

WABI
SABI
LOVE



The Ancient Art of Finding Perfect Love
in Imperfect Relationships

ARIELLE FORD

Author of THE SOULMATE SECRET

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Arielle Ford



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Dedication

For Sheila, my bold, beautiful, and brilliant mother, who first showed me how not to “do” marriage, and then the second time around modeled soulmate love at its highest.

What Is Wabi Sabi?

Wabi Sabi is the ancient Japanese art form that finds beauty and perfection in imperfection. Wabi Sabi honors that which is imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It finds beauty in things modest, humble, and unconventional.

Wabi Sabi Love is the art and practice of loving the imperfections in ourselves and in our partners. It is not mere acceptance or denial of the things that may annoy us or even drive us crazy but rather a deep and profound appreciation for the uniqueness of each other.

Imagine standing in front of a four-foot-tall vase with a long jagged crack down the middle. You might be tempted to immediately pass judgment on the vase as ugly or a piece of junk and walk right by. But those who practice Wabi Sabi might place the vase on a pedestal and honor the history and the beauty of its imperfection by shining a spotlight right on the crack.

As with the cracked urn, fissures are a part of ourselves that cannot be changed. Wabi Sabi Love allows us to love and accept the cracks in ourselves and in our partners. It's the hidden beauty that dances right before our eyes, illuminating our uniqueness, calling forth our humanity, and bonding us to each other.

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Foreword

It is with pleasure that I introduce you to a genuinely useful book on a subject of timeless importance: how to create and nurture lasting love. Arielle Ford is a dear friend and has been a trusted colleague of mine for many years. I'm pleased that she has gifted us with this heart-opening and mind-expanding book. My pleasure is multiplied because I know this book will enlighten and change the lives of many people.

As the poet Torquato Tasso said, "Any time not spent on love is wasted." In *Wabi Sabi Love*, Arielle Ford does not waste a moment of your time. She goes directly to the heart of what it takes to make love grow and thrive over time. At the center of this book is a profound insight about how to flow with your experiences in a close relationship. In *Wabi Sabi Love*, you will learn how to embrace and love imperfection: your own and your partner's. Since you're likely to encounter your fair share of imperfection as you proceed along the pathways of love, it helps to get good at dancing with it. This book is a true treasure trove of inspiration and information on how not only to live with imperfection but also to thrive from it.

There are many nuggets to be found in this book, but there is one I'd like to share with you here. Arielle puts it, "Early on in our relationship we decided that our union would be our number one priority. We promised each other that our choices would be based not on what Arielle wanted, or on what Brian wanted, but on what was ultimately best for our relationship." When I read this passage, I found myself wondering: *Why don't we get wisdom like this taught to us in elementary and high school?* Imagine the mistakes we might avoid and the love we might harvest if we knew a few simple principles like the ones Arielle shares in *Wabi Sabi Love*.

Arielle has a major credential in the area of relationships, and it happens to be the only one that really counts: she has thrived for many years in a wonderful relationship with her husband, Brian Hilliard. Kathlyn and I have been with Arielle and Brian on dozens of occasions, and we can testify that her relationship is a living example of what she teaches.

Relationships of the quality that Arielle and Brian enjoy do not thrive over time by chance or even by good karma. They're the result of the dedicated application of good ideas and good skills. *Wabi Sabi Love* has an abundance of both, and for that reason, as well as many others, I recommend it to you highly.

GAY HENDRICKS, Ph.D., author of *Five Wishes* and *The Big Leap*; coauthor (with Kathlyn Hendricks, Ph.D.) of *Conscious Loving* and *The Conscious Heart*

Introduction

We come to love not by finding a perfect person, but by learning to see an imperfect person perfectly.

—*Sam Keen*

Love. It's right up there with air, food, and water as one of the most vital ingredients for existence. Love nourishes our souls and arouses our deepest desires. And yet, for many people, it's the hardest thing to find. Even harder still is sustaining that love once you've found it.

When it comes to making love last, the reality is pretty unsettling. Right now, 50 percent of first marriages, 67 percent of second marriages, and 74 percent of third marriages end in divorce. But however grim the statistics, there is hope for keeping love alive. A new paradigm is on the horizon, one that has the power to shift your focus from all that seems wrong to all that is right.

Even if you're blessed to be with someone who is compatible with you on a physical, emotional, or spiritual level, it's highly likely that there is one thing, or perhaps a handful of things, about him or her that you wish were just a little different. Maybe you wish your partner were a more passionate lover or a better listener, didn't leave piles of clothes all over the house, or shared more of your creative interests. If you've ever woken up to that feeling of "if only things were different," you're not alone.

The fact is our culture has conditioned us to expect perfection from ourselves and others, and this expectation often leads us into a perpetual state of frustration and dissatisfaction. The human mind can be a fault-finding machine uniquely equipped to focus with laserlike precision on the few things that are lacking, rather than on the bigger picture of all that we have in abundance. If, like so many, you've lost sight of the forest of your deeper love for your partner through the trees of his or her imperfections, the tools and skills you will learn in this book will allow you to see yourself and your partner in an entirely new light, strengthen the bond that brought you together in the first place, and take your relationship to a whole new level.

This book is firmly rooted in the belief that how you choose to see things informs the way they appear for you. For anyone in a long-term relationship, you know how quickly a little quirk and idiosyncrasy can progress from a rub to a burn. How often do you find yourselves arguing over the same little things? But what if, instead of focusing your attention on trying to change that one thing about your partner, you had the ability to actually change the way you look at that one thing? Suddenly, the focus of everything in your relationship would shift.

How will you get to that seemingly unreachable place? You will learn to apply the timeless principles of *Wabi Sabi*. Based on the ancient Japanese aesthetic of finding beauty in imperfection, *Wabi Sabi Love* applies this concept to love relationships. It is the art of loving your partner's imperfections rather than indulging in the fantasy that your relationship can fire on all cylinders only when both people are acting perfectly and behaving in ways that are acceptable to the other.

Just imagine the possibilities that would open up in your relationship if you could learn to accept, embrace, and even find the gift in your partner's imperfections. It is not just about tolerating our partners' so-called flaws, but actually finding the perfection in all that is imperfect about them. By learning to live Wabi Sabi Love, you will create a heartfelt, loving, long-lasting, committed, joyful relationship that lights you up as a couple, knowing that you are greater together than apart and that your bond will be forever stronger, deeper, and more meaningful as a result of embracing these practices.

