

Your Intercultural Marriage: A Guide to a Healthy, Happy Relationship

Chapter One

Discovering the Joys and Benefits of Intercultural Marriage

A successful marriage requires falling in love many times,
always with the same person.

—Mignon McLaughlin¹

My wedding day had finally arrived. My handsome groom, Catalin, and I stood before the mayor of the city of Falticeni, Romania, while he performed our ceremony. Then we led the wedding procession back to his family's home, where my mother-in-law served a sumptuous wedding feast. Each course could have been an entire meal in itself: silver trays of carefully arranged aperitifs; tender slabs of steak, roast beef, and ham; platters piled high with traditional Romanian meat-and-rice rolls called *salmale*; and my favorite: the lovely, deceptively light, filled pastries. Each selection was a work of art unto itself, almost too pretty to eat.

As the crowning touch, my husband's mother dimmed the lights in the dining room and brought out a seven-layer cake glowing with a ring of lighted candles. On top of the cake, the words *CASA DE PIATRA* were spelled out in flowing script. Not familiar with this Romanian phrase, I asked my husband what it meant. "House like a Rock," he said. "It's the greatest wedding blessing that we could receive."

So simple, yet so profound: House like a Rock. At that moment, God impressed on my heart that a house like a rock can only be a house built on *The Rock*—Jesus Christ. A marriage that lasts will be anchored to the foundation of God’s Word. Jesus said, “If you work [My] words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. . . . But if you don’t work them into your life, you are like a foolish carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.” (Matthew 7:24–27 *The Message*)

Ever built a lavish sand castle on a beach? For six years during my childhood, I lived in Fort Myers, Florida. I loved building intricate sand castles, complete with moats, drawbridges, and always a special tower for the princess. But no matter how lofty or beautiful the structure, the tide never failed to come in and wash it away. At first, the seawater lapped gently at the foundation. Then the tide began to steal bits of sand. Next, the base of the castle started to sag toward the Gulf. Eventually, the entire structure washed away, leaving behind only the memory of all the time I had invested into building my dream home.

Sadly, I’ve met many intercultural couples who have built their marriages on sinking sand instead of cementing them to the solid foundation of God’s Word. Like a little girl’s sand castles, their homes are at risk of toppling and being washed out to sea unless they discover the absolute importance of building their marriages on the Rock of Ages—Jesus Christ.

On the day of our wedding, Catalin and I stood transfixed as we looked in each other's eyes. We felt the same bliss that many couples share on their wedding day; finally, we'd found that perfect person to complete us.

Years later, we're still deeply in love with each other. But we've discovered that intercultural marriage is a lifelong building project. The idealism and naïveté that caused us such euphoria on our wedding day has been replaced by deeper wisdom and a commitment to love each other despite difficult obstacles. We've laughed over misunderstandings—and we've cried over them, too. My desire is to share our experiences and the stories of hundreds of other intercultural couples with you so that you'll be equipped with the blueprint and the tools to build your house on the Rock as well.

Forget about 50/50 . . . Marriage is a Covenant

Since Catalin and I married, I've discovered that the world's concept of marriage and God's concept of marriage couldn't be more different. The world says, "Marriage is a 50/50 proposition." God's view of marriage says, "I pledge to give you one hundred percent, even if you can't give me anything in return." The world says, "Marriage is a legal business contract that can be voided if we encounter 'irreconcilable differences.'" God says, "Marriage is a sacred covenant" (Gen. 2:18□25; Matt. 19:3□9). And have you ever noticed that Scripture doesn't mention *anything* about irreconcilable differences?

Intercultural marriage involves a sacred, binding covenant made between God and two people from different cultures, countries, or ethnic groups. And it's a covenant that

the Lord wants us to keep—but keeping it isn't easy. For a few years, my husband and I coasted along as smoothly as an Olympic ice-skating pair. But the past few years of our marriage have required us to do some deeper soul-searching. As a result, we've grown in wisdom, faith, maturity, and patience, and we wouldn't trade our rich intercultural partnership for the world.

