

Love

UNDER PRESSURE



POLLY MAE CASHIN

Love Under Pressure

When the Person You Love Isn't You

POLLY MAE CASHIN

Dedication

**This book is for you—
for both of you—
and for the space that exists between you.**

For the seasons when marriage feels heavier than expected,
when love is still present but harder to reach,
and when each of you may be carrying something the other cannot fully see.

For the one who feels tired of holding things together,
and for the one who feels unsure how to help without making things worse.

For the moments when you are still choosing each other,
even while wondering why it feels this hard.

**You don't need to arrive with answers.
You don't need to agree about everything to begin.**

You are not alone in this place.
And you are not doing this wrong—
not you, and not the love you are still trying to protect.

Two Realities

You imagine a life together. Being known in the small, ordinary ways and having someone to tell when the day has been too much—someone who understands why a moment mattered. You may not expect to agree on everything, but you hope that beneath your differences, you'll understand each other.

Then you discover that the same silence can feel like peace to one of you and distance to the other. An offer to help can feel like tenderness—or doubt about your ability. You can sit beside each other, hear the same words, live through the same moment, and carry away two different stories. Each can be surprised by what the other felt.

These discoveries may begin before marriage or unfold across decades of sharing a home. Some make you laugh and love each other more. Others touch a tender place neither of you knew was there. What happens next becomes part of the life you are writing together.

This book invites you to notice what happens inside you when the person you love experiences life differently. What feels at stake? What are you asking them to understand, change, or reassure you about—and what happens between you when they

cannot? As those questions become clearer, choices you could not see before may begin to appear.

You may return to the same conversation, the same hurt, or the same difference more than once. Returning does not necessarily mean nothing is changing. Sometimes you recognize what you have been carrying into the moment or hear something beneath the words you thought you knew by heart. A new beginning can happen there, even before your circumstances change.

Your love story is still being written. In the kitchen after the argument, when neither of you knows how to begin. In the apology that catches in your throat because you are still hurting too. In the moment you discover that the person beside you has been carrying something you never thought to ask about.

Some pages hold things you wish had never happened. You don't have to make them beautiful to tell the truth about them, and you can't write the other person's willingness into the story. But there may still be something to discover about what you bring to the moments you share. A hurt you've mistaken for a verdict. A fear you've been asking love to quiet. A possibility that becomes visible when you no longer need one reality to defeat the other.

Two of you live inside this story. Each brings a life the other will come to know over time—memories, hopes, tender places, and meanings that do not always announce themselves. Whether you are beginning your life together or have shared it for years, there is more to discover about the person beside you. Love makes room for both realities—and within that room—you begin to write a story neither of you could write alone.

Chapter 1: When the Person You Love Isn't You

This book is written to both of you. Not to explain one of you to the other. Not to diagnose who is “the problem.” Not to decide who is right, who is tired, who is trying harder, or who has more reason to feel the way they do.

And not to give either of you better language for winning the argument.

It is written because marriage asks two different people to build one life.

And sometimes we forget the *different* part.

You married someone who isn't you. That sounds obvious until you have been married for a while. Then it can become strangely difficult to understand.

Why can't you just remember?

Why are you worried about this?

Why aren't you worried?

Why do you need so much time to think?

Why do you want to talk about everything right now?

Why don't you listen to what I'm trying to say?

Sometimes we say these things out loud.

Sometimes we have been finishing the sentences silently for years.

Why can't you just be a little more like me?

Not exactly like me, of course. Just enough like me—

that your choices make sense,
that what matters to me matters to you,
that I know what your silence means,
that I know what your anger means,
that I know what your forgetting means,
that I know what your need for space means.

But you aren't me.
And becoming one never meant
becoming the same.

Why does the other person's difference become pressure?

Difference alone is not necessarily what creates pressure in a marriage. What creates pressure is often what difference comes to mean.

You forgot. And somewhere between what happened and what I felt, *you forgot* became: *I don't matter to you.*

You got quiet. And your quiet became: *You don't want me.*

You needed more time. And needing more time became: *You aren't willing to change.*

You weren't worried. And that became: *I have to carry everything alone.*

You asked another question. And that became: *You don't trust me.*

You couldn't do something that seems simple to me. And that became: *You aren't trying.*

The meaning can arrive so quickly that we don't recognize it as meaning. It just feels true. And once it feels true, we respond to each other as though it is true.