I remember being spellbound when I first came across the concept of Wabi Sabi. It was late afternoon on a cold November day more than twenty years ago. I was gazing out my office window, enjoying the western sky as it turned shades of crimson with splashes of orange light around the setting sun. I picked up a magazine and came across an article with a striking black-and-white photograph of a large Asian urn sitting on a pedestal, with a long, crooked crack down the middle. The crack was highlighted by gallery lighting. Huh? It did not compute. The headline read, "The Art of Wabi Sabi."

Curious, I began reading about this exotic-sounding phrase. In the world of Wabi Sabi, the urn in the photograph was even more beautiful and valued *because* of the crack, because of its imperfection. Singer and poet Leonard Cohen clearly expressed this basic Wabi Sabi principle in his haunting song "Anthem": "Ring the bells that still can ring; forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."

Seeing the ways that Wabi Sabi helps to illuminate the hidden beauty in life had an immediate and profound impact on me, and it wasn't long before I began to realize how this ancient art form relates to love. So many things began to make sense. I mean, I already knew I wasn't perfect and wasn't capable of perfection, but I had never entertained the idea that not only should I *not* strive for perfection, but that my imperfection is in its own way *more valuable than perfection* itself.

I sensed the weight of the world lifting off my shoulders. I could now breathe a little deeper and with more ease. The mess of papers on my desk was no longer evidence of my disorganized mind but rather a testament to my creativity and hard work. The stain on my skirt, obtained at a lunch meeting, was no longer embarrassing proof of my klutzy cutlery skills, but instead proof of my strong appetite for nourishment and for life. I decided then and there to become a Wabi Sabi artisan, and what started as simply a sincere desire to honor the imperfection in myself and others soon became a deliberate way of life.

Once I manifested Brian—my soulmate—I wanted to see if two people could apply the principles of Wabi Sabi toward a long-term, committed relationship, while still preserving the juicy joy and magic that brought them together. I soon learned that Wabi Sabi holds the key to everlasting love.

The idea of accepting imperfection isn't something I swallowed easily. After all, I come from a long line of gutsy, competent women who know how to "make things happen." My strong-willed grandmother, Ada, used her Irish sweepstakes earnings to move her family from Brooklyn to Miami and set up a new family business back in the day when women "didn't do such things." Following the maternal lineage, my mother, Sheila, is an adventurous, fun-loving, and incredibly beautiful powerhouse. She's confident, smart, and very assertive—a successful businesswoman long before she'd heard of Gloria Steinem. Mom raised me to take care of myself, with little emphasis on the actual feelings of the people around me. Who had time for that? Toughen up and get it done was her motto. The fact is, I would not be the woman I am today had it not been for my mother's powerful role-modeling. And by the same token, I also realized fairly early on in my relationship with Brian that the take-charge attitude that served me so well at work was more than a little counterproductive

home.

One afternoon, as I caught myself with my hand on my hip about to wag a finger at my fiancé, Brian—to vehemently make a point about something—I stopped myself cold. Oh God. I was on the verge of being overbearing, even bitchy. I was so lost in my own needs and wants that I’d totally ignored those of the man I cared about more than anyone—the man I’d been searching for my whole life! This was not the woman I had fantasized about being in my soulmate relationship. Powerless, I felt the stronghold of judgment and intolerance taking over. What could I do?

In a flash of inspiration, I told Brian that if he ever saw me behaving this way again—which I guessed, rather prophetically, would be inevitable—he had my total permission to kindly ask:

“*Is Sheila in the room?*”

Referencing my mom, Sheila, whom I absolutely adore, would be a playful way of reminding me that while my strong, opinionated communication style keeps things at the office on track, I needed to dial it back a few notches in order to maintain a peaceful home. Brian laughed and readily agreed. Then, being the loving and evolved guy that he is, he immediately reciprocated and threw me a major bone.

“*If you ever find me giving you the silent treatment or becoming too paternalistic,*” he said, “*you have my permission to call me Wayne.*”

Oh. This was big. Wayne is Brian’s father—a strong and important figure in his life—but I knew his dad didn’t communicate his feelings enough and Brian didn’t want to model that behavior.

This is how, early on in our relationship, my man and I discovered lighthearted and nurturing ways to diffuse potentially touchy subjects. I hadn’t yet connected all the dots to know that we were practicing the ancient art of Wabi Sabi. All I knew at the time was that our interaction felt grown-up and mature, while also being playfully creative and extremely healing. We were both sort of stunned by it, happily amused. It had been so simple—no anger or drama—but at the same time completely life changing. We look back on that moment as a profound turning point in each of our lives: a new way of relating that had somehow eluded us in earlier relationships. And we both believe that had we not gone this route—that of working gently with each other’s imperfections—we would have thrust ourselves over the cliff in similar fashion to our previous relationships, ending up emotionally battered, bruised, and—once again—alone.

Thankfully, we were ready. We learned how to apply the art of Wabi Sabi to gift to each other our best selves, flaws included, and we’ve never turned off the Wabi Sabi spigot. It is without a doubt the secret to our successful soulmate relationship. This ancient practice has brought me . . . us . . . more joy and love than the two of us could ever have dreamed, and it’s something I know you, too, can experience!

After the successful release of *The Soulmate Secret*, friends and readers alike asked two questions: Now that I’ve found love, how do I maintain that love for the rest of my life? And, how do I turn the lover I’m already with into my soulmate? While *The Soulmate Secret* unveiled the principles for *attracting love*, this book now offers ways for *living that love* in a sustainable fashion.

From this book you will benefit from the wisdom that I unearthed along my journey as well as that of many others who have used Wabi Sabi principles to discover a deeper and more fulfilling love. I will share amazing, true-life stories that will give you a vast array of ideas for implementing Wabi Sabi into your everyday life and relationships. You will learn to apply humor, listening, intimacy, and generosity at precisely those moments where you would normally retreat. The fact is that even though it’s simple, love, as you know, is rarely easy.

For instance, initially I thought that once I’d found my soulmate, our love would evolve naturally.

