

Embracing the Differences

The His and Her Story



By Kathy Menzies & Mikal Nielsen

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to our children,
Anna, Leon and Sophia,
who have been an integral part of our
relationship journey.

INTRO

Here we are, 30 years down the track. Still in love, relationship alive and thriving. Children left home, but still visiting. And sex is better than ever.

Piece of cake! Just unfolded that way. Luck's on our side.

Ah no, not exactly!

The truth is, the first paragraph is real. That is actually where our marriage sits today, including exciting prospects ahead of us.

However, the second paragraph is just wishful thinking. It has been bloody hard work, lots of tears and hurts, serious challenges and deep soul searching.

And it has been totally worth it... period!

You see, Kathy is a do-er, Mikal is a be-er. She is an outdoor person, he is an indoor one. Kathy rides horses, Mikal doesn't. He does Sudokus, Kathy doesn't. She wants to go tramping, Mikal wants to do jigsaw puzzles. She is a socializer, he isn't. Mikal deals with conflict by avoiding, Kathy does it by controlling.

You get the picture! What on earth have we got that would not only make this relationship work, but make it thrive?

This book is the story of how it all started, the unfolding of it and where it sits today.

But not in a traditional way. Both of us are going to tell the story as we saw it and experienced it. It is his and her story, and as you will see, even that is different.

MEETING

Kathy

I left New Zealand in my mid twenties knowing that things needed to change. My internal landscape was a mess. I was managing this by drinking and eating way too much. Following a disastrous New Year, I got on a plane to the other side of the world, with a one way ticket.

After an initial travel and working stint I found myself in Nairobi, Kenya with a friend from New Zealand

I immediately fell in love with Africa. The colour, the vibrancy and the people who seemed to have a genuine love of life. We quickly fell into a simple travelling routine, following no particular plan but always ending up somewhere.

At the end of our first month we arrived at the Kampala YMCA in Uganda, where a simple "coincidence" - changed my life.

Mikal

I felt stuck. Stuck at work, stuck with relationships, stuck with what's next. In short, stuck with myself.

Just divorced after a marriage that lasted all of 6 months, I really needed to do something drastically different, something that would get me out of my shell.

So I quit everything, got rid of most of my possessions and looked at a world map. Where and what would be the most extreme to my current life? A tour through the developing world of Africa, Asia and South America seemed to be a good answer.

Looking at the map, Africa was the closest to Denmark so I bought a one-way ticket to Egypt.

A year into the journey I arrived at the YMCA in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, where a staggering coincidence took place. Sitting on the stairs of the YMCA, is another traveller that I deeply connected with nine months earlier in Algeria and who I never thought I would meet or hear from again. Wow, I was delighted. I really liked and admired this guy as he seemed to be everything I wanted to be.

He said that he was going to have dinner with two girls from New Zealand he had just met and I was welcome to join them. "Only one condition," he said "the blonde is mine."

That sounded fair to me as I really just wanted to spend time with him and catch up on his travels.

It was that night, over beautifully cooked chicken on a street stall, washed down with local 80% gin that I met Kathy. Little did I know that we would be dating on three continents and six countries over the coming 15 months and that she would become my wife and mother of our children.

DATING

Kathy

Mikal, this man from Denmark was like no one I'd ever met before. He talked to me about things that I had never imagined talking to anyone about. He seemed to have an openness and acceptance of himself that was so new to me. And the desire to always know more. This spoke to me deeply.

Our time together in Uganda was like a living workshop and when it was time to part, three weeks later it seemed inconceivable that we would never meet again. Yet, I was getting no promises from Mikal - he seemed happy to move on and leave things be.

Mikal

How much the gin influenced the forming of our quartet is hard to say, but from that moment we ended up traveling together for three weeks. My travel buddy hanging on to the blonde and me with Kathy - the leftovers - forming a bond of our own.

It's kind of funny, because it never worked out between the other two, whereas Kathy and I had a fabulous time together.

We played a lot of cards by candlelight and had deep conversations about life, both of which suited me perfectly well. And when it was just Kathy and I together in the night, there was a deep exploration of our bodies and the fabulous differences they contained. Yes, this is definitely one of those places where big differences fit well together, differences that were easy to accept and live with.

As for the many other big differences that would turn out to be vastly more difficult to live with, none of those showed up during our three magical weeks together.

We parted ways and nothing was said about seeing each other again. At that moment in time, I didn't expect that we would meet again and I quickly slipped back into my travels.

