

Acknowledgements

The story of writing *Love Stronger* began in November of 2022 while having lunch with a friend. He asked me what I was interested in doing next and I lamented that I wanted to do another Love Stronger Men's group but didn't have the capacity. He suggested that I write a book to help men instead. My mind popped. I was surprised because I had been running men's groups since 2017 and I had not thought of writing a book before. I jumped on this idea immediately and thought about who could help me.

Sometimes when you know someone for a long time you can lose sight of who they have become. For instance, my sister, Sylvia Thomson, is not the same person I grew up with. She used to be just my annoying little sister and then over the years, she was the sibling who struggled with many of life's challenges. Despite this, she became a Public Relations Specialist, a Social Service Worker and a writer. I admire how she's always honoured her artistic self and kept drawing and writing and eventually became a published author.

That is why I reached out to her. Sylvia is a writer's coach, and an author. We talked and she agreed to help me write the book, hold me accountable and guide me through the process. We began meeting weekly discussing what the workshop would look like as a book, which is when I realized that I needed to run the group again so that I could gain a fresher perspective on the whole concept of Love Stronger. In January 2023 we ran another 10-week Love Stronger Workshop with 17 men.

The Love Stronger workshop finished in early April. Sylvia and I outlined the book with the new insights I'd gained and I thought, "This is great, I will rest a bit in April and get busy writing from May to August and 'boom' the book will be done!" Well, it didn't quite happen that way. I went on a holiday to visit family in Ontario and while I was there I fell and broke my left elbow and wrist.

Oooouuuccchhh!

I could no longer type or write and for months I was in a lot of pain. I learned how to use speech-to-type, which can be quite hilarious at times to hear the recordings. That's when Sylvia stepped up and became more than just a coach. We continued to meet online weekly to discuss each principle or practice and she transcribed our conversations into something readable. I really could not have accomplished this without Sylvia. The workbook you are now holding is complete because of our collaboration. It has my ideas, stories, and inspiration, blended with Sylvia's ideas and talent. In order to acknowledge her contributions to the project, it would be right to say that I wrote this with her. We did it together and I am so grateful for her input and investment in this workbook.

About the Author

What Does a Carpenter Know About Love?

Before we get into the nuts and bolts of how to *Love Stronger*, you should know a little about me and my love story. I was 16 in 1980, when the economy had tanked in Ontario. My dad lost his business and needed to find work. At the time, one of my other sisters lived in Calgary, Alberta where things were booming. She told my dad about a connection there and he found some carpentry work. My dad asked me to think about coming with him and I decided to join. The truth is, that winter and spring of 1980 was a lonely and difficult time for me.

Dad and I were hired by Herb Styles to do a lot of carpentry work at a youth ranch in central Alberta called Salem Acres. We arrived on June 4th, 1980 and got right to work.

Then I saw her face...

Thanks to my sister, Susannah-Joy was anticipating my arrival. Her smiling eyes made my heart throb. She already knew my name and even how to spell it. She was happy to meet me and soon she sought me out every chance she could. We connected on every level as often as possible. We couldn't get enough of each other – not just in a crazy, hormonal teenage way. This was different. Our friendship was unconditional; I felt love and acceptance for the very first time.

Her beauty, her smiling eyes, and her curiosity about all things just drove me crazy. I was attracted to her and she *definitely* had my attention. I began pursuing her like I had never pursued any other girl. Of course, this caused problems with her family, who were very protective of their daughter. My dad was concerned too, but with a twinkling in his eye, he just told me to be careful.

We met in June, and by the middle of August, I remember the exact moment when I decided she was the girl for me and I was going to pursue her no matter what. Unfortunately, we didn't have long together before her parents encouraged me to leave the ranch because of the distraction I was causing Susannah-Joy. By this time, our family had settled in Calgary, so I moved home and looked for carpentry work in the city. Susannah-Joy and I stayed in touch by writing letters to each other.

It wasn't long before her father encouraged her to break up with me because we didn't have the same religious beliefs. He told her this was very important in order to have a good relationship. So, reluctantly and sadly, she wrote me a Dear Bill letter. Needless to say, I had the worst winter of my life.

Although I knew she and her dad were right, I wasn't going to change my beliefs just to get the girl! I kept going to church, searching for the truth, but I also wasted time in pool halls, pizza joints, and movie theatres, hanging out with a few friends who were unhelpful in my character development.

