



## **X Incontro Mondiale delle Famiglie**

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## **BETRAYAL AND FORGIVENESS** Stephen and Sandra Conway - South Africa - Panel 3.2





## **BETRAYAL AND FORGIVENESS**

Stephen and Sandra Conway  
Retrouvaille  
Vatican City, June 2022

We are Stephen and Sandra from Durban, South Africa. We represent Retrouvaille, a ministry for troubled marriages. The program consists of a live-in weekend followed by 12 follow-up sessions.

Retrouvaille looks at four stages of marriage – romance, disillusionment, misery (where our betrayal took place) and finally joy. In the romance stage the focus is on the other person and any faults are ignored or overlooked. This romance stage does not last forever and couples may soon find themselves being disillusioned with little annoyances that start creeping in. Disillusionment can lead to misery where all problems faced are blamed on the other person and life becomes a living hell.

### **SANDRA**

How couples can move from this misery to the joy stage includes making the heroic decisions to love, to trust again and to forgive.

We are now going to share our personal story with you, based on the concepts of Retrouvaille.

### **STEPHEN**

The romance stage of our marriage began when I first met Sandra one morning at her home. I was friendly with her brother and was at university with him. After a night out on the town with him I ended up back at his house and slept on the couch. Sandra brought me breakfast in the morning and I was attracted to her straight away, I felt a surge of adrenaline flow through my body on meeting Sandra and my heart skipped a few beats.

Sandra was initially a very shy and soft person but as she opened up to me and allowed me into her inner circle I saw that she had a lot of insight and was truly a beautiful person. When Sandra turned 21 we got engaged – which was also the day before I went to military service for two years. I left and was already counting the days when I would be home to get married - to spend the rest of my life, with the love of my life. I felt sad knowing that I would be away for 2 years but also hopeful as I knew Sandra was waiting for me. Sadness was the strongest feeling. As a physical image my sad feeling was similar to having a heavy heart. On a scale of 1 to 10 my sad feeling was a 10 and an image of my sad feeling would be similar to relatives at the funeral of a loved one.



SANDRA

I remember the first time I met Stephen - he came home with my brother from a week-end down the South Coast. I made breakfast for my family and felt anxious and excited, including Stephen in the meal. Soon after that, Stephen seemed to be visiting more often. My heart used to race in my chest with excitement, knowing that Stephen was coming to visit – and he certainly knew how to charm me. We soon could not be separated and would spend all our time together. I remember how my family used to say that Stephen could not keep his eyes off me. When Stephen had to go to the army, I thought I would never cope, not being able to see him and be with him, as we had become inseparable. I used to wait anxiously for his calls and looked forward to his letters in the mail. On my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, Stephen and I got engaged and were married 2 years later.

STEPHEN

In the early years of our marriage I began to get upset with Sandra over various issues but did not communicate this to her most of the time. She was very close to her family and I often thought she was more concerned about their needs than mine. This often left me resentful and annoyed and I became bitter towards Sandra and her family.

SANDRA

Despite Stephen being quite a social person, he was very quiet at home. I found myself thinking that I had to drag everything out of him, to get any action. Out with his friends at the running club or football, he never stopped talking and drinking. His quietness at home began to irritate me.

STEPHEN

We faced the second stage of marriage when I became disillusioned about the future and where I saw our marriage going. My perception that Sandra put her family first came to a head when her dad got sick with Parkinson disease and he was forced to leave work. It was decided that Sandra's folks should move into our home. I was finding it more and more difficult to be at home. I felt insignificant and unimportant. Sexually it was also frustrating. Our house is not a big one and it was impossible to get romantic for fear of someone walking in or making too much noise. In this period I drifted and withdrew more and more.



SANDRA

I began to realise that I was not happy with myself. I was too shy and reserved and did not enjoy going to the running club and being amongst people I did not know. I thought I was no longer special in Stephen's eyes and was ignored. I started to feel more self conscious, scared and jealous. Like a kitten frightened by the bigger cat, I wanted to run and hide away.

STEPHEN

Sandra's mom and dad stayed with us for close to seven years before he passed away and a married single's lifestyle was very much set in by this stage.

The married singles lifestyle is a slow, innocently-begun, and in many cases, an unconscious change in behavior after marriage, rather than an outright decision to live an independent and self-centered existence. It can develop because of the attitudes that we sometimes bring into marriage which start a gradual trend where we begin thinking more of our own interests, rather than those of our spouse. It begins, not because we want to spite the other person, but simply because we think we might be happier pursuing our own goals; and we don't see any real harm to our marriage because of this attitude. Then over the years this change in thinking becomes prevalent; and it seems normal that we are no longer doing things together or spending time together.

I had become very involved in the running club and became chairman giving me a sense of acknowledgement. A relatively new lady in our running club joined Sandra's work and was looking to train with someone for an ultra marathon and she joined our running group. I started running more and more with this person and over a period of time our running relationship moved to a different level and we began having an affair. I threw our marriage into the third stage of misery. Things came to a head when Sandra went on holiday with her Mom to her brothers overseas. I was seen by some of Sandra's work colleagues with this woman and my daughter read some messages on my phone. A very emotional and upset Sandra called me from overseas and I confessed that I had been seeing this person. We planned to talk when Sandra returned and during those days of waiting for her to get back I was filled with guilt and fear.

SANDRA

At the running club one evening, I sensed something was wrong. Stephen kept looking at another girl sitting with myself and her husband. I confronted Stephen that night about it and he denied what I had seen. My heart was in my stomach and I reacted with aggression and tears. I



continued to feel uneasy and eventually one night, I picked up his cell phone and opened a message he had just received from that very person I had considered to be a friend and colleague. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I had sleepless nights, horrible days and hours of being sick in the stomach. I cried out to my family saying that no-ones knows the feeling of not being wanted anymore. It was as though my world was ending.