Kathy

There were too many firsts in our time together that I wasn't prepared to sit back and wait. So when I had more funds to travel, I very tentatively wrote to Mikal suggesting that we meet up in Nepal, knowing that was where he was heading to after Africa. I really had no idea if he would even get my letter. When his return letter found me on my birthday, I was very excited. Particularly as he agreed to meet again.

When we met in Kathmandu, there was no ease between us. It felt more like a cold distance. I saw glimpses of the Mikal I had met in Uganda but I saw more of a subdued darkness. There was still a physical connection there but certainly not much laughter.

When Mikal told me that he had decided to change his travel plans, I was both relieved and shocked. Relieved because I wanted to get away from the energy that seemed to be hanging over us. Shocked because travelling in India alone, hadn't been on my radar. But as you do when you have to, you manage and in fact my time in India was more than managing - it was a wonderful experience of learning to be with "just me".

Mikal

A big difference between Kathy and I is that I'm a 'go with the flow' kinda guy and Kathy is the organizer and planner. Not put so nicely, but possibly more to the point, I'm an Avoider and Kathy is a Controller. Yep, that's a big difference that has both ups and downs to it.

The upside is what caused us to meet up again six months later in Nepal. It was Kathy taking action and making a re-meet happen.

The expectations were of course high, and put simply, weren't met at all. It was as if Kathy was a different person, and I'm sure she would say the same about me. It just didn't click this time.

How we managed to hang in there for five weeks of travelling together is kinda mind boggling. In hindsight, that did show one of the strengths of our relationship as we were willing to give it a good go and not give up so easily.

In short, those five weeks through Nepal and India were a disaster, at least compared to our first date in Uganda. And I was happy for us to travel our own ways and certainly didn't expect for us to ever meet again.

Kathy

I left Nepal with a feeling of "nothingness" towards Mikal but as time put distance between us I realised the deeper feeling of "something" was still there. So again I suggested, via letter once more, that we meet up again in England.

I was returning there after a time back in New Zealand recovering from Indian travel. I arrived in London hoping but not knowing if Mikal would be there to meet me. There was such joy in seeing him, once he revealed himself, I knew my knowing was right.

This two week date left us on a high and an agreement that Mikal would come and join me in Paris where I was heading to work for ten months.

Mikal

Despite not thinking anything further would happen after Nepal and India, we did keep in touch via letter. This is where planner/organizer Kathy kicked in again and wrote a casual letter giving exact arrival details for her in London and a "if you are around, do come see me at the airport".

Now, I'm from Denmark and London is not just around the corner, but as it were, I was biking around Europe trying to recover from more than two years of backpacking Africa and Asia. So turning the bicycle in a slightly different direction and heading for London seemed ok.

And who knows what's gonna happen this time? It could be another Uganda experience. Gotta stay open!

And there she was, walking through the arrival gate looking around for someone. And that someone was me. And wow, she looked like the Uganda version, radiant and alive.

She couldn't see me at that specific point (as I was hiding for effect), but when I did come from behind and tapped her on the shoulder, there was an instant connection and we were transported back to our Uganda time.

What followed was two weeks of magic on our third date. The bodily differences got yet again explored in great depth and all other differences that had started to show in Nepal and India were completely gone again.

THE BEGINNING OF A RELATIONSHIP

Kathy

When Mikal arrived in Paris, to be honest, I wasn't sure that I was ready for such a grown up thing as living together. I wasn't completely sure that I was doing the right thing. This became even more of a question as we settled into our little Parisian apartment - all 27 square meters of it.

I was working and Mikal wasn't. I would go out to work and it would seem when I came home Mikal had hardly moved. I was bemused - I had never met anyone who seemed so happy with doing so little. In our earlier meetings we had been on the road travelling and so I had "assumed" that Mikal was an outdoorsy sort of guy. After all, we'd travelled through Africa together and walked in the Hymalians! Assumptions, a very dangerous thing.

So it turned out that although Mikal had done all those things, he was happier being still - more of a be-er than a do-er! Now I loved this guy, it was feeling pretty deep but he didn't like doing things - what was I going to do?

Although that question sat with me, it seemed that I couldn't do anything. For all our differences there was something way deeper that seemed to draw us together so the question became - how do we live together with these differences. I think because it was still early, it was still fairly easy. There was a willingness to give, to compromise. Even though at times it felt like it was going against what I really wanted. This was fine for then, but later, sometimes the word resentment could be attached to how I was feeling.

The inner call to return to NZ gradually grew over our time in Paris and Mikal seemed happy enough to come along. This felt like a natural next step but we never actually talked about what that step meant and how that would look when we got to New Zealand.

