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Me Became We

Brandi Jager
b3kirkham@gmail.com

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My husband and I have been married for just over two years now. When we were first married, my husband loved to say “we” and “our” when describing pretty much everything. He would tell our friends, “We just started a new job” or “We are thinking of moving to a bigger apartment.” Even when he graduated, he turned to me and said, “We did it!” Silly Tom, I would think. You are the one who just got a new job. You are the one who wants to move to a new apartment. And you are the one who just graduated, not me!

I found his use of pronouns endearing, but sometimes I was left confused. Why did he love to say “we” so much, especially in situations where it didn’t seem accurately applied? Was it simply a matter of semantics? Or was I coming head-to-head with an unforeseen aspect of marriage—a change from “me” to “we”?

I wondered about my struggle. Wasn’t I happy to be a “we”? Was I simply immaturely attached to our current society’s individualistic mindset? Perhaps I was still seeking out my own personal fulfillment, focusing on my current needs and wants. Perhaps I was too guarded and untrusting, making me hesitant about being verbally joined with him, bonded without consent to his every thought and action. Perhaps I was afraid of the sacrifice “we” would require of me.

Our current culture knows this fear. This fear of losing freedom in choosing to belong. This fear that individual freedom must be traded for love. This fear that we might have to change.

The shift from “me” to “we” in marriage does in fact require change. There must be a willingness to give up some of the natural, selfish inward orientation and opt into the bigger picture of two becoming one.

This isn’t easy. But is the bond of love really such a bondage? Does tying the knot have to be a noose for our individual progress? Must belonging mean a sacrifice of becoming? Unfortunately, many in society have come to believe that this is the case. They see their bachelor and bachelorette party as the end of their freedom, they toast to their last night as a free man or woman, and they refer to their spouse as a ball and chain.

In doing so, however, it seems that our society is downplaying the benefits of becoming “we.” As co-author of a UC Berkeley study, respected scholar Robert Levenson said, “Individuality is a deeply ingrained value in American society, but, at least in the realm of marriage, being part of a ‘we’ is well worth giving up a bit of ‘me.’”

This change to “we” doesn’t mean that we enslave the “I” or destroy it. Marriage offers a different type of freedom not to be found in pure independence. It’s not the difference between becoming or belonging because we become as we belong. Within the bond of marriage, two is better than one as we can become more than we ever could by ourselves.

This is what my husband helped me to understand. Through a simple pronoun change, he was demonstrating that he was fully committed to becoming one in our marriage. He was no longer just an individual but rather part of a whole—a united partnership. He recognized that his actions would affect every aspect of my life, and in turn, mine would shape his. Therefore, he permanently attributed his world to mine. To him, we were a team, and that is what could make us strong. He had come to see “we” as a privilege instead of a disadvantage.

As another husband expressed it, “My bonds to my family hold me back from many sorts of opportunities. And yet these do not feel like bonds. They are, I know, my liberation. They force me to be a different sort of human being, in a way in which I want and need to be forced.”

It turns out the use of “we” is much more than a simple semantic choice. University of California researchers found it to be a “gamechanger.” While analyzing conflict conversations of 154 couples, they found that the couples who use “we” more than “me,” “I,” or “you” saw an increase in marital satisfaction, a decrease in stress, and an increase in positive interactions. Martial change appeared to come
from adopting a mindset leading to the more frequent use of a simple word.⁷

While getting married demonstrated my commitment to my husband, as do the rings we wear and the vows we made, verbally changing from “me” to “we” puts this commitment into action. As my husband taught me, “we” means that we are on the same team.⁸ And when challenges arise, “it’s us versus the problem” as he lovingly reminds me. I have his back and he has mine, and together we can do and be more than we could apart. There is great strength, peace, and unity that has flowed into my life because of this commitment between us.

Neither of us are perfect. Therefore, our “we” has imperfections that also burdens us. However, our “we” mentality means that there is little blaming or convicting; rather we are there to shoulder the adversity together. I’ve learned that the unity required in this “we” relationship is paired with the most intense vulnerability—and the deepest kind of love can only grow from such trust.

A healthy marriage is not the blissful and carefree relationship portrayed in fairytales, nor is it the prison and loss of individuality depicted in much of today’s media. The bond of marriage is much more challenging and rewarding. It is a beautiful interdependence between two people striving to become one as they love each other more than anything else.

Allow this love to change you. Allow this love to motivate a shift in mindset. Allow this love to help you see your marital union through eyes of “we” rather than “me.”

Brandi Jager is a recent graduate of Brigham Young University’s School of Family Life. She has a minor in ballroom dance and met her husband while performing as a member of the BYU Ballroom Dance Company. In her free time, she enjoys being with family, running, watching movies, and social dancing with her husband. Special thanks to Katrina Cookson for her collaboration on this article.

Endnotes