We'd be living on autopilot, happily floating through one delicious day after another. If only! All couples—even soulmates—have challenges to face and obstacles to overcome in romantic partnership. This book illumines the path to triumphing over our imperfections, not by denying or tolerating them, but by knowing full well what they are and celebrating them!

In these pages you will learn to apply the wisdom of Wabi Sabi to minimize conflict and create a deeper, more loving relationship. Learning to live Wabi Sabi Love in every moment won't happen overnight. However, when you remember the simple tenants of Wabi Sabi—to find the perfection and beauty of imperfection in both yourself and your beloved, you will find that you can let go of issues and challenges much faster, while transforming yourself and your relationship in the process.

With each chapter dedicated to tackling one Wabi Sabi Love practice at a time, the book is designed to help you develop tools and insights to fulfill the promise of your soulmate partnership. It is not about accepting harmful or unhealthy behavior, but about integrating your partner's full beingness, and your own, into a sustainable, everlasting relationship.

Wabi Sabi Love will show you how to cultivate love for yourself and for your partner, especially on the days when one of you is being difficult or stubborn, acting out, spinning off in a million directions, refusing to listen, skipping commitments, spewing negativity, indulging in a pity party, shutting down, closing off, or being generally cranky, moody, and unfit for human consumption. Does this sound familiar?

If you find your toad turned prince/princess has warts after all, welcome to the club. You may not be perfect, but through the practices laid out in this book, your love can be.

Throughout the book, I have chosen to randomly alternate between the “he” and “she” forms because Wabi Sabi Love applies to everyone!

It is my dream that you will use the insights, tools, stories, and practices offered in this book to experience more love, more joy, more compassion, and more peace with yourself and with your beloved. Now, more than ever, the planet needs the high vibration that authentically happy couples radiate—so let's get started!

Wishing you a lifetime of Wabi Sabi Love,

ARIELLE FOR
La Jolla, California

PLEASE NOTE

Practicing Wabi Sabi Love is *not* an invitation to go into denial or accept bad behavior or harmful situations. In the event you find yourself in an abusive relationship, you are advised to seek professional counsel immediately.

Chapter 1

Growing a Generous Heart

Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.—*Buddha*

As with most new couples, when Brian and I first married, we experienced several months of true bliss. But as anyone will tell you, marriage is not the same as the romancing prior to the wedding. Have you ever noticed we never really learn what happens to Cinderella after the prince sweeps her off her feet and they ride off together into the sunset? What no one tells you is that in real life you have to learn to live with each other's habits, quirks, and, yes, downright annoyances.

While we were showered with numerous well wishes from friends and family, the one wedding gift we didn't receive was the handbook on how to have a great partnership. And as you can imagine, being single for forty-four years didn't exactly train me to share my life with anyone. As a businesswoman, I was used to making the decisions and calling the shots about where I was going, what I was doing, when, and with whom.

Brian, on the other hand, was a former successful athlete who had spent his life being a team player, caring deeply about how his actions affected other people and the world around him.

Early on in our relationship we decided that our union would be our number one priority. We promised each other that our choices would be based not on what Arielle wanted, or on what Brian wanted, but on what was ultimately best for our relationship. This shared commitment meant that when we encountered the inevitable disagreements and upsets, no one would threaten to walk out and both of us would take responsibility for finding a solution.

Together we explored couples workshops to learn heart-opening strategies to keep our love on track and we always kept the lines of communication wide open. We shared our deepest thoughts and dreams as well as our imperfections and fears.

We have been fortunate to find guidance among our circle of friends and colleagues who are happily married, generous souls who have graciously shared their wisdom with us. Many of them—and others who have successfully navigated choppy marital waters—share their stories of turning conflict into connection and compassion in these pages.

Over the past fourteen years, Brian and I have created a life together that far exceeds my wildest imagination. When I've had a full day, I sometimes leave my shoes lying about. And wouldn't you know? Every now and then Brian will find one, get down on one knee, and place the shoe tenderly on my foot, proving that married life does indeed have its fairy-tale moments. And then there are those times when you're both vying for the remote or have two totally different ideas about what a date night should include, and you wonder how two seemingly opposite people could ever find long-term bliss.

If you know anything about the Law of Attraction, you know that you first have to declare your

vision before it can become reality. When I was creating my soulmate wish list, I was very careful to list every statement in a positive way, such as, “He will be loving, kind, and generous.” Making positive statements about your intentions is an old talk-to-the-Universe trick since the Universe simply cannot hear the word “not.” According to the Law of Attraction, if you say, “I do *not* want X, Y, or Z,” you will end up getting just that. Although I knew this, there was one must-have requirement that I never did figure out how to position in a positive light, so I simply wrote: “He will *not* be a football fanatic.”

Having grown up with a father and a brother who lived, breathed, and talked football 24/7, I often felt as if football was my nemesis in my ongoing competition for my father’s attention. The truth is, I hate football, and I just couldn’t imagine spending my life with someone who had football blaring on the TV. Truthfully, I’d rather be alone than be subjected to the sound of crashing helmets and the grunts of men in tight pants chasing a pigskinned orb to the beat of seventy thousand cheering fans.

Wouldn’t you know? What I resisted persisted. Brian was indeed a huge sports fan—for basketball. Okay, not football exactly, but the similarities were glaring. He comes by it honestly as a former player, but that didn’t change the fact that I wasn’t sure, at first, that I’d be able to overcome what I perceived to be this most harrowing obstacle. Would I have to compete for his attention, just as I had to for my father’s time and focus?

It would be unfair of me to put down the entire world of sports in one fell swoop. After all, those athletes work hard toward their goals, engaging in countless hours of practice while nobody is looking. I mean who doesn’t get goose bumps when watching the Olympics? I have shed a tear or two on occasion, watching those medalists stand reverently on the award platform. In truth, it wasn’t the actual notion of organized sports that put me off early in my relationship with Brian. It was the idea of competing for my partner’s attention and playing second string to a pack of men on a flat-screen TV.

I decided to face the first of many tests by opening myself up to the possibility of actually loving sports. Could it really be all that bad? What might I gain by broadening my thinking? More importantly, what would I lose if I didn’t try to find something positive about my husband’s passion? It was time to do some digging, and fortunately I quickly found some research that substantiated my belief that incompatibilities are an inherent part of all relationships.