Mikal

After London I went to Scotland to tick off one more thing on my travelling bucket list: To be a barman and to give Kathy the time she asked for to settle in Paris.

While there, Kathy came visiting for our fourth date for a long weekend, which was back to being pretty average.

Having done my short barman stint, I headed to Paris for what technically speaking was our fifth date but quickly turned into the beginning of our relationship that has lasted to this day.

Here we started to get hit with the real deep differences that would become major obstacles, major learnings and major growth. They would take us to the edge of splitting up several times (and actually splitting up once for a couple of hours), to bringing us deeper and deeper together, connecting with a strong bond that had been there right from our Uganda time, but that we were not consciously aware of till much later in our journey together.

One of those differences that became really obvious during our six months of living together in a one room tiny flat, was that Kathy is a do-er. She can't sit still for long and certainly not indoors. "What shall we do? Where can we walk to today? What can we go and explore? There's so much to see!"

And then there's me. I'm the be-er, happy to do very little, ideally indoors where it is warm and comfortable.

Luckily, Kathy would go to work in the morning so I could just chill and go exploring the cafe scene at my own pace. Then she would come home and be totally ready to go adventuring. Fair enough, but it did cause some clashing and challenging times.

Can we really live together like this? It somehow didn't seem possible, but calling it quits didn't seem to be a solution either. We had to find a way.

So the real question became: Have we got enough in common and is that strong enough to carry the relationship. By this time, we were aware that there was something deep down that kept drawing us together, but we couldn't pinpoint it.

We also knew that we were both open to learn and grow and therefore could continue to have deeper conversations about ourselves and our relationship. That would have to be a strong point on the positive side of the equation.

On top of the differences getting clearer, we also started to see more things we had in common. Unfortunately, not all of those were positive.

On the positive side, we both enjoyed the French cuisine, especially bread, cheese and wine. Add in Scotch whiskey and a healthy interest in sex, we could really enjoy those commonalities.

On the negative side, there were a common resistance to talk about certain things, including money, sex and deep personal stuff. We had to add this into the mix of things to improve on.

As you can see, we were not short on stuff to work on, but what bonded us together kept being strong enough to not end the relationship during our time in Paris.

MOVING TO NEW ZEALAND

Kathy

Arriving in NZ was another turn around for me. My family is classically Kiwi so when I returned home with a Dane who didn't fit the classic kiwi mold, more differences stood out.

In Europe Mikal blended in, both physically and with his slightly outside the box thinking. However in NZ there was no blending, just sticking out, and my family doesn't like things that stick out. This created a huge conflict for me. It felt for some time I had to choose between my family and Mikal. All of this was unspoken.

Looking back, life has had a way of giving us just what we needed - even at times it hasn't seemed that way.

After stepping back into teaching for a while and feeling that this wasn't where I wanted to be, the opportunity to be caretakers at a Buddhist Retreat Centre presented itself.

Mikal was very clear - "I'm going". This surprised me as mostly it had been me leading the way so I knew that if I wanted to stay with Mikal then I had no choice but to go.

What I found, after not being there for long, was that being somewhere by no choice, doesn't work. I was there through fear of losing Mikal, rather than being there for me. I turned that around by leaving and then finding my way back for me - not for fear, but rather for me.

It was only many years later that I found out how painful my leaving was for Mikal and that I regret. However, in reality, I had to follow what I needed to do to make it right for me. An important lesson around self care.

Once I returned to Wangapeka, I became fully immersed in that magic of the place. And within that magic there were so many challenges. Wangapeka was a meditation centre which meant the main focus was meditating, which in the traditional way meant spending a lot of time sitting - yes just sitting!

As we have said, Mikal is a be-er and I am a do-er, so sitting for long periods of time suited Mikal perfectly, but not so for me. I had moments but there were way more moments that weren't so good, leaving me feeling frustrated and to a degree a failure.

The turn around for me came half way through our time at the centre. A beautiful meditation teacher said to me, "Mikal learns through stillness, through going inwards. You learn through your body. Embrace that - go out and slash bracken, be present, that is your meditation." It was such a liberating conversation. I could see a way forward that worked for me, that fitted me. It also gave me an insight as to how Mikal and I could co-exist within our differences. We could follow our own paths on the same road.

The longer we were at the Wangapeka, the more I fell in love with the place. A big part of that was the meeting and giving support to the people who came to the centre for both personal and group retreats.

I loved meeting and connecting with the wide range of people that came to the centre, yet for Mikal I could see this wasn't easy or particularly enjoyable. He didn't seem to need anyone, apart from me, yet I needed way more than just him. Acceptance and allowance have been the key words to finding peace with this difference.

