



## Praise for *Side by Side*

*Side by Side* is beautifully written, heartfelt, and profound. The authors traveled the country to interview older couples about their marriages. Their questions were excellent and the couples they interviewed answered in honest, articulate, and detailed ways. The stories they tell are powerful and poignant teaching stories. The couples were from diverse backgrounds and parts of the country, but they shared many common traits. All were spiritual seekers striving for deep and mutually satisfying relationships. Even as they said goodbye to parents and approached their own deaths, they also faced a world in crisis. In the last chapter, the authors share their own marital struggles. I greatly respected their candor and commitment to each other. All older people now face the loss of the world as we knew it. These stories of marriages can help us understand how to face even the greatest challenges with love, joy, and equanimity.

**MARY PIPHER** AUTHOR OF *A LIFE IN LIGHT*  
AND *WOMEN ROWING NORTH*

"We're all just walking each other home," said Ram Dass. Here's a book rich with insights into how aging couples in committed relationships are making that walk in ways that help them find wholeness. For several months, Caryl and Jay Casbon traveled the country interviewing couples about the relational dance where we sometimes step on each other's toes and sometimes sweep each other off our feet, learning how to move to the music that makes each other's heart beat. The result is a book of honest and heartfelt conversations from which there is much to learn about the ups and downs of intimate love as a vale of soul-making.

**SHARON PALMER & PARKER J. PALMER** AUTHOR OF  
*LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK* AND *THE COURAGE TO TEACH*

It seems like just yesterday that I was reading books on how to prepare for marriage. Then I read a pile of books to help with communication, parenting, budgeting, conflict resolution, time management . . . the challenges of a marriage in motion. And suddenly now, I find a beautiful book for aging couples . . . just what I need now. *Side by Side* unfolds like an adventure and leaves you with so much to think about, individually and together, and so much to live into each irreplaceable day. It even includes abundant resources to use the book in small groups. Highly recommended!

**BRIAN D. MCLAREN** AUTHOR OF *FAITH AFTER DOUBT*

As someone trying to nurture a marriage in mid-life, I found this book so rare, comforting, and revelatory. Finally, real couples talking about the struggles with our shadows, our family of origin conditioning, and the beast of logistics, while also painting a picture of the sacred work of showing up for someone you love, the physical closeness unlike anything else, the shared adoration for kids and community. *Side by Side* helped me take the long view—a real gift at this moment in my own journey.

**COURTNEY E. MARTIN** AUTHOR OF *LEARNING IN PUBLIC* AND *THE EXAMINED FAMILY* NEWSLETTER

Each couple's soul story offers pearls of wisdom informed by age and experience. The Readers' Guide is such a thoughtful gift to help us explore our own journey as we step together into this new phase of life.

**HELEN DAVIDSON** BLOGGER AND LIFE-STORY FACILITATOR FOR OLDER WOMEN AT [AGELESSPOSSIBILITIES.ORG](http://AGELESSPOSSIBILITIES.ORG)

As an Episcopal priest, I frequently work with couples preparing to be married. Their focus is, understandably, on the upcoming wedding and the beginnings of their new life together. Although *Side by Side* focuses on aging couples, still the wisdom of this book, and the stories shared, offer so much for couples at any stage in their relationship, even those just beginning their marriage journey. Embracing the adage, “begin as you mean to go on,” *Side by Side* should become required reading for every new couple I meet with.

**THE REV. ELIZABETH MOLITORS** RECTOR, TRINITY  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

The Casbons show us how beautiful healing can happen when soulmates show up fully to support each other’s spiritual growth. Thanks to these wise couples, we can all learn more about walking the path of Love amidst the mundane and meaningful challenges of partnerships, aging, and simply being human.

**CHRISTINE LOVE-MACLEOD & AINSLIE MACLEOD**  
AUTHOR OF THE INSTRUCTION AND THE OLD SOUL’S GUIDEBOOK

*Side by Side* shares moving stories about couples who see relationship as well as aging as paths for spiritual growth and who dance with the gifts and challenges of sacred relationship.

**HEATHER ENSWORTH PHD** AUTHOR OF *FINDING OUR CENTER* AND CO-AUTHOR OF *FROM TRAUMA TO HEALING*

What makes one marriage last and others fail? This book can help answer that question. The guidance and knowledge of thirteen couples tell their story and offer their age-old wisdom on how they learned to adapt and conquer obstacles that threatened to tear them apart. *Side by Side: The Sacred Art of Couples Aging with Wisdom & Love* is a fascinating reading experience. It made me stop and realize the problems couples face together and how they can keep their love still strong and shining bright. Caryl & Jay Casbon are two talented authors. There was never a moment that I found myself bored reading this book. Instead, I eagerly awaited the next chapter to discover another couple's story. This book would make a wonderful wedding present for all young couples. The wisdom it contains could help them.

**MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW**

SIDE<sup>by</sup>SIDE



CARYL & JAY CASBON

# SIDE<sup>by</sup>SIDE

the sacred art of couples aging  
with wisdom & love



CREATIVE  
COURAGE  
PRESS

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For the couples who generously opened their homes  
and hearts to us and shared the gift of their stories  
which serve as the foundation for this book.