For the past thirty-five years psychologist and researcher John Gottman, Ph.D., has been studying married couples, and he has found that every happily married couple has somewhere around ten irreconcilable differences. In other words, scientific studies have now proved that having differences in a happy marriage is normal! What a relief!

Not surprisingly, Gottman found that the top two irreconcilable differences are about finances and children. The other biggies include sex, in-laws, housework, political views, communication, balance between home and work, and personal idiosyncrasies. According to Susan Boon, Ph.D., a social psychologist at the University of Calgary, the secret lies in coming to terms with the differences rather than trying to solve the unsolvable. The Wabi Sabi solution is to embrace the tastes, opinions, preferences, and unique viewpoints that make each of us individuals, rather than trying to eliminate them.

These claims all sounded really good in theory. But would I be able to truly overcome my sports phobia and celebrate our diversity with a full-blown embrace?

WABI SABI PRINCIPLE

Having differences is inevitable. What matters is how we manage the differences, and this is

where becoming a Wabi Sabi artisan really pays off.

Drawing on the Wabi Sabi lessons learned by my friend Moji, I realized that there was, in fact, a way out of my quandary. Moji, a smart woman whom I greatly respect, came up against a similar challenge when she fell in love with Jason, a football fanatic of the highest order. Her approach opened my eyes to the possibility that there was indeed a Wabi Sabi solution in my future.

FALLING IN LOVE WITH FOOTBALL

It was only their third date when Jason suggested to Moji that the two spend it watching a very “important” football game. Although these words landed for Moji with a thud, she tried to keep an open mind.

“My son had just started playing football as a freshman in high school,” she said, “so I was no stranger to the game. I quickly picked up the basics about this rough-and-tumble sport, but spending our date night watching grown men pound one another into submission was not my idea of romance!”

It was the beginning of football season, and Jason and Moji were just getting to know each other. And even though Jason’s football was a part of nearly every conversation they had, they still developed a strong bond that moved beyond the sport itself. A definite spark had been ignited.

“Before each game,” she recollected, “he would feverishly update me on all the players, stats, and injury reports. During the games, he would explain in detail the complexities and nuances of each play. His true passion for this game was undeniable.”

A few weeks into the season, Moji came to a critically important realization about the man she was falling in love with. Her outgoing, athletic, and very funny new love interest seemed to have a fatal flaw: he was literally obsessed with football and everything related to it.

It wasn’t long before Moji felt as though she were competing for Jason’s attention. She began to wonder, *Is it going to be me or football?* She was faced with a conundrum. Should she tolerate the sport and pretend she was having fun watching it, or should she throw a fit every time there was a game on? It was tempting to give in to one of those options, but realizing that she and Jason had true potential, she decided that she really wanted to enjoy her time with him and not just fake it. And putting up a fight every time he mentioned football seemed like a surefire way to end the relationship.

And then she thought, *Why not me and football?* Moji seriously pondered what it would take to make her relationship with Jason work and, more important, flourish. She thought about the elements of football. It’s a bunch of great-looking athletic men tackling one another. It involves speed, precision, and strategy. Her thoughts started reeling as she considered the sport’s redeeming qualities.

Finally she came to a conclusion.

“The only thing for me to do is to dive into this with mind, body, and spirit to really learn the game. Then we will see if I love it too.”

Moji began asking questions about different positions and play calls. She even carried a little notepad to take notes as she learned about NFL teams, players, and even head coaches.

“Before I knew it, I was hooked. I am not kidding you! I loved football!”

Serendipitously, during football season the following year, Jason asked Moji to marry him. Their wedding took place shortly after the season ended.

Now, five years later, they plan their social life around all levels of football, whether it’s high school, college, or professional games, and they love every minute of it.

“My girlfriends think I do this for my husband, but the truth is, I am doing this for myself. I have become a full-blown football junkie!”

While Moji learned to love football, Jason had to learn to embrace a few things about Moji—the first being her parenting style. A lifetime bachelor, Jason suddenly found himself in the position of stepfather of a teenage son, a role he admits was a great challenge for him. “Being a stepdad doesn’t come with a manual. I’m not an enforcer type, but more of a happiness and harmony kind of guy.” Having grown up in a household in which he was required to make his own bed and wash his own dishes, he had a hard time accepting Moji’s lenient approach to raising her only child. “She says the reason she does everything for him is that she’s Persian,” he explained. It took a while for Jason to accept her way of doing things, but he soon realized that “A happy wife equals a happy life.”

Moji’s willingness to explore where her lover’s interests might take her and Jason’s ability to embrace Moji’s parenting style are two clear illustrations of what it means to have a generous heart. We may never fully agree with how our significant others see things, but we can learn to accept, honor, and respect their viewpoints as their own and as valid. Moji and Jason discovered that their traits each had deep cultural roots. Rejecting either aspect would have meant the end of their relationship; by accepting their differences, they deepened their bond.

While Moji’s full embrace of football is admirable, finding acceptance for my husband’s own sports fanaticism is something that admittedly took me a long time to develop.

WABI SABI PRINCIPLE

Embracing the most fundamental aspects of your partner seals the bond in your relationship.

In the early days of our relationship, I discovered that Brian would occasionally watch a football game (usually a playoff game or the Super Bowl), but he had a near freakish passion for basketball. You could say he comes from a family that is basketball crazed, whether it’s high school, college, or the NBA. Believe me when I say these folks *eat, pray, and love* basketball. On my first visit to Oregon to meet Brian’s family, he took me to my first professional NBA game to see the Portland Trailblazers play in the Rose Garden. In true Brian Hilliard fashion, we had courtside seats that cost about as much as a midsize vehicle. I was not prepared for the explosion of sound, the bright lights, or the intensity of the crowd. As a highly sensitive person (HSP), I found myself trapped in a nightmarish situation. My nervous system was overwhelmed. By the end of the first half, I was on the verge of a major headache.

Brian was very understanding and assured me it was quite all right with him if we left the game. We went to a quiet romantic café for dinner and spoke about life, love, and our future. The one topic we avoided was basketball.