What had started as an inkling but grew to be way more while we were at Wangapeka was my desire, or more, my need to have children.

In the early days, when it looked like Mikal and I were going to stay together, Mikal made 3 stipulations: no children, no stationwagon and no dog. Being newly in love, I heard him but didn't really take much notice because at that time all I needed was him.

However as our relationship grew, this desire to have children grew and it wouldn't go away. I shared this with Mikal who of course reminded me of "our agreement"!! And so began a fairly long and at times painful time of our relationship.

Do I leave this person who I love dearly because he doesn't want what I want or do I stay with him and let go of something that felt so incredibly important to me? I finally got to a point of clarity - I couldn't leave him now over something that was still in many ways on the wish list but there would be a day when I would need a yes or no answer from Mikal.

And if it was a no then I would have the power and strength to move on. With that decision, an ease returned, a calm and a knowing. And sure enough that day did come.

Mikal

When Kathy's contract in Paris came to an end, we had to decide where to next. This was one of the easier decisions for me where no compromise was needed. I really didn't want to go back to Denmark and was keen to see the world Kathy came from. No commitment to stay, just visiting.

And I'm still here 29 years later. So what happened?

We found a flat in Christchurch, Kathy's hometown, and I had to finally step out of travelling and spending money mode and move into creating income mode. What to do?

I facilitated my first Firewalking course and it was great to experience how well Kathy supported me in it and how much she gained from doing it together with me. That was something great to have in common and again showed a part of what would hold this relationship together, a focus on personal growth.

But it quickly became evident that I couldn't make a living from firewalking, so I would have to find something else.

Being so different, it seemed hard to think that we could find anything we could do together that would create enough income.

This opened up an experience we had a few times before, but this time we could see it more clearly. It was yet another indicator of the rightness of our relationship. When we desperately needed clarity on 'what is next', it would present itself quite clearly.

We got offered a one year contract as caretakers at one of the biggest and oldest meditation centres in New Zealand, The Wangapeka Study & Retreat Centre. This was a golden opportunity to learn about meditation while living in an amazingly beautiful place.

This also turned out to become the toughest time together for us so far, as our differences started to show themselves more and more.

Kathy is a morning person, I'm a night owl. We had to start early in the morning, or at least what I would consider early. My morning grumpiness certainly didn't help the situation as Kathy is high energy in the morning.

Another difference that started to show itself was our completely different need for socialising. My need is close to zero and Kathy's is a long way from that. The hardest part for me was dealing with all the people that were coming through the centre, and the hardest part for Kathy was the indoor admin and paperwork, and probably also putting up with me.

However, the biggest and potentially most likely breaking up difference got clearer and grew during our time at Wangapeka, but didn't get resolved till about a year later. Kathy wanted children, I didn't. I really couldn't explain why, it just wasn't right for me.

CHILDREN

Kathy

When the day came that I knew I had to put my question to Mikal regarding children, we had left the Retreat Centre and moved to Hawke's Bay. The conversation around children came surprisingly easy for me. I felt very clear, if Mikal said no, then we would need to end our relationship.

However, when Mikal did say yes, there was an immense feeling of relief and gratitude to him. I felt supported and loved in every way. In a very short time I was pregnant. We always joke that Sophia, our daughter, was just hanging around waiting to get the nod!!

And so began our parenting journey and for all our differences, this was an area we were most similar. We were gifted with three beautiful children who are now young adults, out in the world following their own paths.

What did cause the greatest amount of conflict for me, through our parenting journey, was my need to control. Many times I wanted Mikal to step up into his role of father as I saw it. When he didn't do it my way, I felt unsupported and let down. The gradual letting go of control gave room for Mikal to be his version dad - which actually wasn't too bad!!

Mikal

We had now made it to Hawke's Bay on the North Island where we would spend the next decade and a half.

Kathy's need for children kept growing and eventually got to the point where I couldn't avoid it any longer as she put the ultimatum to me: Children together or you're out.

Decision time Mikal. How am I going to make that decision? This was going to be a big compromise and I had to get it right. Saying yes in order to keep the relationship would be the wrong decision. The long term consequences would be way too big. The compromise had to be made with a deep level of alignment to who I truly am.

As I unfortunately got to experience a number of times later in our relationship, when I made compromises without that alignment, it would always backfire.

It took a lot of soul searching and digging for me to find the deep alignment that helped me make that decision. Once it was made, Kathy was pregnant within a week.

Prior to this, I had made a promise to myself to never get married again, never get a mortgage again and to not have children.