For our therapist, Theyr Jenkins, and the other often  
unsung healers, therapists, coaches, and spiritual directors  
who are committed to helping couples grow stronger, side  
by side, as they age together with Spirit, wisdom, and love.

*Beautiful young people are accidents of nature,  
but beautiful old people are works of art.*

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

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SIDE by SIDE

*To journey without being changed is to be  
a nomad. To change without journeying  
is to be a chameleon. To journey and to be  
transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim.*

MARK NEPO

## INTRODUCTION

# Inspired by a Dream: The Story Behind *Side by Side*

**ONE MORNING** I awoke to discover Jay waiting for me, wide-eyed and eager to share an idea that came to him in a dream. This was a numinous dream, coming from Spirit, charging us to interview aging couples in committed relationships living into the winter season of their lives. A title popped into my head, and I blurted out, “Jay, I think I know what we can call this project: *Side by Side*.” It stuck and became our north star. We would film older couples, interweaving a trinity of themes: relationships, aging, and spirituality. And then we would find a way to share what we learned with as many people as possible. Game on.

To be clear, while we focus on spirituality, we recognize that couples approach the Great Mystery and their search for meaning in myriad ways, such as spending time in nature, working for social justice, practicing meditation, privately studying poetry and sacred texts, and so on. Many couples are “unchurched” and don’t participate in organized religion but have crafted and honed their own unique ways of practicing and sharing their spiritual journeys as a cornerstone for their relationship. We embrace, as the title states, the notion of committed relationships as “sacred art,” which we hope will become clear in meaning as you read

the stories in this book. *Side by Side* is also for couples who may not have named their spiritual journey as vital but are curious to see how other couples are doing so.

This dream found us both in the midst of befriending our own aging along with one of life's more disorienting initiations: retirement. At heart, we were worker bees and sincerely enjoyed our careers in education and ministry; this wasn't an easy change. We were not looking for another job either, yet this *Side by Side* dream, what we have come to understand now as a "commission," arrived right when we had the time to pursue it. It foreshadowed a theme that often occurred in the interviews: retirement doesn't mean that your soul's callings fall silent. Instead, it is an invitation for re-formation, allowing one's old life to recede and making room for new priorities. Now free from "making a living," we began to consider "making a life." *Side by Side* transformed from a dream fragment to a full-blown adventure that has consumed us ever since.

We purchased a Winnebago and named it *The Dharma Dog* to pursue the dream. "Dharma" translates as one's destiny, a sacred path or duty. A dog, well, follows its nose and knows a good bone when it whiffs one. That, in essence, describes our research methods. Driving across the country and back in two months, over 8,000 miles, we dodged hurricanes and camped among the buffalo in Yellowstone and the iguanas, sandhill cranes, and wild pigs in Florida. The journey enabled us to arrange three-day visits with the couples and carry with us our shelter, camera equipment, and rescue dog, Lily Rose, who showed up at our doorstep one day before we departed.

"Naivete is the mother of adventure"<sup>1</sup> is quoted on the first page of a true story about Rinker Buck, a brave fellow inspired to travel the Oregon Trail in a covered wagon, re-creating the conditions of the original pioneers as much as



possible. Temperamental mules, fractured wagon wheels, lousy weather, and numerous other near-disasters not imagined when he guilelessly set forth plagued his journey. The disasters also dished up the memorable guts of his narrative, where his character and skills were tested. His journey serves as a metaphor for our project. Jay and I also headed down the *Side by Side* trail, profoundly naïve regarding what it would ask of us, where it would take us, and what disasters (like a pandemic) would impede our progress. The journey presented a much wilder, more difficult, and heartwarming odyssey than we could have imagined. At times, it became a grueling, heartbreaking ordeal. We began to say, “We are not doing this project but undergoing it.”

Anyone who has traveled in an RV understands what its cramped confines, daily moving on to explore unknown territory, and its tendency to break down (like the prominent crack in our windshield that funneled an internal waterfall onto the dashboard during torrential rainstorms in North Dakota), do to your relationship. It brings out your best and worst qualities. For us, the RV stands as another metaphor for the conditions aging couples face: lots of time in the smaller world of your home, unpredictable weather conditions, unexpected delays and repairs with health problems, changing status, and freedom to go where you want to go. Jay and I witnessed each other’s tenacious strengths when tested under adversity and learned to be gentle when we got tired at the end of the day—or reactive amidst troubles. Filming, traveling, and writing together intensified the conditions in the cauldron of our marriage, which became an unintended but necessary part of the story.

The Oregon-bound pioneers traversed dirt roads littered with discarded tables, bureaus, and other family heirlooms their fellow travelers thought they could not leave home without. They quickly discovered that the weight and bulk of

their possessions endangered their progress, burdened their mules, and broke down their fragile wagons. We, too, had to cast away treasured ideas of what we thought was necessary when we began. For instance, during the first year of the pandemic, right when we had completed the interviews, we wrote a long, wordy draft of an entirely different book than you see here. Our friend and now publisher/editor, Shelly Francis, informed us that we missed the mark and needed to rewrite the book in a story format. So, we “tossed the first draft off the wagon,” leaving behind a year of work. The second version is what you hold in your hands, with chapters highlighting each couple’s story. Also, amidst the rewrite, Jay and I ran into serious relationship concerns after twenty years of marriage. We found a therapist, stopped writing for a while, and delved into our dynamics. I underwent a total hip replacement and didn’t write a word for two months while I healed.