Intercultural couples may experience more conflict than the average couple. However, they also experience extraordinary benefits as a result of their willingness to take that leap of faith. In my conversations with intercultural couples from all over the globe, I've identified a multitude of blessings that intercultural couples receive as the result of their partnerships. Whether your journey is just beginning or you've been married for fifty years, keep these benefits in mind during the days ahead.

The Joys and Benefits of Intercultural Marriage

Appreciating Other Cultures and Overcoming Stereotypes

Intercultural couples have the opportunity to cultivate a greater appreciation for other cultures. In her book *Intercultural Marriage: Promises & Pitfalls*, Dugan Romano writes, "Because of exposure to different customs, ceremonies, languages, and countries, most couples felt that they had enriched their daily lives in a way which would probably not have been possible with someone from the same background. They often felt that life with a 'foreigner' was more consistently interesting because it was more varied and unpredictable."² Catalin and I have grown to appreciate the ways in which our cultures differ. With each new stamp we've received on our passports, we've collected funny

stories, valuable experiences, and priceless memories, and our lives have gained greater vitality.

Marrying a person from another culture also provides couples with the impetus to overcome their personal stereotypes. Intercultural marriage (and the experience of interacting with people in different cultures) brings to the surface deeply seated prejudices and assumptions that most people don't even realize that they possess. Here's a funny example of prejudice from early in our marriage. My husband writes certain numbers (such as 1, 4, and 9) differently than most Americans do. Once, when he and I visited the university library, he wrote down our phone number for the librarian. She looked at the number and asked him, "Why do you make your '4s' so funny?"

He replied matter-of-factly, "Why do you make *yours* so funny?" I burst out laughing. He had a point: Who says that the way we Americans write the number 4 is "right"? In fact, neither way is necessarily correct; they're just *different*. But we tend to conclude, "My way is right; yours is wrong." Intercultural couples learn quickly that they must change this way of thinking in order to achieve harmony in their marriages.

When I married Catalin, I learned that the American way of doing things is *a way* of doing things, not necessarily the *right* way. I also learned that God is not American, and neither is Christianity. When we open our minds and hearts to these truths, our relationships with others improve in all areas of our lives.

Gaining a Multicultural Family and Children

Another benefit of intercultural marriage is the blessing of gaining a multicultural family and rearing multicultural children. While children of intercultural couples may

encounter some challenges that typical children don't face, they also reap rich rewards as a result of their intercultural heritage. One intercultural couple, Dorrie and Hiroshi, said of their bicultural children: "They grew up with a global worldview and are just naturally sensitive to the nuances of different cultures; [we] like to think that the world is in their hands—that the time for the true multiculturalist has come, and these kids are born culture-brokers."³

Kim, a child born to intercultural parents, categorizes herself as "Australian-Swiss-Vietnamese." She writes: "As a child of a multicultural family, I have many challenges, opportunities, and aspirations. I am entitled to a rich, diverse life. Having parents from different cultures has broadened my horizons so that I see life through many perspectives. I do not see myself any longer as different, but as unique. My uniqueness allows me to be a part of the human race without total loss of individuality. I try to accept, acknowledge, and be three cultures within one person. Having intercultural parents teaches you a lot about love, life . . . the universe."⁴

The Stretching of Minds and Challenging of Worldviews

Intercultural marriage offers couples and their children the chance to have their minds stretched and their worldviews challenged. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "Man's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."⁵ A worldview is like a pair of glasses; it colors how we see and interpret reality. When we choose to marry a person from another culture, we learn to take off our own "worldview glasses" and take a fresh look at the world through our partner's lenses. We begin to understand why that person thinks, talks, and acts the way he or she does. We also have

the opportunity to address the differences between reality and various cultures’
perceptions of that reality.