By February 1981, I'd had enough of the wild life. I wanted a spiritual life and became a believer in Jesus Christ. Life began to make sense. I was experiencing a new part of me that brought so much joy and peace into my heart. I also met a few great men and women who helped me understand how to make good decisions for a faithful and wholehearted life.

***This book is not an attempt to proselytize or convert anyone. My faith is a part of my journey and being transparent about who I am is important to me. So I will speak about my spirituality from time to time.*

Susannah-Joy found out about my new journey (thanks to my sister again) and immediately phoned me. Our relationship was quickly rekindled and with a hesitant blessing from her father, we started dating seriously.

A year later, we were very serious and wanted to get married. Most everyone thought it was too soon, especially her dad. He had extreme difficulty with the idea of his daughter getting married at 18 years of age to a man who was also 18. But we were so determined that we didn't let anybody stop us. We finally just sent everybody wedding invitations and decided they could show up if they wanted to.



So that's what we did. At 18, we boldly declared our independence by getting married on May 21, 1982, and telling our parents, "We are gonna do this whether you participate or not". I know — it's kind of rude and disrespectful, but that's how we did it. We're thankful Susannah-Joy's parents are gracious and forgiving and chose to attend, as did my parents. I'm skipping over a lot of details, but to summarize, the first couple of years in Western Canada were good for me. I arrived, found the love of my life, and found a new love for God. I also began my carpentry career, and got married.

After the wedding ceremony, in the Receiving Line, my dad said, "Well, I hope you know what you're doing." Not exactly the vote of confidence I was hoping for. And my new father-in-law? He barely looked at me as he passed by and in tears, hugged his daughter before leaving. We were happy. We went off to our beautiful new apartment in downtown Calgary and started the honeymoon. Love is blind; it truly is.

Then, by my calculations, it was about 77 hours later that I was no longer blind. We were enjoying our long weekend honeymoon and on Monday night, my lovely new bride had done an amazing job cooking a delightful dinner for us. She called me to the table and dished out some pork chops, mashed potatoes and some beautiful green vegetables, drenched in cheese sauce.

I asked her, "What are those green things?"

"Broccoli," she replied.

"That's not broccoli."

"Yes, it is."

"No," I contested. "That is not broccoli."

Her voice changed a bit and with eyebrows raised she retorted, "Yes. It. Is!"

An argument over broccoli quickly became very heated. It was our first fight and I had no idea what to do. So I left.

That's right. I left the apartment. I walked outside in a daze. I remember walking along the river thinking, 'Oh my goodness, what have I done? I just walked out on my new bride! What a mess I have made. I do not know what I'm doing. What a mess I have made!'

I really blew it. I felt all alone, and a little scared. I didn't think my dad would help me or could help me, because he was not the kind of man to admit when he was wrong or to say things like 'I love you' or 'I'm sorry.' I couldn't remember ever hearing him say either and I certainly wasn't going to get my father-in-law's help, because, well, we weren't really on good speaking terms.

I remembered the vows Susannah-Joy and I had so recently made to each other and thought of my commitment to her, I was stuck and didn't know what to do. So I prayed to God, "Please help me. I have no idea how to do this." The wisdom I received at that moment was to just get back in there and apologize. Simple, but not easy. I walked back into the apartment, head hanging low, ready to face my reality. It was empty. My mind raced as I searched the very small space. Oh no! Where did she go?

I figured out that she went up to the rooftop where there was a hot tub. So, I put my bathing suit on and went to find her. She was sitting quietly in the hot tub. She didn't look at me at first. I joined her in the hot tub and we talked a little bit. I sort of apologized and she forgave me. When we were back in the apartment, I discovered that it most certainly was broccoli in that cheese sauce.

To be clear, I had never seen broccoli in its true form. Anytime my mother cooked vegetables, she boiled them in water endlessly and it usually just turned out to be a mushy substance (all green vegetables looked similar to me). So, I honestly did not know what broccoli looked like in its natural state. It became very evident that I had married a most excellent cook.

My wife and I can laugh about it now, but the event showed me that there was a huge discrepancy between my ability to be a husband, and my desire to be there for her according to the vows I had just promised her. Also, I could ruin everything . . . very quickly!