During the next few years, I heard a little bit about Brian’s college-jock days as a basketball player for the Oregon State University Beavers, but Brian is very humble and I really just didn’t get the magnitude of his athleticism. Then on one of our later trips to Portland we went to a resort at Mount Hood for a birthday party for one of Brian’s closest friends. We were seated next to two adorable young women whose fathers had also attended OSU. At one point in the conversation, one of the women asked Brian what his last name was.

When he replied, “Hilliard,” the two women literally screamed in unison.

“Brian Hilliard? You’re really Brian Hilliard?”

“Yes,” he said, proudly but quietly.

“Oh my God, my dad is going to die when he finds out we met you! You have always been one of his favorite Beavers of all time! He just loved the way you played.”

I looked at my husband and thought, *Wow. I've married a jock. Who would have guessed?* I didn't know a thing about basketball, but I was about to learn. During the first six months of living together I noticed Brian cut out a page of the sports section of the local paper and made daily notations on it. One day, I asked him if it was some sort of crossword puzzle. He shot me a look, then nearly rolled on the floor with laughter as he said, “It's the sixty-four team bracket for March Madness!” Huh? I knew I needed to learn more about this secret sports world of Brian's.

Sharing your partner's passion isn't always easy, especially if you have an innate aversion to it. But at this point in the game, I realized that the heart of a Wabi Sabi artisan is a generous one. It is generous in the way that it sees its partner and in the way that it sees itself. It is generous by always giving the benefit of the doubt and seeing the other person's greatness beyond the scope of a momentary mess-up. A Wabi Sabi heart is generous in the interpretation of events and with its time and investment in making the relationship number one, despite opposing viewpoints.

Shopping is a great example of how couples who have a lot in common can still become diametrically opposed. Did you know that it has now been scientifically proven that men and women have radically different approaches to shopping? While women tend to troll the malls for deals and delight, men often apply a more linear methodology to purchases: go in, get it, and get out. According to research conducted by the University of Michigan School of Public Health, the reason lies in our evolutionary psychology.* Men hunt; women gather. Thousands of years ago women had to develop a keen sense of discernment to differentiate the poisonous berries from the nonpoisonous ones. At the same time, men planned their attack first in an effort to conserve energy, then grabbed their prey with practiced dexterity. These opposing strategies helped sustain the human race, but when it comes to consumer activity today, men and women often get entangled in a cross fire of their own making.

Like foraging the forest floor for nutrients, shopping is both a social and a sensual experience for women. A shared mission to search out the perfect little black dress can be a totally fulfilling night out with a favorite girlfriend. Women enjoy roaming around until something catches their eye, whether they are searching for clothes, shoes, purses, or accessories (especially if they are at bargain prices). One of the reasons women often (including me) adore shopping is that it fully engages all of our senses. Running your hand across the fabrics from silk and satin to linen and leathers, observing the colors and patterns and styles of the latest fashions, smelling the newest fragrances, and feeling fine leather shoes on your feet are delightful experiences most men never care about.

Those of you who struggle with your partner's passion for shopping—or with your partner's indifference to your own shopping obsession—may find inspiration in the way my friend Jerry occupies his time between his wife's fittings in the women's apparel department.

SHOP, PRAY, LOVE

Like many men I know, Jerry used to hate shopping, and luckily for him, his beloved wife, Diane, doesn't go shopping very often. However, on those rare occasions when she does hit the mall, she likes to have Jerry come along.

From the start, Jerry glanced at his watch frequently, making it obvious that he would rather not be there; in turn, Diane often felt pressured to rush through what used to be an enjoyable pastime.

One afternoon, as Jerry was anxiously biding his time while he sat in the middle of the dress department, he closed his eyes and literally asked God for help in dealing with what felt to him like an unbearable situation. Almost instantaneously, he received very clear and specific instructions: instead of waiting impatiently for their shopping expedition to end, he was to take out his pen and write Diane a love poem. Jerry followed this spiritual prompting, and as he did, he was overcome with a great sense of peace. Not only was he reconnecting with his love for Diane, but he had also made the shift from focusing on only his own preferences to a state of gratitude for the life they shared together. Rather than being bored and antsy, he became engaged and enlivened by discovering a different way to relate to the process of shopping altogether.

In the middle of this transformation, Diane came to show him a dress she wanted to buy and found Jerry sitting peacefully with a smile on his face. Confused but intent on shopping, she went back to trying on more clothes. After a brief interlude, she came back to check on him again. He was still calm and peaceful. After she had made her purchases, she went to find him so they could finally leave before the experience inflicted any further damage. He asked her to sit down and said, "I'd like to share something with you."

Jerry quietly read her the beautiful love poem he had written as a tribute to her. She thanked him and her eyes filled with tears and the shutters on her heart blew wide open. They left the store giggling and holding hands in a bubble of love no shopping high could match. To this day, whenever they find themselves at a mall, Jerry writes her love poems.

But the story continues. Jerry's Wabi Sabi moment not only helped him and his wife; his epiphany helped a total stranger too.

One day Diane was in a department store, shopping with her mother. She saw a young woman quickly going through the clothing racks while a young man sitting nearby was looking miserable. Diane approached the man with a smile. "It's really horrible, isn't it?" she softly said to him.

"Yes," he said, dipping his head down as if not wanting to admit the torture he felt. "I really hate this."

"My husband used to feel this way too," Diane said. She surveyed the young man's face for a moment.

"Used to?" he asked, sitting up a little straighter.

Diane shared her story about how much Jerry hated shopping until he began using the time to write her these exquisite love poems.

The young man listened intently without saying a word. For a moment, he paused with a look of uncertainty on his face. Just as Diane drew back, hoping she hadn't overstepped her bounds, the young man leaped from his seat and called out to his wife who was closing in on the dressing room with an armful of clothes.

"Um, honey, do you have a pen?"

The Wabi Sabi wisdom of this story hardly needs explaining. Imagine hating a situation (shopping so deeply that out of desperation all you can do is pray . . . and then to have your prayers answered instantly with a simple but brilliant solution. Our intuition feeds us the answers without fail when we take a moment to listen.