More Opportunities for Ministry and International Travel

Intercultural couples also gain greater opportunities to be involved with missions and other ministries. My husband and I met while working for an orphan ministry in Romania. We love children, and we know how much God loves them too. Catalin and I feel a special affinity for the children of the world who have been hurt, abused, and abandoned. God has used our shared experiences in orphan ministry in Romania to forge a powerful bond between us. We are now able to minister to intercultural couples in the States. When we meet people here who have emigrated from Romania, we can connect with them and encourage them in their marriages.

Many intercultural couples enjoy the desire (and have a reason) to travel more often. A number of individuals who choose intercultural marriage in the first place are “international souls” who have grown up in other countries or cultures and already feel comfortable traveling from place to place and adjusting to the customs and mores of different cultures. Since we married, Catalin and I have had the opportunity to travel throughout Europe and tour his homeland of Romania. Because I’ve always enjoyed traveling and having the chance to learn new languages and discover other cultures, intercultural marriage was a natural fit for me. It may be for you as well!

Intercultural couples also enjoy developing an international identity. Many of them spend time jet-setting from culture to culture. I recently met a young woman named Daniela from the Czech Republic who is dating a Romanian man. Both of them live in

Switzerland. They can easily make the transition from speaking Czech to German to French to English to Romanian and then back again. People like Daniela feel comfortable traveling to almost any place or culture because of their natural ability to cross language and cultural barriers.

Expanding Our Horizons

As a result of the intercultural partnership that Catalin and I have formed, our personal and spiritual horizons have expanded considerably. We see the vast scope of God's redemptive work in the world as He uses ordinary, fallible people like us to show others His plan of salvation through Christ. Both Catalin and I have grown to understand more of God's power and sovereignty, and we're amazed that He is so intimately concerned with the details of our lives. We've also gained a stronger sense of His profound love for all people, no matter their skin color, language, culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or worldview.

Another benefit that intercultural couples reap is the opportunity to learn one or more new languages. Catalin worked as a translator for Buckner Orphan Care International and already spoke excellent English when he arrived in the United States, so he had an advantage. But I have learned some Romanian by reading books and listening to tapes, as well as by spending time talking with Catalin and his family on each trip we take to Romania. My love for my husband's beautiful Latin-based language has provided a powerful motivation for me to continue to learn to speak it.

Affirming Each Other's Identity

Intercultural marriage provides us a forum for affirming each other's identity and saying, "You matter to me and to God." We gain the opportunity to encourage and affirm our spouse's experiences, identity, language, family, and culture. Catalin and I live in constant awe that God could bring together two people from half a world away and bond us so closely in heart, soul, body, and spirit. The Lord has granted us a unique, powerful love story that we enjoy sharing with others.

Greater Reliance on God

Christian intercultural couples also gain the opportunity to develop greater reliance on God, which is necessary for a fruitful, Christ-centered marriage. All marriages experience cycles of ebb and flow. Every marriage partner enjoys the high points—the times when the relationship just seems to click. But we're also called to remain committed through the low points, when conflict, depression, dissatisfaction, and other issues may cause us to question our relationship and our choice of marital partner. It doesn't take long for each partner to discover that—surprise!—his or her mate is not perfect. When that lightbulb flashes on, disillusionment sets in.

But often, a positive spiritual result can emerge from this disillusionment. It can motivate couples to attend church more regularly or become involved in small groups, Bible studies, MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups, or other ministries. They may feel the need to pray more, both individually and with their spouses. They might seek marriage counseling or advice from others. They may read marriage books to help improve their relationship.

As intercultural couples face hardships, they begin to understand that no flawed, sinful person can meet all of their needs in this life. *Only God can do that.* In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the apostle Paul wrote, “He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Our weaknesses provide us with the opportunity to look to God to meet our deepest needs as He molds us into godlier, more mature spouses.