That is part of what happens under pressure.

It narrows our attention.

It speeds up interpretation.

It makes everything feel personal.

Eventually, the body can learn the story too.

You feel yourself tighten before your spouse has finished the sentence.

You hear a change in tone and already know where this is going.

You see the look.

You recognize the silence.

You brace.

Sometimes the argument has begun before either of you has said anything, because your bodies have learned what conflict has felt like lately.

That does not mean either of you is broken. It means something has been happening often enough that you have begun to expect it.

And expectation changes the way we experience each other.

What Happens Between Us

Marriage doesn't happen only inside two people. Something also happens between them.

I respond to what I think you mean. You respond to the way I respond. Your response confirms what I already suspected, so I respond more strongly. Then my response confirms something you have begun to believe about me.

Neither of us sits down and decides to create this.

It grows.

Maybe the more I pursue you, the more you pull away. The more you pull away, the more certain I become that I have to pursue you. I experience your distance as proof that you don't care. You experience my pursuit as proof that there is no room for you to breathe.

So you move farther away.

And I come closer.

Eventually, I don't have to ask what your distance means. I already know. And neither do you

have to ask what my questions mean. You already know too.

Except maybe neither of us knows as much as we think we do.

This is the space between us. It is shaped by both of us, but it cannot always be explained by either one of us alone. And when pressure is unnamed, everything that happens in that space begins to feel personal.

What If I Got You Wrong?

There are times when the meaning we give our spouse's behavior simply isn't true.

You wouldn't.

But maybe you couldn't.

You don't care.

But maybe you care deeply and don't know how to show it in the way I recognize.

You are ignoring me.

But maybe you are overwhelmed.

You aren't changing because this doesn't matter to you.

But maybe you are changing at a pace neither of us wants.

Understanding this can change more than our behavior. It can change our experience.

Maybe I don't have to spend the rest of my marriage learning how to control my anger every time you do that thing. Maybe, as I understand you more truthfully, that thing begins to mean something different.

And when the meaning changes, perhaps the anger does too.

Not because I suppressed it. Not because I became more spiritual. Not because I learned the right communication technique.

Because I no longer experience what happened in quite the same way.

Sometimes the moment changes because its meaning changes.

But not always.

Because sometimes you meant exactly what I thought you meant.

What If I Didn't Get You Wrong?

This book is not going to ask you to spend the rest of your marriage searching for a kinder explanation for something that is hurting you. Sometimes your spouse really was dismissive. Sometimes the promise really was broken. Sometimes they could have done something and chose not to. The words really were cruel. The behavior does need to change.

What you are experiencing is not merely the result of an old wound, a misunderstanding, or two people being different.

Something is wrong.

Understanding why someone behaves the way they do does not make what they do acceptable. Explanation is not justification. Love does not require you to call something good because you love the person doing it.

And this book will never ask you to make something acceptable simply because you understand it.

The invitation is not to assume that your interpretation is wrong. It is to become willing to discover what is true.

There is a difference.

There is a space between what I thought you meant and what is true.

Sometimes I enter that space and discover that I got you wrong. Sometimes I discover that I was right. The truth is more complicated than either one. And sometimes I don't know yet.

Maybe one of the most important things we can learn in marriage is not to decide too quickly what something means.

Why Does Love Have Two Realities?

There is another difficulty. Even when we understand what happened, we may not experience it the same way.

You didn't intend to hurt me.

And I was hurt.

You are trying.

And I am tired.

You need more time.

And waiting is costing me something.

You are overwhelmed.

And I feel alone.

You genuinely love me.

And what you are able to give right now may not be what I need.

We often act as though one of these realities has to defeat the other.

If you didn't mean to hurt me, I shouldn't be hurt.

If I'm hurt, you must have done something wrong.

If you need time, I shouldn't have a limit.

If I have a limit, I must not love you enough.

If you are doing your best, I shouldn't need more.

If I need more, your best must not be good enough.

But what if love doesn't require one person's reality to disappear so the other's can be true?

Love makes room for both realities.

Your experience does not have to become false for mine to be true.

My pain does not automatically prove your intention.

Your good intention does not erase my pain.

Your limitations do not erase their impact on me.

And the impact on me does not necessarily tell me everything about your willingness to love me.

Both realities can be present in the same marriage.