Whether it's basketball or accompanying your beloved to the mall, learning to love—or at least accept—what your partner loves requires an open mind and a generous heart. While I was struggling my way through the basics of learning about basketball (did they play in innings or quarters? Rebounds are good but traveling is bad?), I was fortunate enough to come across a book called *Secrets of a Very Good Marriage: Lessons from the Sea* by Sherry Suib Cohen. Sherry's heartfelt memoir

opened my eyes to a new way of embracing Brian's favorite sport. Just as she embraced her husband, Larry's, love of the sea, Larry learned to get involved in Sherry's work as well. They both showed me that developing a passion for the things your mate is passionate about is one secret to a very happy marriage.

HOOK, LINE, AND ETERNAL LOVE

Bermuda. The very word conjures up images of pink sandy beaches surrounded by aquamarine water and sun-drenched days melting into balmy evenings under star-speckled skies. What could be more romantic? This was the future on which Sherry's fantasy honeymoon with Larry was forecast.

Theirs had been a short but sweet courtship, and both were certain they were a match made in heaven. He was enchanted by her and said he knew the minute he saw her that they were meant to be together. She loved his zany sense of humor, as well as his honesty and his brilliance. It also didn't hurt that he was always game for anything.

They married and went to Bermuda for a much-anticipated honeymoon of rest, relaxation, and fun. What they got, however, was more than either of them bargained for. They shared an experience that would change the trajectory of their marriage, and their lives, forever.

After their crisp November wedding in New York, they arrived at the island paradise, excited to explore each other and their surroundings. On their first day Larry suggested to his new bride that they take out a rowboat, maybe do a little fishing and explore the islands that make up Bermuda. Sherry, a self-professed landlubber, had never been in a boat of any kind. The rickety old rowboat he heaved into the water gave her the chills. But, being very much in love and eager to please her new husband, she pushed aside her fearful thoughts of the sea and climbed into the small boat.

"It started off as a beautiful day . . . one that would be just me, Larry, and the sea. Lost in thought and in each other, we soon discovered we were lost at sea too!" To add to the excitement, the weather—which had started out sunny and warm—quickly turned cold and dreary. Sherry recalls how it began to rain. "I was trying to be a good sport. We rowed and rowed until finally, after what seemed like an eternity, we found our way back to shore."

As they stumbled off the boat, freezing cold, soaking wet, and exhausted, Larry saw a sign on the dock that said Fishing for Blues Tonight. Instantly rejuvenated and with the excitement of someone who had just won the lottery, he turned to his new bride and said:

"Let's go get warmed up, change our clothes, and then go fishing tonight!"

Her stomach sank. Her worst fears flooded her body as grim thoughts raced through her mind. Her life was *not* going to end in a dinghy.

This is not going to last. He is completely insane and off his rocker. After the day we just had, any normal person would want a long break from the ocean, she thought.

They didn't go fishing that night, or the next. But very quickly, Sherry began to understand how deeply connected Larry was to the ocean. She didn't really understand this passion and love for the sea but rationalized that maybe, in another life, he had been a great fisherman.

"I'm a very strong woman," she told me. "I know how to get my way and do what I want, *when* I want. But I also recognized that this was something I couldn't fool with. I knew, with absolute certainty, that for the rest of our life together the ocean would either be *with* us or *between* us. Realizing this, my choice became crystal clear."

Originally, Sherry saw Larry's immense love of the sea as his worst fault and a great potential

threat to their relationship. But eventually she came to respect it and often wished she had something she loved as much. One day she had a beautiful epiphany when she realized she did love something as much as Larry loved the ocean: Larry himself! Larry is her greatest love.

“He is the smartest and funniest person I know. I love his wrinkles, the sag in his belly, the slight stoop to his walk. I would rather be alone with Larry in the middle of the ocean than any other place in the world.”

Sherry eventually found enjoyment lying in the sun, or reading or writing while she spent time on the boat, but she never really came to love the ocean the way Larry does. Dealing with engine breakdowns is her least favorite boating experience; however, over the years she has even learned to bleed the engine when necessary and help navigate if the instruments fail.

WABI SABI PRINCIPLE

Play a part in your partner’s life story. When you engage in your love’s interests, you acknowledge not only the person, but also the passion.

Larry is a firm believer that a good marriage requires each person to be an active player in the other’s stories, not just a passive bystander in them. Fortunately for Sherry, he has what it takes to put that philosophy into action. When Sherry is writing a magazine piece or a book, Larry accompanies her whenever possible. He has cooked with Paula Deen and loudly admired Estée Lauder’s paintings. He has even taken part in conflict-resolution sessions that were the basis of one of her books. “This way,” Sherry says, “we each live colorful, layered lives. In fact, we each live two lives—together.”

Inspired by Sherry’s newfound appreciation and acceptance of Larry’s fishing as well as his voluntary involvement in her passion for writing, I realized that my marriage would be well-served if I could find a way to love basketball, or at least love watching Brian doing what he loves. I was determined to embrace March Madness, that World Series of the college-basketball universe, with as much adoration as I could muster.

I decided that I would join Brian on the couch to watch the last fifteen minutes of any game he was watching. He was always delighted to answer my rookie questions, and he never got impatient with me when I called the end of the quarter “an inning.” It was exciting to see the kid in him light up when he saw the players excel. By the time March Madness ended, I was looking forward to watching the last quarter of the NBA games he watched. But two more unexpected surprises emerged from my new practice of watching games with Brian: First, he began sharing more of his collegiate career memories with me, allowing me to appreciate and admire him in a whole new way. And second, I began to develop a genuine appreciation for the players as well as the game!

Don’t get me wrong. I love Brian with all my heart and soul. But when I saw Avery Johnson, a suave point guard for the San Antonio Spurs (all five foot eleven of him), walk onto the court, I fell in love with him in a fanlike way. After a short while, he became my favorite player in the NBA. I can’t explain it; I just became entranced with his wily ways on the hardwood. My other crush was Jason Kidd of the New Jersey Nets. Watching Avery and Jason work their magic gave me two more solid reasons to watch basketball with Brian.

The point is, you may never grow to love your partner’s passion as much as he or she loves it, but you can grow your own heart by learning to love and support the things that really turn your partner on. One way I learned to connect to my “generous heart” is by taking five minutes to do a Heart Lock

In, a technique I learned from the Institute of Heartmath, which I find assists me in letting go of any negative emotions and reconnecting with my commitment to being a loving and supportive partner.

