strengths. Like other books by John Gottman, such as *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994), attention is given to the emotional/physiological interactions that take place during communication. For example, a stressful conversation might induce "flooding" in one spouse, where the heart rate spikes and adrenaline levels may be elevated. "Emotional stress," write the Gottmans in the analysis of one couple, "has caused the many parts of [the husband's] nervous system to become so overloaded that it's difficult for him to think straight and communicate..." (p.44). The interplay between thought and physical response, one might say, is an expression of man's intimate body-soul unity and thus expressive of a trustworthy anthropology.

And yet the Gottmans occasionally seem to suppose a somewhat "angelic" or unembodied anthropology. Much emphasis is placed on restoring the emotional connection between spouses that have "drifted apart," as the saying goes – and this even in situations where husband and wife would probably accomplish more by means of a good night's sleep, a hot shower, a good breakfast, and a brisk walk! In other words, the authors at times seem to minimize the obvious bodily factors that complicate their patients' emotional lives. Who hasn't experienced a period of angst that, as it turned out, had more to do with a sleepless night than with an intractable dilemma?

Another strength of *10 Lessons* is that it chooses wisely to ignore the increasingly common belief that sometimes marriages "just fail." As an example in this vein, consider a statement by Michael G. Lawler [in *The Jurist* 55 (1995): 236] that "a marriage is consummated and permanent only when the marital love in which it is founded is consummated and permanent." In this view no marriage is *a priori* indissoluble; indissolubility is proved by, well, not dissolving. Yes, it is to be expected that marriage counselors will work to keep a marriage together; after all, one's reputation could suffer if too many couples head straight from the marital therapy couch to divorce court. And yet it remains admirable that nowhere do the Gottmans tell a couple, "Yep, you're right – it does sound like your marriage is all washed up. We advise you both to cut the charade and find someone more compatible." No marriage is beyond repair for the authors.

And yet despite their wise choice not to listen to the anti-permanence crowd, the Gottmans seem to capitulate to the false idea that certain sins, particularly in the realm of sexuality, are without victims and even without effects. At the least, couples in the book who have cohabited, who are

“childless by choice,” who had sex before marriage, and so on, seem to experience no discernible fallout in their marriage from these decisions. True, perhaps none of the effects of these prior decisions bubbled up in the specific therapy sessions highlighted here. And yet if Christian teaching is correct that “sin...injures and weakens the sinner himself” and “harms...communion” (*Catechism*, nos. 1459, 953), then it’s only to be expected that the consequences of disordered choices (especially if unrepented and unabsolved) may show up in marriage therapy.

Another strength of *10 Lessons* is that the featured couples span various ages; even grandparents have further to progress in the art of love! The Gottmans also offer sound and refreshing advice about marriage and children: a child-centered marriage is not a good idea, they say. Indeed, in an era where parenthood seldom dares to admit that it is anything less than meticulously planned, parents are tempted to think that their marriage should take a backseat while they invest 110% into their children. Not so, say the Gottmans. Ironically, parents so focused on providing their children with a happy home can miss the very thing most important for their children’s happiness: their parents’ healthy marriage. In this vein, it’s striking that the Gottmans choose the very same word to describe the home – a “cradle” – as does Bl. John Paul II in *Christifideles Laici*. The Gottmans write, “We often encourage couples to think of their marriage as they would a cradle. It’s here in the safety of your stable, loving relationship that your child’s heart can rest” (p. 233). (Compare to John Paul II: “The family... is the cradle of life and love” – *Christifideles Laici*, no. 40).

The last example is emblematic, as well, of Gottmans’ treatment of religion and faith – or rather, non-treatment. If religion is mentioned at all, it is a passing background detail. None of the couples speak of faith as a formative influence in their lives or their marriage, and the Gottmans never ask about it. One is led to wonder whether all of the couples selected were card-carrying atheists. Or is it that religion is not a “practical help” when it comes to marriage difficulties? Surely there is wisdom about marriage that can be gained even without a formal credo. And yet, as demonstrated by the Gottmans’ brush with John Paul II’s language, religion has thought quite a good deal about marriage and family life. (Incidentally, the lack of religion in *10 Lessons* reminded me of a bridal magazine I browsed during wedding planning. Out of the ten “real weddings” featured, not one was in a church. Not one? Is that even statistically accurate?) One is left to wonder what, if anything, faith contributes to one’s marriage.

For this reviewer, the most problematic aspect of *10 Lessons* is its reduction of marriage to a matter of communication – if not in theory, then certainly in practice. It has no “ontological” dimension. The weight of each transformative lesson is a new communication technique, and the goal of each session is more intimate, more successful communication. This raises many questions in light of man’s embodiment. What role does the body play? Does touch count as communication? And with such an emphasis on what might be called the rational abilities of man, what about a marriage where one spouse has lost the ability to talk, hear, or reason? It’s hard to tell what advice the Gottmans could give to a husband whose wife had advanced Alzheimer’s.

As a whole, *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* offered much in way of practical marriage advice, a la tips and strategies. The technique of opening up the marital therapy room to observers, so to speak, provided an authenticity to the Gottmans’ suggestions beyond what would have been gained by principles alone. Despite leaving several unanswered questions, particularly as regards faith and the role of the body, the Gottmans offer helpful advice to struggling couples with their wealth of accumulated knowledge. As with any book of practical tips by authors who may not share the fullness of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family, the book should be read in the light of the Church’s authentic teaching, which never contradicts right reason.

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