At the time, all of these challenges felt like roadblocks or, at best, significant detours. In truth, they resulted in what we hope is a much-improved book and significant growth in our relationship. Our callings take us into the territory of our soul’s inner work. Our souls don’t give a rip about deadlines or even the finished product; they want us to grow. Troubles have a way of attracting grace and guidance in dark places, offering what we most need. This is good news for those of us aging and doing the hard work of relationships.

We are often asked, “How did you select the couples?” The quick answer is we turned to people we considered “old souls” living in committed relationships with spiritual practices embedded in their daily lives. We sought couples capable of vulnerability in front of others and willing to “go public” by discussing the project’s themes in front of a camera: aging, relationships, and spirituality—not an easy ask. Half of the couples we approached said no. For some, it was too exposed; others were insecure about the health of

their relationship. For the gay couples we approached, it was simply too public. We truly understood. This project reflects some of the challenges, wisdom, and stories of this generation of elders. It does not include some of the rich diversity of faiths, sexual orientations, races, and cultures living in this country today. It is simply a snapshot in time of thirteen couples interviewed before the pandemic.

We wanted soul stories. There is a significant difference between soul stories versus ego or hero stories.<sup>2</sup> We all tell ego stories—the ones recounted for self-promotion—that highlight achievements and successes and are designed to manage a controlled image or persona. There is a place and time for ego stories, as when applying for a job. But soul stories, much like Rinker Buck's Oregon Trail yarns, include ambiguous endings, complexity, beauty, and darkness. They aren't recounted to promote the ego or make us look good but to explore the truth. Soul stories honor vulnerable encounters with failure as well as achievements. They include emotions often hidden from sight and rejected by society, like fear, shame, passion, and anger. The experience of aging, as well as intimate relationships, belongs to the geography of the soul.

As Jay and I retired, we wondered about our relationship as we grow older together. What does love mean now, at this age? How much time together is a good thing? How do we honor our natural leanings toward more solitude, interiority, creativity, and spiritual growth? What can we give back to our troubled world? Who will die first, and how will the survivor bear it? How can we make the most out of these remaining years?

It is a rare privilege to have access to another couple's world. Couples are seldom witnessed; following the fanfare of the wedding, they retreat to the privacy of their homes, mostly sheltered from others' gazes. We have never

experienced anything quite like staying with a couple over two to three days, preparing meals and taking walks, then diving into structured, in-depth conversations, asking set questions, and listening to their responses over six hours of filming. Each time, we entered a sacred space. By the end of the interview, we felt in awe as well as deep love for the couple, without exception. And we didn't want to leave. We discovered a great nobility in this generation of aging couples.

The couples, in turn, often thanked us for the chance to reflect on their lives and history, to hear what the other had to say, and for being witnessed. It was one of the most satisfying experiences of our lives.

It is a secret hidden in plain sight: relationships are hard. Relationships bring us to the edges of endurance, mirror our tragic flaws, shadows, and goodness, and offer the most humbling, fertile path to growth we know of.

We created questions (listed in appendix I) that invited stories of struggles, conflict, love, parents' deaths, mystical experiences and spiritual growth, joy, purpose, and meaning. We drew heavily on our friendships from our community through the Center for Courage & Renewal. For over twenty-five years, Jay and I have worked with many colleagues leading soul-centered, inner-work retreats for teachers, spiritual leaders, and executives, using Quaker practices and the Circle of Trust approach based on the work of author, educator, and activist Parker J. Palmer. These couples were natural for our project.

Some of the couples we found through friends. When someone said to us, "You need to meet these folks," we treated it like a bone on the trail and followed up with their suggestion; many of those connections worked out as well. We made the path by walking and listening to leads, synchronicity, and guidance, and were seldom disappointed.

We hope the use of the story format—the ancient way of passing along history and meaning—captures the unique lessons each couple embodies through their lived experiences. Each of us finds different meanings in stories, and while we share some of our interpretations, we trust you to discover your own.

Our fear now is that we can't do justice to the outpouring of humor, insight, and wisdom the couples shared with us. We have done our imperfect best, we hope.

### **HOW TO USE THIS BOOK**

This book is created for couples interested in consciously walking side by side, making the most of this time of life with the time they have left—to age together as they distill their life experiences, adjusting to the inevitable changes that aging brings. We all learn differently. While you are welcome to read *Side by Side* alone or skip to the chapters that interest you, the reading of it is also intended to be shared in order to create opportunities for dialogue with others. If you are in a committed relationship, we suggest that you set aside time to read this book aloud to each other at your own pace. To get the most out of it, go to the Readers' Guide included at the end of the book. It includes questions and practices designed to initiate discussions on the themes contained in each chapter. If you wish to set up a couples' group, the guide also suggests how to do so.

Additional group work materials, video clips, and support for forming groups will be available on our website as well: [www.sidebysideaging.com](http://www.sidebysideaging.com).

