A letter to my wife, on the occasion of our 36th anniversary (16/1/17)

I wrote this letter to Mardi for our anniversary today.  Because we live so far from most friends and family, I am unable to present this letter as a toast at a group celebration, and decided to publish it instead.  Will you please be upstanding and raise a glass with me?  To Mardi!

Today is the 18th anniversary of our American wedding.  Despite being the second time to marry you in as many weeks, it didn’t feel strange—having had the practice of being married two weeks prior in Australia I was a bit less nervous.  Your uncle whispering loudly, as I waited at the front of the church, “It’s not too late, mate…if you duck out the back we can meet at the pub and miss this whole thing!” went a long way to help with that

I will be forever grateful to U.S. Immigration for issuing you a “Fiancee Visa” requiring a wedding on American soil:  because of their largesse we had to have a second ceremony with our American family and friends.  Does that make today our…  18 + 18 = 36…  36th wedding anniversary?  I’m not sure.

It seems at times we’ve spent the last 18 years running pell-mell through major transitions, submarine deployments, shifting continents, saying goodbye to dear friends and opening our hearts to new ones, changing vocations, wondering if this might be the year we have a ‘normal’ life.  It’s been an edge-of-my-seat adventure, which I love…and also intensely dislike on some days, if I’m honest.

I want to pause today and plumb only a very little the depths of some of what you’ve taught me.   So here goes. Happy anniversary, my love.

You’ve taught me that marriage is more a process than an event.  An event, certainly: holy, sacramental.  Not just civil recognition (by whichever government is running whichever country we reside in).  More than that… an ongoing alignment (at times, painful) with what it means to put someone else’s good before my own.

You’ve taught me that it’s possible to find delight in the most ridiculous pop culture—podcasts about West Wing episodes, Twilight (not just the books, the movies too!), and your ‘guilty pleasure’ of Entertainment Weekly.

I’m learning with you that ‘faith’ is better described as ’trust’…we started our journey together by getting engaged when you had no clear path to an American visa, my entry dates into the Naval Nuclear Power program was fixed in stone, and it was incredibly unlikely that a “fresh off the boat” Foreign Medical Graduate such as yourself would ever land a spot in a US medical residency.  Step by step, at just the right time (usually at the last minute, clashing massively with our Type-A personalities), the Lord opened doors.  At times with a ’see what I can do?’ flourish.

A medical internship a ten-minute walk from our apartment in Charleston, SC.  Entry into the pediatrics residency program in the same part of the US that my first submarine was stationed.  Entry into a follow-on pediatric emergency medicine fellowship program in the same place when I was asked to stay longer and teach on shore duty.  And on…and on…and on…

You have taught me that in marriage, in many ways the “medium is the message”.  Embarking on a shared journey with another person is unknowable at the start: both of us change, develop new habits, lose old ones, and experience profound loss and sorrow alongside joy.  It’s been along the way, in the process, that I have begun to discover a capacity for self-sacrificial love that I never knew was possible–all the while being confronted by my in-built tendency to meeting my own needs first.

You have taught me (well, instructed me, anyway) that one should never, under any circumstances, wear socks with sandals.  Or drive a minivan. [salutes smartly]

I have learned with you—after traversing England by foot and summiting Mt Kilimanjaro—that the most fulfilling goals are the most difficult and painful to achieve.

You have taught me that a healthy marriage requires space…space to let the other person live into, experiment, and discover who they are created to be.

You have taught me that in many ways, marriage is less an emotion than something to be done…like leadership, if you’ll pardon the analogical stretch, less a calling than an imperative.  There is work to be done–because without effort, without committing to a lifetime of learning, the relationship suffers.

You have taught me that Christmas is still Christmas when you are eating lobster and baking in 41C heat in Australia.  And it’s still Christmas when a surfer is killed by a great white shark while your father and I are watching (true story).

I am learning with you that ‘home’ is a tricky concept.  No longer ‘where I grew up’, or ‘where I have spent most of my life’, after three continents and seven homes you’ve helped me discover how to exist in the tension of residing in one place while parts of my heart lie in others.

I am learning with you, mostly by being forced to acknowledge my own brokenness, that one of the best things I can bring to our relationship is a commitment to pursuing my own individual wholeness.

You have taught me that the dark humor of the submarine and emergency medicine communities are the same—providing me with the joy of bursting out laughing with you on totally inappropriate occasions.

I have learned with you a few of our cultures’ myths about marriage:  for example, that a partner is meant to fulfill all of one’s needs, or that being married is the highest and best goal of all humans.  You have taught me that all humans are meant to live in community with important roles for other friends and family, and that marriage is a choice for some, not a requirement for all.

You have also taught me to continue to find value in the American system of democracy—really—through your love of The West Wing and your inability to discuss politics without one degree of separation to the fictional President Bartlet.

You have been my teacher these past six years in Kenya as you have grown into a deeper understanding of your calling:  from ‘saving a life’ to ‘serving the suffering’.  You have taught me that it is possible to rejoice with a family celebrating the recovery of a daughter in the morning, and to grieve with another family the death of a son in the afternoon.

Through the many hours that you spend quietly counseling parents that their child will die soon and that it might be time to consider letting them go rather than impoverishing their wider family with expensive (relatively) ICU stays, you have taught me much about the nature of the Triune God.  A God who invites us to join Him not only to work to rescue the suffering from pain, but to also be His hands and feet in their suffering.

I have learned with you (and would quite like to stop learning, frankly) that it is usually in the darkest moments of suffering and sorrow that our most profound growth and learning occurs.  And that suffering is not to be avoided at all costs, but entered into and even embraced.

You have taught me to understand that asking “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” is to ask the wrong question—a better question is “Why is there not more suffering in the world?”  You have taught me that every time a child is born completely healthy it is a miracle, given the unbelievably complex and numerous range of things that could have gone wrong but didn’t.

You have taught me that just because you despise exercise does not mean you are a bad person.

You have taught me that your boundless ‘optimism’ is more than that—less optimism and more a gift of faith.  The ability to see possibilities that no one else can yet see.  Your mindset of being quick to forgive, and unwilling to hold a grudge has helped me understand that we really do “become what we think”—neuro-plasticity, the ability of the brain to create new pathways is something we can be intentional about, rejecting thoughts that give death and choosing to reflect on those that give life.

And, last but not least…you have taught this former (yes, former) extrovert that you did not just need to be ‘more extroverted’ or more outgoing, and that introverts like yourself are not socially handicapped when they spend much of the party hiding in the kitchen doing the dishes.

Happy anniversary, my love.

-Andy