The heart is a muscle that pumps life-giving blood and oxygen throughout our bodies. We already know that running, biking, hiking, and other cardio workouts are proven ways to strengthen our heart and improve our long-term health. In the same way, a Heart Lock-In improves the emotional and spiritual strength of your heart—only you don't have to break a sweat to reap the benefits!

For the past thirty years the visionaries at Heartmath, located in Boulder Creek, California, have studied the heart. Their research offers compelling evidence that the heart possesses its own intelligence and has great influence over how the body's many systems align themselves. The Heartmath scientists have found that when we focus on the area around the heart, while remembering and reexperiencing feelings such as love, appreciation, or gratitude, the positive results can immediately be measured in our heart rhythms (heart rate variability). They call this "heart coherence," a highly desirable state that improves our emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

Using the Heartmath techniques is one way to begin developing a generous and expansive heart. Just as your bicep muscles respond to lifting weights on a regular basis, spending time each day focused on the experience of love, appreciation, or gratitude builds a reservoir of these good feelings which translates into greater love, joy, and harmony in your relationships. And quite frankly, who doesn't want more of that?

EXERCISE: *Strengthening Your Generous Heart Muscle* (fill in the blanks)

What hobby, passion, or activity does your partner love that you have yet to embrace?

Use your imagination for just a moment, and ask yourself the following question: "If the key to having all my dreams come true is to find a way to fall in love with _____, what is the easiest way for me to do this?"

Now write down five or more ways your relationship would be improved if you could find a way to accept or possibly even love what your partner loves.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

Do a Heart Lock-In. It is about experiencing your heart at a deeper level.

Close your eyes and breathe slowly. Shift your attention away from your mind and focus on the area around your heart.

Remember the feeling of love or appreciation you have for your partner. Focus on this feeling for five to fifteen minutes.

Gently send that feeling of love or appreciation to yourself and to your partner.

(For a deeper experience of a Heart Lock-In, please visit www.wabisabilove.com/audio to download guided audio version.)

With practice, a Heart Lock-In can provide physical, mental, and spiritual regeneration and resiliency so the next time you find yourself dreading something your partner loves to do, you can more easily make space for it. Growing your generous heart will also help grow your love for each other.

* D. J. Kruger and D. Byker, “Evolved foraging psychology underlies sex differences in shopping experiences and behaviors.” Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Meeting of the NorthEastern Evolutionary Psychology Society, *Journal of Social, Evolutionary and Cultural Psychology* 3, no. 4 (2009): 328–42.

Chapter 2

From Annoyed to Enjoyed

Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.—*Leonard Cohen*

While some experts might tell us not to sweat the small stuff, we all know it is the little things that can chisel away at even the best of relationships. Before those granular irks lead to the Big Bang in our partnerships, we need to develop relational safety nets to catch us before we fall. You can consider these strategies to be a quirk-turned-perk energy shift, if you will. A key aspect of Wabi Sabi is learning to move our focus from what makes our partners so annoying to what makes our partners so unique.

At its heart, this transition is about gratitude. Gratitude can be a marriage-saving emotion, especially if you tend to easily slide into feelings of annoyance about your partner's daily habits. Little rituals of thankfulness can sustain you as you struggle with the thing he or she did—*again*.

One of my favorite prayers comes from *A Course in Miracles*:

On this day where would you have me go?

What would you have me do?

What would you have me say and to whom?

For many years I began each day with this prayer as a way to center myself and receive divine guidance. It was particularly useful when I was feeling upset, stuck, or uninspired. I would follow this prayer by making a gratitude list that often looked like this:

Today I am grateful that I have fresh air to breathe and clean water to drink and for the many friends and family members who love me. I'm grateful that I have a healthy body, a creative mind, and interesting work. And before I got married, I usually added in the line "I am grateful for my soulmate who is on his way to spend his life with me."

So far so good. Then I got married and my prayers changed.

Dear God,

Help me. I have married a man who refuses to answer the phone, but he will walk across a room to hand me the phone so I can answer it.

Okay. I'm stretching the truth just a bit here, but like all couples, Brian and I each had quirks and odd behaviors that we had to learn to love and appreciate.

A daily practice of offering prayers of gratitude (whether you believe in a higher being or not) for your beloved mate—flaws and all—will keep your mind open and your heart receptive to remembering how much you love him or her. For it's really the *cracks* in our partners that we will

someday miss the most.

MRS. LEE'S STORY

The cool, quiet room was overflowing with the grieving faces of friends and family as the funeral director invited Mrs. Lee up to the podium to speak.* The petite, elegant widow walked slowly to the front of the small chapel and calmly began her eulogy.

"I am not going to sing praises for my late husband. Not today. Neither am I going to talk about how good he was." Mrs. Lee's eyes flashed.

"Enough people have done that here." She took a deep breath, allowing the air to fill her lungs before she continued. "Instead, I want to talk about some things that will make some of you feel a bit uncomfortable."

Several people stopped fanning themselves and sat up a little straighter. "First off, I want to talk about what happened in bed." She paused dramatically, shifting her weight from side to side. A crow cawed outside the chapel window. She watched it perch itself on a nearby tree.

"Have you ever had difficulty starting your car engine in the morning?" She carefully studied the faces about the room. With a loud, grinding sound, she snorted and rumbled, violently shaking her timber frame.

"Well, that's exactly what David's snoring sounded like." A cough rose up from the center of the audience. "But wait," she continued. "Snoring wasn't the only thing." A few pairs of feet shuffled nervously under the chairs.

"There was also this rear-end wind action as well. Some nights it was so forceful, it would wake him up." A child giggled into her hand while her red-faced mother stifled a grin.

"What was that?" he would ask.

"Oh, it's the dog," I would say. Patting his back and smoothing the covers, I would urge him to go back to sleep." She touched her hair as if remembering the way her hands felt as they placed themselves on her husband's gasping body. "Oh, you might find this very funny," Mrs. Lee offered with a whisper of a smile. Her hands clutched the funeral program as she licked her dry lips. "But when his illness was at its worst, these sounds provided comfort and proof that my David was still alive."

Silence washed over the room. Even the birds outside seemed to be listening.

Mrs. Lee looked heavenward as her voice began to crack. "What I wouldn't give just to hear those sounds one more time before I sleep." A single tear wandered down her face, landing noiselessly on her lapel.