### **HOW THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED: THE BEATITUDES FOR COUPLES**

*Side by Side* offers a chapter dedicated to telling the story of each of the couples we interviewed, and each chapter

begins with a “beatitude.” When we traveled to Israel several years ago, we made our way to the Mount of Beatitudes, a hill on the Korazim Plateau by the Sea of Galilee, where many believe Jesus delivered “The Sermon on the Mount,” a homily that sheds light on how to live and embody one’s faith. The Beatitudes, a part of this sermon, found in the gospel of Mark in the Bible, form an elegant progression of eight blessings and teachings that became a lasting contribution to wisdom literature. Jesus’ ministry was never about beliefs but the daily living of spiritual principles to honor and love one another and to practice peace and nonviolence. The Beatitudes’ perennial wisdom has inspired work for social justice in society and offered comfort to the suffering.

As we wrote the following chapters, the “Beatitudes for Couples” quietly and organically emerged through the stories. Inspired, we crafted a list of our own “be-attitudes” or blessings that would support the sacred art of messy, challenging, committed relationships. We organized this book around these new Beatitudes for Couples, which informed the chapter titles. A few of these beatitudes are not assigned to one specific couple yet are reflected through many of their stories.

You can find them in their entirety on the following page and as a printable download at our website. While this book is non-denominational, we believe the original Beatitudes and the Beatitudes for Couples are meant to speak to your heart and soul no matter what faith tradition you follow (or none at all).

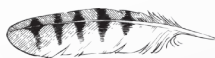
We have been changed by this journey with the *Side by Side* couples. Our sincere desire is that you may be transformed by their stories as well as you age together, side by side with wisdom and love.

A note about authorship: While we conceived this book and project together, and both interviewed the couples and

then transcribed the interviews, Caryl has penned the stories in this book, as we found it challenging to blend our writing styles. Jay focused on the summary of findings, created the Beatitudes for Couples, and consulted with Caryl regularly concerning the themes and content of each chapter. We are thought partners in every aspect of this body of work.

With blessings and gratitude,  
Caryl & Jay Casbon  
Santa Barbara, California

# The Beatitudes for Couples



Blessed is the couple who welcomes Divine Presence into their midst, for they shall know Eternal Belonging, grace, and love.

Blessed is the couple who embraces all seasons of life—the perennial cycles of spring, summer, autumn, and winter—for they shall know wholeness.

Blessed is the couple who welcomes the stranger in each other, for they shall find wonder and encouragement on their growing edges.

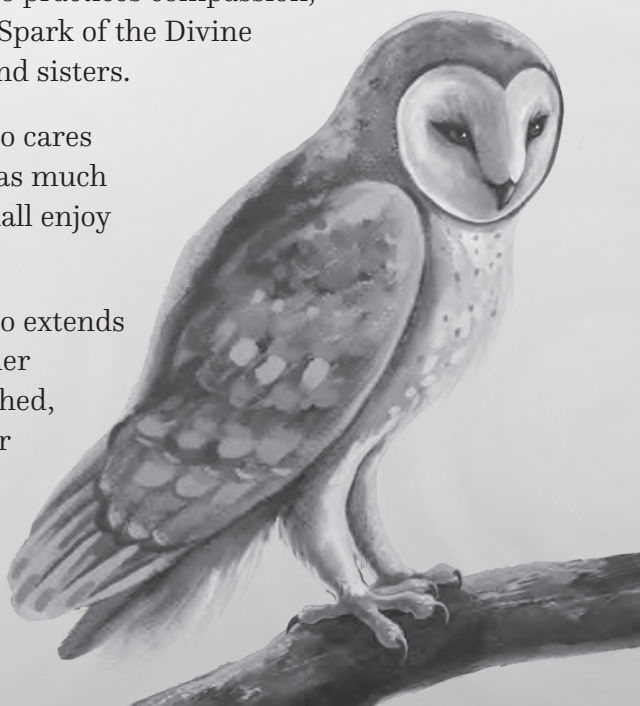
Blessed is the couple who confronts their own shadows, for they shall be freed from blame and projection.

Blessed is the couple who listens deeply to each other, for they shall be seen, understood, and met.

Blessed is the couple who practices compassion, for they shall honor the Spark of the Divine in all of their brothers and sisters.

Blessed is the couple who cares about the other's needs as much as their own, for they shall enjoy the fruits of mutuality.

Blessed is the couple who extends tender care to one another when suffering, diminished, wounded, or shamed, for they shall be comforted.





Blessed is the couple who recognizes the Indwelling Spirit in all of life, for they shall encounter the Mystery and see the Light in all beings.

Blessed is the couple who dances with the tension between “me” and “we,” for they shall know companioning without loss of self.

Blessed is the couple who openly and humbly addresses conflict, for they shall find truth, reconciliation, and freedom from violence.

Blessed is the couple who practices Sabbath through the daily bread of devotion, mindfulness, and prayer, for they shall find Home.

Blessed is the couple who extends mercy and forgiveness, for they shall be relieved of resentment and harsh judgment.

Blessed is the couple who offers beneficial presence across the generations, for they shall leave a legacy of love.

Blessed is the couple who celebrates life with the Spirits of tomfoolery, shenanigans, creativity, and play, for they shall know humor and mirth, and have some really good times.





Blessed is the couple who  
welcomes Divine Presence into  
their midst, for they shall know  
Eternal Belonging, grace, and love.