The “Exotic” Factor

For me, as a hopeless romantic, the most enjoyable aspect of intercultural marriage has been the romance. I call this the “exotic” factor. I loved the mystique of falling head-over-heels for a godly and stunning young man from the mysterious nation of Romania. The intrigue of cross-cultural love made the experience compelling and supercharged with excitement—making it different from every other dating relationship I had been in. Discovering more about my husband’s background, country, language, family, and experiences fascinated me. To this day, Catalin’s stories about life in Romania and the country’s rich history continue to captivate me and those we meet. Like an archaeologist unearthing treasures from a long-lost empire, I still enjoy discovering new facets of my husband’s personality and culture.

A Stronger Commitment

Many intercultural couples develop a diamond-tough commitment to their marriages because of the hard work needed and adversity they have to overcome just to

be together. The endless stacks of paperwork, the family conflicts, the wedding planning, the fervent prayers for visas to be approved, the difficulties of long-distance communication, the miles of governmental red tape—these require intercultural couples to fight for their marriage before it even begins. This creates a strong bond among intercultural couples that many other couples don't have the opportunity to forge.

A Sense of Adventure

No doubt about it—intercultural marriage is an adventure! Intercultural couples experience the thrill of knowing what it's like to do something “outside of the box.”

I've never considered myself an adventurous person, so I was surprised when one friend commented, “You're so brave to have gone to another country and married Catalin!” I had never thought of it that way. I had simply been available for God to use for His purposes, and He led me to my husband in a way that I never anticipated. By being willing to take this leap of faith, I've seen the Lord build my strength, courage, and character as He has prepared me for a fruitful ministry of writing, speaking, and encouraging others.

When God called Abraham to travel to an unknown land, Abraham didn't say, “Send someone else, God.” He said, “I'll go.” And the entire world was blessed by his obedience. As a result of our willingness to take the intercultural leap of faith, we may have the opportunity to take the gospel into a culture where it is not often heard.

Identifying with Jesus Christ

As people who have been called to cross boundaries of nation, ethnicity, culture, and language, we have the privilege of identifying with Jesus Christ, who left His Father in heaven to live on earth as the Son of God. Philippians 2:7 tells us that Jesus “emptied Himself [of glory], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” And Isaiah 53:3 says, “He was despised and forsaken of men, / A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

When we, our spouses, and our children suffer from the lack of understanding expressed by the world, we get a small glimpse of the suffering that Christ experienced on earth. That helps us to identify with Christ and to develop greater compassion for others who have been mistreated, disenfranchised, and alienated. Ironically, many of the heroes and heroines of the Christian faith experienced intense alienation. In fact, the term *Hebrew* in the Old Testament literally meant “foreigner.” The book of Hebrews reminds us: “By faith [Abraham] lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise” (Hebrews 11:9).

God has always had a special affinity for outsiders. He often reminded His people to take care of those who were hurt, lonely, poor, and sick. He told them, “Show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19).

As we identify with Christ and the fellowship of His sufferings, we recognize that He came to earth, died on the cross, and rose from the dead in order to make a way for people of *all* nations, tribes, tongues, and cultures to be reconciled to a holy God. Paul wrote in Ephesians, “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups

into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall. . . . So then *you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household*" (Ephesians 2:13–14, 19).

The blessings (and the struggles) that we face in intercultural marriage provide us with a platform for modeling Christ's sacrificial love to our spouses, families, and friends. By being kind and patient with our spouses and children, hanging on to our sense of humor, lovingly working through problems, actively listening to other's stories, and sharing our life experience with others, we demonstrate how God has "broken down the dividing wall" and made all who call on Him brothers and sisters in Christ.

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Quotes for Reflection

The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man.”

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

—Genesis 2:22–24

Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments.

—Deuteronomy 7:9

Movies to Watch

- *Maid in Manhattan*, starring Jennifer Lopez and Ralph Fiennes (2002, Rated PG-13)
- *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, starring Nia Vardalos and John Corbett (2002, Rated PG)
- *Shall We Dance?*, starring Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez (2004, Rated PG-13)

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