"In the end, it's these small things that you remember, the little imperfections that make them perfect for you.

"So, to my beautiful children," Mrs. Lee swept one hand toward the front row, "I hope that one day you, too, will find yourselves life partners who are as beautifully imperfect as your father was to me.

Mrs. Lee's eloquent tribute to her husband left the entire audience in tears. With just a few heartfelt words she summed up the mystery and magic of a lifelong marriage built on the foundation of love, imperfection, and acceptance that knows no bounds.

Wabi Sabi Love is grounded in acceptance. It's the practice of accepting the flaws, imperfections, and limitations—as well as the gifts and the blessings—that form your shared history as a couple. Acceptance and its counterpart, understanding, are crucial to achieving relationship harmony.

This is sacred love, not infatuation, or love that is convenient. What if we discovered that romantic

love was never meant to be perfect, but to guide us to this highest form of love? What if, in fact, ~~soulmate we are destined for one another~~ love exists to propel us into an understanding of Wabi Sabi Love, such as Mrs. Lee experienced?

Can you imagine what the world would look like, feel like, be like if the foundational premise of romantic love and deep intimacy were based on the art of loving one's imperfections rather than the illusionary fantasy that your relationship is fabulous only when each person is acting perfectly and behaving in ways that are acceptable to the other? Imagine a world in which imperfection is the accepted norm and is actually cherished.

Would the divorce rate drop? Would the love that brought us together alter the very way in which we relate to our partners? Would this new set of values provide an evolutionary segue into a love so perfectly imperfect that you learn to cherish that which used to drive you crazy?

Anyone who has found this highest level of Wabi Sabi Love knows that it comes in one way and one way only: through exploring, embracing, and actually falling in love with the cracks in each other and ourselves.

Sometimes the crack is a simple but persistent bad-hair day, an imperfection that one couple had to come to terms with.

BREAKTHROUGH WITH THE UNTAMED MANE

According to Jan, Fred's wife of twenty-five years, Fred's hair is, in a word, unmanageable. Medium brown in color, it is wavy, curly, and very asymmetrical, sprouting out on both sides of his head.

"It's as if the sides of his head have different personalities," Jan claims. "It's so out of control that even a three-hundred-dollar professional haircut couldn't tame it."

The funny thing is, Fred is completely without vanity when it comes to his appearance. Before he met Jan, he was even known to buy eyeglasses without trying them on.

"I adore my husband," Jan says. "I've never met anyone less self-conscious about appearance than he is."

His attitude was quite a departure from what she had learned as a child. Growing up in a home with a father who was fastidious about his appearance and grooming, Jan consciously decided that she did not want to be her father's daughter. She doesn't wear makeup or high heels, and she chooses to keep her appearance as au naturel as possible. It is a trait that she and Fred definitely share. Fred, however, seems to take it to a much higher level of *naturalness* than Jan does.

"I'm an extraordinarily careless dresser," Fred admits. "I barely comb my hair, and most often you will find me in my uniform: sweat pants and a T-shirt underneath a flannel shirt."

Fred is a highly esteemed professor of psychology, a bestselling author and speaker who works from his home office.

"For years my wife has combed my hair, especially when I have to give a lecture. She gets irritated when I go out looking like a slob. When I'm in a particularly slothlike mode, she gives me the disapproving 'stare.'" By this, Fred is referring to the wilting glare that even his hair pays attention to. On some occasions, Jan swears she sees it shrink back in terror as she attacks it from all sides.

For many years Fred just endured Jan's attention to his wild head of hair. Some days he would tell her just to "*leave me alone*" while she would comb, brush, gel, or try to cut Fred's hair into submission.

"Like a stealth infiltrator, Jan even moved the hairbrush into the top drawer of my office desk one

day so that she would have the brush handy when she wanted to fix my hair. It had lived happily in the bathroom for years.”

Fred made many attempts to make peace with Jan’s endless attention to his unruly mop, but gradually he realized that being annoyed wasn’t useful. He loved his wife and understood that her intentions were both loving and pure. She really had his best interests at heart.

“We’ve both worked hard to stay present and connected in our marriage. I’ve come to an understanding that she’s not changing. It was both grace and deep work to get from how *dare* she to how *care* she! Eventually, I realized that there’s no one else who cares as much about me as she does. The brush represents her love for me,” explains Fred.

Now, when Jan reaches for the brush, Fred no longer pulls away. He allows himself to experience the overarching kindness of this simple yet loving act. Most of the time he even says thank you to his deeply devoted and attentive wife.

And as for Jan, she has reached her own level of acceptance. “I’ve finally made peace with his total nonchalance about his appearance. In fact, I have even learned to respect his ability to stay true to himself.”

The brush is staying in that top drawer, but why shouldn’t it? Fred and Jan both know their love has actually been deepened by the very thing that once bristled more than just Fred’s coiffure.

While we can’t all be as unself-conscious as Fred about our appearance, I just love that he finally came to understand that Jan’s love for him manifested in her efforts to spruce him up for his public appearances.

Many years ago I had my own Fred-like moment with a former boyfriend who wore an expensive suit and tie to work every day. One morning I saw a piece of lint on his shoulder, so I casually reached up to brush it away. You would have thought I was hauling off to smack him upside the head! He flinched and cast me a very nasty look. I quickly began to explain to him that I was only trying to remove some lint. He growled like the Incredible Hulk, then coolly replied, “Don’t. Ever. Do. That. Again.”

Was I missing something here? His reaction completely startled me. Up to this point he had been a very sweet and caring guy, but with one flick of my wrist (literally), he had morphed into a total jerk. When I asked him why he was suddenly so defensive, he admitted that his mother had always been “picking” at him and he just couldn’t tolerate it. End of story. He was forty years old, acting fourteen, and refused to discuss it further. Luckily for me, the relationship ended quickly thereafter, but I learned an important lesson that has stayed with me to this day: it isn’t always easy to find beauty and perfection in behavior that makes us crazy.

WABI SABI PRINCIPLE

Loving the quirks can be a perk when you see them as a part of the whole. Gratitude reminders help you see the Big Picture instead of dwelling on the details.

Another quirk-turned-perk couple I know has learned to view their idiosyncrasies as a part of their marital DNA.

LAUGHTER IS LOVE’S BEST MEDICINE

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