Within a period of three months we got a mortgage, got married and had our first child on its way!!!

If this woman had that kind of power, I was either a sucker for punishment or this was really the woman and relationship I needed. I of course would love for it to be the latter, but the truth is most likely both.

Parenting is challenging, no doubt about it. But as this book is about our relationship and our differences, growing up our children is the one thing we have done together with the least conflict between us. It turned out that we had very similar beliefs, values and philosophies of what bringing up children was about.

The key differences were rooted in the natural differences between our masculine and feminine essences.

We started to see and learn about those differences and how they influenced our way of parenting and how we could make positive use of them in other areas of our relationship.

SEX

Kathy

Before meeting Mikal, I had been in one long term relationship. We had been sexual and there had been many special moments but on the whole I felt like something was missing - like I didn't quite get it.

When I met Mikal, one of the most amazing things was his openness around sex. We explored each other's bodies in a way that I had never experienced before, which touched me in a way that I had never been touched before.

As our relationship grew, the deeper hang ups within both of us often got in the way of true honesty and intimacy. Being able to speak your truth around something so intimate was so hard. We both knew, at some level, that to move forward this is what we had to learn to do.

And so it has been an ongoing journey of growth and plato's, of ease and stress.

For me, sex just as in parenting, has been an area where less differences has shown up, apart from the obvious. There has been a natural ebb and flow of my sexual desire, which I have learnt to respect and allow rather than question and make wrong. This has been particularly evident through menopause. It feels like often the mind is willing but not the body (whereas in other stages it has been the other way round!).

As a couple we are learning to be with the changes that are happening for both of us as we age. The delight is that the interest in sex and ever changing landscape is still moving between us.

Mikal

Saving the best till last, this is both a subject and object I'm passionate about. Some of the deepest and most profound spiritual growth I have experienced in my life has been through love making with Kathy.

Sex has been one of the anchors of our relationship, one thing that we both could enjoy and work on together, resulting in deeper and deeper connection till this day, and I expect that to continue from here on.

I wish I could say it has been cruisy sailing, but I have to admit it has been a turbulent journey.

Because of our upbringing and past experiences, there has been an uneasiness with talking about sex for both of us. Doing it is much easier than talking about it. It takes a lot of effort for me to bring it up, even though I know it always ends up being worth it.

In terms of differences, it appears to me that they are primarily the natural ones between the masculine energy and the feminine energy. As they are often in conflict with my beliefs, mingled in with my shyness, they have caused a fair amount of conflict in our relationship.

When I started to dive more deeply into this, around 15 years into our relationship, it gave me a lot of clarity and answers. From there on, till today, it has been about consciously exploring those differences and again back to the same answer as previously: Understand, accept and then celebrate the differences.

And that I feel, we are getting better and better at, not just in sex, but in all areas of our relationship.

CONCLUSION

"I love Kathy - always, but I certainly don't like her all the time" - one of Mikal's favourite sayings and Kathy would say the same about Mikal. But here we are 30 years in a relationship that is alive and still growing, even though we are different in so many ways.

The key has been the willingness to face what doesn't work, to continue to grow ourselves as individuals, to take ownership of our part in conflict and most importantly to keep loving and acknowledging all the good we see in each other.

Our differences have both pulled us apart and held us together - a funny paradox.

We truly believe there is never a right or wrong around staying in or leaving a relationship. For us however, the gift of being truly known by another and all that that brings, has come from hanging in there, putting in the work and doing our best to enjoy the ride.

Wherever you stand in your relationship status, we wish you well in this amazing journey called "life".

Much love

Kathy & Mikal

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kathy and Mikal are passionate about supporting people to live better lives.

Kathy, as a teacher, aims to inspire her students to look at the world in a way that empowers them to be the best versions of themselves.

Mikal, as a life & business coach, strives to give his clients an understanding of what gets in the way and how to transcend that so they can be the best version of themselves.

They are also in a long term thriving intimate relationship of 30 years which has survived depression, bankruptcy, family suicide and vast differences.

With their passion for growth they founded FY Couples Coaching. Their mission is to support others to move their relationships to the next level of depth and fulfilment. They are presently doing 2-2 couples coaching. They coach together so their clients are always exposed to a “his and her perspective”. They are moving towards doing couples retreats for the full immersion experience. Use the contact details below to inquire about complementary couples discovery sessions.

“There is no happy ever after but there is a happy with each other” This is what Kathy and Mikal wish for all couples.

They can be contacted through their Facebook page [FYCouples](#) and by email to info@fycouples.com



Kathy Menzies & Mikal Nielsen