BLESSED IS THE COUPLE WHO

# Welcomes Divine Presence into Their Midst

INTRODUCING  
JIM & MARIANNE HOUSTON

**WHEN WE ENTERED** Marianne and Jim Houston's home in Kalamazoo, Michigan, we passed through a hallway that also serves as a gallery. On the right wall are photographs of Jim's entire African American Baptist family, going back to the slave period before the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments of the US Constitution. His family photos face Marianne's pictures of her Polish-Catholic clan, gazing back at Jim's. Also adorning the walls are the children's and grandchildren's images, the progeny of their family tree. Among those photographs lives a couple held together by love and history, who treasure every bit of their heritage while honestly acknowledging the struggles of bringing two cultures together. Their peaceful countenance and sparkling eyes tell a story of belonging; Jim and Marianne chose to marry in 1968 when interracial marriage was newly legalized in the US, bravely leaning into a marriage that broke with conventions of the time.

In the den is a photograph of Marianne as a young Catholic novice in full habit, posing with a group of nuns in France in the early 1960s. In this image, Marianne's smile is like the expression of Mona Lisa; a knowing observer can spot a joyful rascal and a genuine original. We were intrigued to learn how Marianne changed from a Sister of Loretto to becoming a married partner of Jim Houston for fifty-one years!

When we asked them what brought them together, we soon discovered the answer. In Marianne's words, "Well, Jim and I met when I was working at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. It was 1967, and as an Air Force sergeant at the base, he was helping to close it down at the time. He was also taking classes and stopped at a coffee house on campus. I walked in, and he saw my girlfriend and me and asked to join us. I said, 'Of course!' That was the beginning of our 52-year relationship. I saw someone kind, smart, funny, and different from the other men I had been dating. I thought, 'What a good new friend,' and that is how it came to me that night."

Jim chimed in. "That is her version. I saw a knockout gal that came in the door and thought, 'What an attractive young lady. I need to know her.' We talked for a half-hour, and I had to go back to the base. I told my buddy right then that I was going to marry her. We got together and began to go out. In little over a year, we dated off and on and then married. There was something about her. I knew she was the one, but I had to convince her. Then I was transferred to Tacoma, where I spent my last two years of enlistment and our first two years of marriage. We then returned to Madison and finally moved to Kalamazoo in 1970 to finish my university studies. We have lived here ever since, where we have become immersed in this community, had our two sons, now grown, and now six grandchildren."

Marianne acknowledged their age difference with humor. “We feel very fortunate. When I met Jim, I was thirty-two, Jim was twenty-three, and I had been a nun from ages eighteen to thirty. I thought I was thirty going on twenty. Jim had been around a little, so I thought he was twenty-three going on thirty-one.”

Marianne recalled being recruited to become a secretary for campus police after a young coed was murdered on the UW campus. “I agreed to do that. It was terrifying. Jim knew how I was responding to this and picked me up each morning, so I wouldn’t have to walk alone. He came by in the afternoon and escorted me home. I knew that gentlemanly behavior was rare. There are so many examples of that. If I called him, he was there. If I needed him, he was there. And I was there for him. Jim’s deepest *modus operandi* is one of kindness. When I watch him interacting with others, I learn so much about loving-kindness. And his loyalty; I have known since we have been together that he was always there. And besides, he is funny and fun to be with, even when we are upset with each other.”

Since Jim and Marianne bring together two different religious and racial traditions, as well as age disparities, we were interested in how this impacted them. When a couple comes together, they always join the two cultures from their respective families of origin, including unspoken rules of communication, expectations, and roles. Starting with their religious backgrounds, they noted that their Roman Catholic and Baptist traditions were “the least of our problems,” for they have a mutual understanding of the Christian message and ways of being in the world. They believe that there is only one God. Jim converted to Catholicism but also kept his Baptist roots. They were married in a ceremony with both a Catholic priest and a Protestant minister, and on their

fiftieth anniversary, they again celebrated their relationship with both traditions represented.

“I never insisted that he convert,” Marianne stated. “I thought he was the best Christian I knew, but with Jamie, our oldest son, Jim thought he should see us practicing a shared tradition. Father Fitz said to Jim, ‘I don’t know what to do, for you are already baptized. But I can confirm you.’ Then Jim replied, ‘There is only one thing. I don’t do this confession thing. I talk to God with a direct line.’ Father Fitz concurred and said, ‘I can understand that. I just want to ask you a couple of things. All of our lives, we do things we regret, hurt people, etc., so I am sure you have had things like that in your life.’ Then he said, ‘I absolve you.’”

Jim added, “That was my one and only confession.”

While a mutual acceptance of their religious backgrounds was easily navigated, some of the variations in their family cultures were more challenging. Jim began, “I come from a family that is extremely loud. We are not past the point of coming down on someone who needs it, either. Marianne has had to adjust to people speaking up like this and speaking to someone who needs a comeuppance. I had to get used to her quiet, indirect family, and she, our loudness.”

Marianne added, “In my family, we might see a sister do something that bothers us, complain about her behind her back, but not say to her, ‘Shut up.’ Jim’s way of joking is something they do in his culture, which they call ‘signify,’ what you do with your best friends. They hit their most sensitive areas as a part of a joke. That type of humor was not part of my experience. It is only funny if it is funny for the other person, but not if the other is hurt.”