#### STEPHEN

After Sandra returned from overseas, I moved out for a few days and on returning home, I still did not know what I wanted. Sandra and our daughter asked me to do the program before any decision was made. I reluctantly said yes leaving the final details for Sandra to do.

During the Retrouvaille weekend I learnt the techniques of dialogue and the need to ask for forgiveness. Dialogue is a way to communicate your feelings in a safe environment. It teaches us that feelings are neither right nor wrong – they are just reactions to a person, place or event. One can for example feel angry and that is okay. It is what the person does with that anger that makes it right or wrong.

I wanted to be forgiven but battled with the process of how to do this. I found it difficult to say the words. I also judged that the only way I could demonstrate a sincere desire for forgiveness would be through my actions and deeds. I had to build up trust again. I was also battling to forgive myself. I had hurt my wife of 21 years and our daughter too – I had done wrong and thought how can I possibly forgive myself? I was going through internal torture but more than any pain I had ever experienced, even worse than having route canal treatment with no anaesthetic. I was full of remorse and guilt and would often find myself crying while driving the car on my own or sitting quietly in my office at work. I judged that

I did not deserve to be forgiven. For healing to take place, I learnt the process started by asking for forgiveness. I knew that the healing process would not happen overnight but soon after our weekend, during a dialogue session, I asked Sandra for forgiveness and I had started the process.

Asking for forgiveness is not merely saying I am sorry. Saying I am sorry still leaves you having the power but asking for forgiveness means you become vulnerable - the power is transferred to the other person who can forgive but who can also say no. However, for true healing to take place one has to let go of the pain - it cannot be the focus of all your attention



SANDRA

I had forgiven Stephen before but this time, it was hard to forgive. I knew I had to. I believed Stephen did not realise what it took for me to forgive. I began to think about my responsibility in our relationship reaching this point. It seemed to me Stephen never shared his feelings and when he did I ignored them by putting others and my work first. I believed it to be okay if I was busy doing work and church activities. Stephen had never asked for forgiveness, although he had said he was sorry.

I was also reminded of Jesus, who gives us the good news of a loving and forgiving Father. Jesus, who loved the sinner and forgave the sin, who befriended prostitutes and tax collectors, who showed compassion for the weak and who healed the sick. There are so many examples of forgiveness in Scripture, the sinner who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, the rejoicing over the lost sheep returning to the fold, Dismas the good thief, the woman taken in adultery whom Jesus saved from being stoned to death.

A saying that has really touched me and brought the importance of the victim giving forgiveness is by Louis Smead who said "TO FORGIVE IT TO SET A PRISONER FREE – ONLY TO REALISE THAT THE PRISONER IS ME".

FORGIVENESS WON'T CHANGE THE PAST, BUT WILL SURELY CHANGE THE FUTURE.

STEPHEN

As I experienced Sandra's forgiveness, our relationship continued to heal and I have been able to forgive myself. We still have our moments, but through the techniques learnt at RETROUVAILLE we handle problems differently and resolve issues a lot easier. The healing process does not work overnight but by working on it day by day changes do occur and things do get smoother.

SANDRA

At lunch time one day, I told Stephen that he had never asked me for forgiveness. For the first time, he openly shared his feelings on the subject and said that he just thought that he had. The healing process took many months and there are still times now, when I have bad days. The difference is now I can talk to Stephen more openly about this and he can help me deal with what is bothering me. When we realise we are not doing things as we have been shown in Retrouvaille, we acknowledge that fact and try to make things right, using the tools we have been given.



STEPHEN

We had moved into the 4<sup>th</sup> stage of marriage – joy. In the joy stage we no longer focus on ourselves as individuals but now on us as a couple- unified in the true meaning of love. It is in this stage that we realise that love is not a feeling but in fact it is a decision. You can decide to love despite how you are feeling. A Retrouvaille priest often uses the following scenario to illustrate this point. When couples have a young baby it is easy to love the child at 10am in the morning when the child has been fed and changed and is smiling away. But at 2am when you are tired and need sleep for work the next day and your child is teething and crying the house down it is not so easy to love him or her. But you make the decision to love and get out of your warm bed despite the tired and irritated feelings you may have.

Also necessary to move onto the joy stage is the need to forgive and to ask for forgiveness for any hurt you may have inflicted on your spouse.

We also need to make the decision to trust again, despite our feelings. If trust is given then the other spouse needs to act trustworthy.

SANDRA

The statements that stood out for me, after doing the weekend and follow-up sessions, were “feelings are neither right nor wrong” and you have to be responsible for your own feelings.

Doing the follow-up sessions helped me feel secure in the knowledge that we were both continuing the journey and the healing process. We dialogued almost every day and we grew closer, slowly but surely. It seemed to me that I had the old Stephen back.

STEPHEN

I learnt techniques and tools on the RETROUVAILLE weekend which have been very helpful. Sandra and I continued to learn and grow by attending the follow-up sessions that followed our weekend and for me this is where the real work started. Yes there are times when the going gets tough but having a desire to make our marriage work we try and work through these times and have a positive attitude that we can make it happen. In the follow-up sessions we continued to share our journey. Using the support of the RETROUVAILLE family and dialogue the journey forward is made easier. We know that we are not alone in this continuous journey.



Crises and hurt in marriage can be dealt with and although the 4 stages of marriage can be repeated again and again each time couples will be more equipped to recognize where they are and hopefully a deeper love and understanding will be reached in the joy stage of marriage.

Compare with pronounced text