

When You Fight for Someone to Live

Editor's Note: Bo Stern's husband is fighting a rare disease called ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

People sometimes dance around questions with me about marriage and terminal illness. They wonder how it changes things, if it changes things. I think it does and it doesn't.

We are who we have always been inside. We have always been careful fighters. We watch our words because we've learned in 28 years that it's really hard to take them back. But while we're careful, we have not had a conflict-free marriage. Not by a long shot. And we still don't.

This seems to surprise people who assume a terminal diagnosis is such a game-changer that nothing is now worth fighting over. I get that. I would have thought so too, but it's not true. At least, not for us.

We still sometimes fight because this diagnosis did not fully dismantle our humanity, which came pre-loaded with the desire to be right and to get our own way. While it's true that fewer things matter now than before, there is also the added pressure of sorrow and strain that accompanies ALS that tends to heighten the emotion connected to the things that do matter. The result is that an argument can escalate quite quickly and unexpectedly. I am neither proud nor ashamed of this; it just is because we are real people, made of dust and lost without grace.

So, yeah, we argue like we used to. But we also stay mindful of what matters in ways that we didn't before. We hang on to beautiful moments with both hands, and sometimes I can feel us both recording them in our memories for a day when we'll need them.

I write things down in a sacred, secret journal, one I will

never share with the world outside our marriage, and sometimes I wonder if I'll ever have the courage to go back and read it myself. But I write it down because, no matter what the future holds, I will want to relive the story of the friendship God has given me with a man I do not deserve.

This memory-keeping, secret-holding part of our marriage is new and beautiful and not without pain, but it's the right kind of pain. It's the pain that reminds you you're still living. Like a sharp pinch on the skin, it tells you you're still awake, still in the game, still a part of a brilliant team. It reminds you the only reason this journey is so gut-wrenchingly difficult is because you've built something you really, really don't want to lose.

The statistics on couples divorcing after a terminal diagnosis are grim and tragic. It makes my stomach hurt to think of it. But I do believe that any sort of Really Big Battle in a marriage mostly makes that marriage more of what it was before the battle.

Suffering makes the hard harder and the lovely lovelier and the tempers hotter and the forgiveness sweeter. And however difficult this fight, we're in it together in a way we've never been together in anything before, together every breath this side of eternity.

I think Steve would agree that knowing we may not have all the time in the world has made us better people and better at marriage. If I could bottle up the "better" without the battle, I surely would. I would package up these feelings of deep appreciation and love for the life we share, and I would give it to every couple just now saying "I do."

I would give it to them for the days that go bad, for the fights that aren't careful, for the words that land hard. Because this appreciation doesn't keep those things from happening; it just changes how we respond to them. And that, friends, is the real game-changer.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released *Beautiful Battlefields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.