Jim explained, “It is part of my culture from slavery time. How you get through the pain is by laughing. To do otherwise, I’ve come to learn as a sociologist, would destroy you.

*Signifying* is a survival mechanism, in addition to laughing, joking, and singing together. I've learned since how the people in the Holocaust survived in the camps. They have discovered some of the most beautiful music written in the camps. There is a lot of comedy displayed by Jewish people that comes out of their pain and suffering. Blacks use humor, music, and laughter as ways to survive."

Marianne noted, "I have come to love it most of the time. And Jim has had to adjust to my seriousness. I tend to take seriously things that he can brush off. I have come to understand that within Jim, his family, and many of our other friends, he can laugh at things, and I say to myself, 'That is not funny. It is hurtful.' Jim says, 'I laugh to keep from crying.'" Marianne concluded, "I've had to adjust to what doesn't seem funny."

Other cultural differences manifested in their approaches to raising their children. Jim came from a strict, authoritarian family, and when we asked about what has tested their relationship, they named this issue. "There was a difference in how we raised our sons," Marianne said. "I was not so focused on being hard on and physical with the boys in terms of spanking. My way wasn't that way, and not my family's way. We had to come to an agreement about that. That is not to say Jim was a tyrant or cruel, but he employed an authoritarian approach to discipline, which we had to talk out. That was a test."

Jim explained his approach to parenting. "Raising our sons, I was not the buddy-buddy type. My message to them was, 'I am not your friend. I am your father.' I don't know if that was right or wrong, but I valued that our sons respected us as elders, here to guide them. That is how I was raised. Now that they are grown, I can be a parent and a friend. There is a little of that which still lingers in me. Each has its value."

In young people today, disrespect is rampant. I know why I was raised to respect elders, and I believe levels of respect need to be maintained. I was raised that kids address elders by their last names. I did not have the right to use their first name. We still address them that way, Mr. So-and-So. There is something good about that. Did my parents ever consider us peers? I am not sure. Yet both of my sons have said to me, ‘I am glad you were hard on us. We see our peers and what weaklings they are, and I am glad my dad was hard on me.’ During the ’70s, some parents were afraid to discipline their children because they thought the children would no longer love them or be afraid of them.”

Jim and Marianne also noted that we are now facing several generations raised without fathers in the home. They believe the absence of fathers for the sons has been instrumental in creating violence and anger in young lives.

Most couples also negotiate differences in their personalities. We asked each couple in our interviews what they thought was most difficult about their temperament for their partner. You know, that quality that defies changing and that pushes your buttons. Marianne blurted out a common yet challenging difference. “I am a terminal extrovert. I talk as I think.” For many couples, one is an extrovert and the other an introvert. This profoundly impacts communication styles, how much alone time you need, and if you like to think aloud or silently. It is critical to how we approach and process life.

Marianne continued, “I was born with what is today described as hyperactivity, on top of being an ecstatic person. That has been there since I was a child. The earliest thing I can remember my mother saying was, ‘Marianne, just be quiet.’ Language is both internal and external. What is internal shoots right out of my mouth. It creates a real challenge for me as a facilitator and teacher to be quiet enough to



hear my students, I mean, really hear them. My years in the Loretto community, with so much silence, were perfect for me. In my teens and twenties, when I was taking on that part of my personality, it was a huge help. I feel like I am going back to where I was as a child, talking a lot and being an impulsive risk-taker, all of which have served me well and have also been a shadow.”

Jim, an introvert, talked about the quality in him that challenges Marianne. “I tend to be more thoughtful. One of the things Marianne has endured with me is that I am a procrastinator. Before I do something, I think about it for a long time. But I don’t always externalize my thoughts. I keep so much within myself that it can be detrimental to my health. I was raised by a father who was hard and who said, ‘If you don’t want your feelings hurt, put them in your pocket.’ Don’t let people know your real feelings. Hide them. If you don’t know what I think, you can’t criticize me. I don’t do it as much as I used to. I am both an introvert and an extrovert. I like people but like alone time, more at night, when the house is quiet—a different kind of quiet. I can have the TV on and don’t even know it. I am thinking about what I don’t think about during the day. She may understand me spending the nights alone in the basement, but it is still difficult for her. I wish I were more the other way, but I also find I do a lot of talking during the day to different groups. I don’t want to burden other people with my problems. Over the years, people asked, ‘Why not talk about it?’ I can talk, but usually to groups of people, not so much one-on-one.”

Being raised in large families, both name the gifts they have in common and their values for living and loving in a community. The values—engendered from childhoods that were filled with many siblings and cousins—include hard work, kindness, loyalty, humor, respect for others’ needs, the sense

that family has each other's backs, and caring for the less fortunate. They believe that how you treat others is a reflection of your character. Marianne added, "Another core value is being one of many, or as I describe that experience, as one of benign neglect. My parents couldn't focus on just me. That gave me a sense of self as an individual with the freedom to develop my gifts. Consciously and subconsciously, I instilled this in our children as well. You, we, and I have individual gifts. The gift of the gifts is that we take them and develop them for the world. Outward thinking towards the world is at the core of our values." In their 70s and 80s, they now are guided by these values in their service to and presence with others.