That does not mean both interpretations are equally true.

It means both people are real.

Why Is Love a Two-Person Job?

Marriage is often described as two becoming one.

But oneness is not sameness.

Marriage does not require two people with the same strengths, needs, histories, pace, abilities, fears, or capacity. Pressure makes that especially visible.

There will be seasons when one of you can carry more. One of you may have more steadiness,

more patience, more emotional capacity, more ability to remain present. There may be days when one of you has very little left to give, and the other carries almost everything.

That is not fifty-fifty.

It is uneven.

It may even feel unfair.

The cost does not become unreal simply because the person you love cannot carry more right now. But neither should we assume that what a spouse is **not** giving is something they are presently able to give.

Capacity can be exhausted. It can be limited. It can be developing. Sometimes a person understands what needs to change but does not yet have the capacity to live differently every time pressure rises. Sometimes change takes longer than either spouse wants.

And sometimes the issue is not capacity at all.

Sometimes a person is unwilling.

Those are not the same reality, and love needs enough room for us to discover the difference.

My father was married to my mother for more than sixty-five years. He used to say:

“Life is a two-person job.”

I've always loved the simplicity of that. A two-person job doesn't mean two people contribute exactly the same amount every day. It means

neither person's capacity exists in isolation anymore.

We are building a life together.

Sometimes I carry what you cannot. Sometimes you carry what I cannot. I need patience while you are becoming. You need patience while I am becoming. And sometimes we have to tell each other the truth about what carrying so much is costing us.

Love makes room for that too.

When Understanding Isn't Enough

There may also come a point when you understand your spouse very well—and still need something to change. You may know why this is difficult for them. You may understand the history behind it. You may believe they are trying.

And still find yourself saying:

I understand why this is hard for you. And this still has to change.

That is not necessarily a failure of love.

There is a space between what I thought you meant and what is true. But there is another space we will eventually have to face:

**the space between what I now understand
and what I am willing to live with.**

Those are different questions.

What is true?

And:

What does love do with what is true?

We will not answer the second question on the first pages of this book.

Some truths require patience before the way forward becomes clear.

Some require grief.

Some require forgiveness.

Some require a difficult conversation.

Some require boundaries.

But situations involving abuse, coercion, violence, manipulation, or danger require safety, not an instruction to remain exposed to harm.

Love does not predetermine the answer before truth has been allowed to speak.

Where Do I Begin?

So, this book begins with noticing. Not fixing yourself. Not fixing your spouse. Not repairing the marriage before you have understood what is happening inside it. And certainly not learning how to control yourself well enough to tolerate anything another person does.

We are going to pay attention to what happens within you—what happens between you. We are

going to notice the meanings that arrive so quickly
they feel like facts,

the reactions that seem to happen before
thought,

the things you protect,

the things your spouse protects,

the expectations you have taught each other
without realizing it,

the places where you have misunderstood,

the places where you haven't,

and the realities that may need room to exist
together.

You may read these pages alone or together. If
you read them together, don't use them to explain
your spouse. If you recognize your spouse in a
paragraph before you recognize yourself, resist the
temptation to point.

This book isn't giving you a better way to say:
See? This is what you do.

It is offering something quieter:

*Maybe there is more happening here than I have
been able to see.*

You don't have to arrive at insight quickly. You
don't have to resolve anything because a chapter
ends. Some things will become clear quickly. Others
may take time.

Formation rarely moves in a straight line.

You may return to the same argument, the same hurt, the same question, and the same difference more than once. Returning does not necessarily mean nothing is changing.

Sometimes change begins because we encounter the same moment and, for the first time, no longer assume we already know everything it means.

This book is not meant simply to be completed. It is meant to be returned to.

And if at any point these pages themselves begin to feel like pressure, you can stop. Nothing here requires you to force insight, manufacture empathy, excuse harm, decide quickly, or become someone else.

For now, there is only one invitation:

Notice.

Notice the person in front of you.

Notice the person you become around them.

Notice what you have come to expect.

Notice what you have decided their difference means.

Notice what has been growing between you.

And leave open, just for now, the possibility that there may be something you do not yet know.

Because the person you love isn't you.

And perhaps love begins, again and again, by making room to discover who they actually are.

Note: This book is not a substitute for professional counseling or care when safety, trauma, or mental health concerns are present.

The story continues...