We had a rough beginning, but it pointed out my need and desire to become a great husband and, eventually, a father too. I began learning: through books, trial and error, prayer, observation of others, and especially from my wife, how to *Love Stronger*.

As a professional counsellor for the past 20 years, I have heard stories from many men struggling with various mental health challenges or their marriages and other personal relationships. Their struggle to find intimacy revealed a true desire to be loved and to love others. The problem was that they didn't know where to begin, nor did they have the skills.

This motivated my wife and I to create a workshop to help men learn how to develop healthy relationships. We called it *Love Stronger*. We began by offering it to our clients in small groups and tweaked the material to make sure it was meeting the needs of the men in our current culture. As we progressed, it became clear that many more men could use these practical skills, so we began offering *Love Stronger* to the wider community.

After running several 10-week workshops over a few years, I was having lunch with a good friend of mine, Phil Hay, who encouraged me to write a book. I realized then that a book would go further and we could teach more men the *Love Stronger* Practices. I was excited at the prospect of empowering this generation of men, and the next to love others in deep and meaningful ways. That book has become the *Love Stronger* workbook to supporting men like you, as you navigate your relationships and become a stronger lover.

What Do I Mean By Love Stronger?

My passion and purpose for this book.

Many of us know how to let somebody know that we are attracted to them. But our partners also want to feel belonging, to feel protected, to feel cherished, to feel desired and to feel precious. Unfortunately, we don't always know how to love in a nurturing, and empowering manner. There is also one important factor that most of us never think about... and it is the other reason I want and need to get this book into the hands of as many men as possible. We need to learn to Love Stronger...

Because *they* first loved us.

Most of us were first loved by a woman in a deeply sacrificial way. For most mothers, it was a give-it-all-you-got, hold-nothing-back, unconditional loving-kindness for nine months in the womb. We were born in love and continued to be loved without even realizing it for at least the first couple of years of our lives. Many of us have experienced that deep love, and because of it, something grew in our hearts to love our mothers in return. Maybe that's why even the burliest of men are quite protective and sensitive towards their mothers.

Women deserve to be loved much more than they are. There is something innate in most women that motivates them to love by giving sacrificially, whereas men, we love by protecting and by building a safe place for our loved ones. This isn't a gender comparison; it's a fact. Women are designed to carry human life within them, therefore, they have what it takes to do this. As men, we can become amazing partners to our wives by also learning how to nurture, empower, and cherish them. When we do this, they will feel safe and empowered to give us what we also need – intimacy.

I also want to impact future generations. *All* men need to develop a relationship space that is safe for their loved ones. When their feelings, ideas, and authenticity are encouraged to develop, they are able to thrive as human beings. The ripple effect of loving others is quite often a family tree with strong branches. As you love your spouse and children, they not only love you back, they learn to love others. Eventually, your children marry and have children (your grandchildren) and now they have the skills to love their spouse and children, and so on.

I hope that this book will help any man learn to love his spouse, his children, his family, and friends in deeper, stronger, more powerful ways. The reader could impact an entire community just by reading this book and following the practices.

The ability to become a great lover, I mean in all of our relationships – not just the bedroom – is not withheld from anyone. If we just learn and practice, learn and practice, learn and practice, we will eventually become an expert. As is true for everyone. Just like the sun freely shines upon us all, God has given us all the desire and the capability to love and be loved.

I have 20+ years of experience as a carpenter and 20 years of experience as a counsellor. I have worked with many men of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and I can tell you one thing about them: they want someone to love and they want to be loved. If you feel like you haven't got what it takes to express love to others, you're definitely not alone. Maybe you grew up in a family that had a lot of love deficits or maybe it was neglectful, like mine was. Maybe you experienced abuse, such as physical, emotional, verbal or sexual abuse. All of these have an impact on the way you learn to love others because we will withdraw to protect ourselves from pain, which then also prevents us from receiving love.

The good news is you can overcome those deficits with a bit of courage. And nobody can stop you from becoming a stronger lover. Anyone can learn how to love and the people around you need you to love them stronger.

Pathology runs from generation to generation like a fire in the woods, taking down everything in its path, until one person, in one generation, has the courage to turn and face the flames. That person brings peace to his ancestors and spares the children that follow. Terry Real (Author of *The New Rules For Marriage*)

Imagine what could be done for our families and communities when a group of men consistently strengthen their hearts to love others more than themselves. What could be different in your family? Whose heart will become safer in your care? Whose life will flourish because of your love? A commitment to learning how to love will bring you a lifetime of love. You and your family will experience healthy relationships of all kinds.