Jim and Marianne are deeply committed, not only to each other but to the welfare of others in their community. Jim concluded the reflection on values. "Respecting others is informed by the spiritual value of, 'Do unto others as they do unto you.' That is a value we try to maintain in and outside of family and explains why we have been active in the larger community in different ways. We know we are part of the greater family of our community. Being raised by strict Baptists, I am held to the line. As we have grown older and the world has changed, these values help us cope; they help us continue to exist. But of all the gifts we possess, the most important is kindness and love."

You may be wondering how they are putting these values into action now. Marianne publishes books of her own poetry, leads retreat series for teachers, and mentors for the Center for Courage & Renewal. They are both active in their church and are a part of various support groups. Marianne recounted a story that captures this "elder, beneficial presence" and how she operates as a natural mentor. "I love going shopping at the grocery or dollar stores, but not for clothes. I don't try on clothes. I love the conversations with

the young people who work in those places, asking them questions, supporting them, and telling them, 'I think a lot about your world. I don't use plastic.' I talk to them about their education and ask, 'Are you in school? What are you studying?' They love to talk to us oldsters. They love it when we show an interest in them. I said to the young woman who works at the gas station, 'You are looking sleepy today.' And she responds, 'This is my second of three jobs, and I have a baby. I am tired a lot.' It is such a privilege to listen to what she has to say. The learning is immense.

"This is true with older friends too. We have time to listen and learn. We had Howard, age ninety-two, and his partner, eighty-six, for dinner, and we sat at the table for a long time. They were asking Jim questions. He was sharing about his life as an African American male, and we learned together that Sunday evening. Howard could hardly get up but was engrossed in the conversation. We are learning and unlearning what we thought we knew."

Jim still works a few days a month as a substitute teacher in a local high school and, drawing on his background and PhD in accounting, business administration, and public administration, serves on a board of a financial institution he founded with friends. Jim explained that the Community Promise Federal Credit Union is located in the "financial desert" to serve communities of color and immigrants. They make small loans to low-income people needing help starting new businesses, and break the power of payday lenders in the lives of the poor. Jim also initiated a group for minority youths in high school to create a safe space for them to discuss their struggles with school and their minority status, and to prepare for their futures beyond high school.

In his words, "Contact with the younger people is learning in itself. Being in a high school several days a month,

you get a new perspective, their perspective, on many things, and it makes you think. Young people today are no different, but they have different toys. I was born in a time when we had no electricity or running water in the house, and no TV either. These young people have all of that, plus more. Their perspective is different, and I learn how they adjust to the world they find. We talk about the world that they live in as people of color, and what they need to do to be successful in this world. I tell them, ‘What you do now determines what you will do in the future. The best way to approach life is to prepare yourselves as best you can, in the now.’

“We talk about the unfairness and that no one ever promised you things would be fair. They can expect an unfair world, not just for people of color. Others experience this too. Whatever is out there, how you prepare yourself now will determine how you will cope. Get good grades, and help one another. You may be strong in some subjects, so help others with your strengths and vice-versa. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Sometimes we get white kids, and I have a message for them as well. The world they are entering will be more diverse. Don’t be afraid to embrace diversity. It will make you stronger. I enjoy the diversity. It is the world they will be living in. It is a good thing. Even though I teach in an above-average school district, there are still some single-parent families and more economic diversity. In the late ’50s, there was no diversity.”

While they both are “servant leaders” with hearts of gold, with aging, they find it necessary to turn their service work toward home. Marianne recently suffered from a stroke, and in her mid-80s, she faces many physical challenges. “I think we have arrived at a time in our marriage that love has a big component of service to each other as we age. Because I am ahead of Jim in that department, being older by eleven years,

I wonder what I would do without him. Without each other, where would we be? Love is more than the original emotion, but that is still there. I look into his eyes, or when he is holding a grandchild, I love him more. That is still there, but the need for one another is a good part of love at this time. For instance, he makes the stairs easier than I do. He can carry the laundry up and down them. Ordinary, everyday things, like when Jim gives me his arm when we walk. He offers his accounting ability for my retreat work since the world of finance is not within my bandwidth. I love him for the ways he stepped up after my stroke, with a weakening of my executive powers.”

Jim added, “The service is manifested in the little things. ‘Do you need a refill on your coffee, or get whatever? I am going to the store.’ Realizing Marianne has had a hard day and is tired, I am asking about what I can do. It is about the little things we do to make each other’s life more comfortable. Trying to anticipate the needs of the other, and trying to serve each other, becomes more important as we grow older and lose a step or two. So we serve each other.”

Vulnerability is essential to authentic intimacy. Jim and Marianne share tender vulnerability at this stage of life, where health and functioning challenges increase. “For better or for worse” is a paradox at the center of aging and relationships—sometimes the “worse” becomes the better times for our souls and in our love for one another.

Addressing our curiosity about their spiritual journeys, Jim and Marianne recalled two stories that explain a great deal of how they encountered the Divine.

Marianne went first. “As a third-grader, when I was about eight, I was a swimmer, and in our small town, the public pool offered free swimming lessons to kids like me in the morning, for we didn’t have much money. I never

missed a day. My life was the water. Water has always been my element. My mother described me as a baby loving the bath. I loved how it made me feel. One day in June, it was too cold, and my mother said I shouldn't go to my lesson. But I went and was the only child that showed up. The young lifeguard came out wrapped in a towel in sweatpants, then stood by the pool and watched me swim. I remember being in that big pool alone, swimming and cavorting and loving it. Floating on my back, I thought, *This must be how God is holding us.* I've come to think of my experience as unifying for me."

Many spiritually devoted people have childhood stories of their first encounters with the Divine that contain a numinous quality and serve as unforgettable touchstones, easily accessed when recalled. Even though she was eight at the time, Marianne told this story as if it had happened yesterday. Mystical experiences often exist outside of time.

Jim's experience occurred when he was a little older, yet it is still as clear and present as ever. "During my first year in college, I had been finishing school in Kalamazoo, going back to my parents for the weekends, for they lived about 45 miles southwest from here. I was at a party one night. It was two in the morning, and I was driving my old Renault when the bearings went out on my car, a wheel broke off, and the car suddenly dipped down, flipped over, and slid sidewise; I ended up gripping the gearshift. I remember saying out loud, 'Lord, I am coming home.' I was calm as could be. I was not afraid. Once the car stopped, I crawled out through the windshield, and stood by the car, still calm, but when I looked at the car, I started shaking. The car was a mess, but I had not a scratch on me. This was a mystical, miraculous experience.

"I said to myself, 'It isn't my time. Maybe God has other things I am meant to do.' When I look back, the

same thought comes to me. It is an experience that has impacted my thinking even about death. Death has given me a second chance, and I am peaceful about death.” When you consider how many people are motivated by a fear of death, this is truly a profound, mystical gift Jim received at an early age.

As we continued to investigate spiritual themes, we asked Marianne about her passage from living in a convent as a Sister of Loretto to the present. The story of her spiritual evolution poured out as a far-flung exploration similar to what many baby boomers have undergone. “I was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, and it served me well, educationally and spiritually. We learned early on not to question doctrine, which served me pretty well with strong boundaries. When I turned eighteen, after twelve years of Catholic education, I decided to become a sister. In my college years, I spent time with and learned from women who were strong, educated, liberal, and more and more progressive; I loved it, and I loved my life. I was so fortunate to have that group of women as mentors. What happened over those thirteen years was a chance to delve deeply into philosophy, history, and church history; there were no boundaries. I freely moved beyond doctrine, and my spirituality developed over that time and in the years that followed.

“With a foundation as an extremely devout Roman Catholic and an education that took the form of broadening and deepening, I was also fortunate to study abroad. I had wonderful professors recognized internationally in their fields. What was happening was the development of my spirituality and my vision of body, mind, soul, and brain functioning. I find myself today saying honestly, ‘I am Buddhist, a Hindu, Quaker, Sufi, Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic, not in communion with Rome.’ That is where I stand in terms of my spirituality. I don’t know if any of those traditions align with

where I am spiritually but they all have some input. I could broaden that to other traditions as well.”

Like Marianne, many of us elder North Americans began in Protestant, Jewish, or Catholic traditions, which provided helpful boundaries of doctrine and rules, mentors, a sense of belonging, and instructions on how to be, think, live, pray, and what not to do (mostly not to have sex outside of marriage). These things served us well in our youth. Like Marianne, adolescence and the college years led us far afield from these boundaries to new freedom to explore other traditions, which opened up to the West just as we came of age. Eventually, the Dalai Lama reminded us to claim the roots of our traditions, for the sampling of many things would never take us deep enough. Spiritual depth requires a commitment to a path. Jim and Marianne have managed to balance this radical inclusion and openness with a life of devotion within a progressive Catholic congregation.

As our interview came to an end, we were touched by the richness of their lives and their challenges. Looking back at our parents and grandparents, we wonder how they handled this time of life, searching for positive models and clues. Jim told a story about his Grandpa Sang, whom he remembers seeing behind a plow and a mule. He lived to age 103 and was still actively participating in life to his fullest capacity, even at the end.

“I thought about all he had seen, and I knew him as an old man, at 100 years, who was still preaching as a minister. I heard people thought he was dead at 101, but when I visited him in the hospital, he was sitting up smoking a cigar. What was he thinking? When I asked, ‘How are you doing, Grandpa?’ he remarked, ‘I could preach the horns off a billy goat!’ There was a spirit there. He recognized the voices of people, even though he was partially blind. He knew the



name he had given to each of us. That is why you want to stay vigorous and active.”

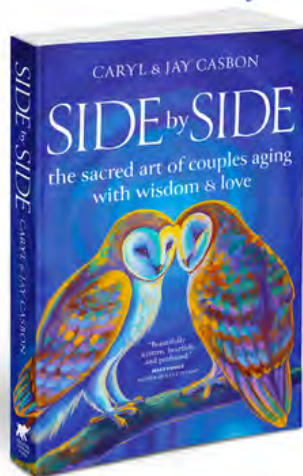
While Jim and Marianne may not smoke cigars at the end of their days, we are confident they will do everything within their power to share their care, opinions, stories, laughter, questions, and love of life until they pass from this world.



*Try to keep your soul young and quivering right  
up to old age, and to imagine right up  
To the brink of death that life is only beginning.*

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