Get Ready to Love Stronger.

I recommend that you take your time working through this book. Give yourself at least 90 days. There will be a lot of questions that you need time to think about. And you need time to practice the skills laid out in the book. This is not a weekend project. There are 12 *Love Stronger* Practices, so you could give yourself a week or two to learn about each one. When you implement each practice one at a time, and then make a habit of practicing them regularly, little by little, your life will change and impact your loved ones – hopefully a lot. As you become better at expressing and showing love toward others, you will also be able to receive love from them. Love is reciprocal when it is healthy. An infant may do nothing but receive its mother's love, yet the mother feels love when the baby smiles, cuddles, and accepts her nurturing.

I encourage you to be that person who says, “The pain stops with me,” and make a commitment to patiently work through this book one step at a time. Mark your calendar 90 days from now when you will celebrate completion. Here are some ideas that will help you get the most out of this journey.

Introduction

You Have the Potential

Consider starting a **Love Stronger Accountability Triad**. Your success will be greatly improved by having the support of two faithful male accountability partners. The three of you will become a *Love Stronger Triad*. Your triad could agree to meet regularly, weekly or bi-weekly, to encourage each other's progress. It would be wise to have a close friend if you can, and also an older man with more life experience and a different perspective. We can all learn from each other, especially when we are open to hearing each other's stories.

This book is more of a manual than a self-help book. If you are like me, you keep your car manual handy for those days when the car needs work. Right now, your heart needs some work. We designed the manual specifically so that you could work through it at your own pace and revisit it for years to come. Different sections of the manual focus on areas of your relationships and life, building upon each other so that you feel encouraged as you grow through it.

Speaking of building, I have blended my experiences as a carpenter and a counsellor and applied them to this project. I drew comparisons from the ways that a master carpenter designs a home for his family and how a man shapes his heart into a safe place for his loved ones to thrive. Before I became a counsellor, as a master carpenter I enjoyed 20 years of practicing the building process. Creating, designing, building and renovating all fall into the master carpenter's scope of work. I achieved a diverse skill set and because I am curious, observant, and a pattern hunter, when I compared the carpenter's principles to the relationship principles of great lovers, the symmetry was beautiful.

The Love Stronger Way is similar to the Master Carpenter's Way. This guide will compare the construction principles to relationship principles. Principles are non-negotiable; they are the facts that must be respected in whatever you do. The way a master carpenter builds a home is subject to the laws of nature, physics and the local building codes. The carpenter will also design a home according to the needs of its residents. Design predicts behaviour (another principle); so if you want to build a safe relationship space for your loves, you need to follow the same principles.

Using these terms and the metaphor of building a house will hopefully help you picture your relationships tangibly and understand them better. At the end of each section of this guide, you find an exercise and some questions to answer. I have also designed twelve practices for you, and I encourage you to commit to making them a part of your life. Practicing a skill once or twice won't change your relationship — but becoming consistent with these practices almost certainly will. Challenge yourself and the triad to do your very best and celebrate when you see results.

We have also included pages to write notes, so you can look back and share your experiences with your triad. You can also journal your thoughts in a private notebook if you prefer. I am a big fan of journaling and encourage the process of daily writing to help you hear your own thoughts and give your mind clarity.

You will also hear a few of my stories from 40+ years of marriage with my beautiful bride. My wife, Susannah-Joy, is also a mental health professional and has taught me more about how to *Love Stronger* than I can write in one book. We know this process works. We have seen men's lives changed, marriages enhanced and relationships thriving because of *Love Stronger*. This can work for you if you do the work.

On the next page, you will see a contract which is your commitment to yourself. Write your name, date, and what you want to get out of this. Be as specific as you can. Instead of, 'I want to love my wife more,' why not say, 'I want to make my wife laugh again?' Or, 'I want my kids to tell me what is going on in their lives.' Or, 'I want to be able to tell my dad how I feel about him.' The more specific you are, the more clear your commitment will be. When we know our *why*, we are motivated to pursue it.

If at any time you need help as you are going through this workbook, we encourage you to reach out to us through our website: lovestronger.ca or email: hello@lovestronger.ca

May your journey through these pages empower you and bless your family.