

Anna Baker:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. I'm your host, Anna Baker, senior marketing manager here at Vanderbloemen. In today's episode, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, spoke with Toni Nieuwhof, author, lawyer, pharmacist, and church leader. She's also an influential speaker, leader and the co-founder of Connexus Church. Her extensive and unique background has given her unique and practical insight on how people grow emotionally, personally, and spiritually.

Anna Baker:

Toni and her husband, Carey, have spoken openly about their marriage for over three decades now, in efforts to help encourage Christian couples around the world. Her new book, *Before You Split*, helps you find out what you really want from your marriage and how to move forward to a better future. Toni digs into relevant trends she's seeing in marriages through quarantine and lays out the benefits of leaving her unhappiness behind instead of your marriage. She hopes this book will encourage spouses to stay together and grow stronger through challenges, even in an age where separation is common.

Anna Baker:

This conversation is insightful, practical, and a powerful reminder of the Lord's plan for your marriage. We hope you'll enjoy this conversation and check out Toni's new book available now. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag *vandercast*, and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind the scenes content.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, hey there everybody, so glad to have you back again. I have a special treat. Today we have Nieuwhof on the podcast, and we have the better of the two Nieuwhofs. Carey, as you all know is a friend and we've been on each other's podcasts many times, but Carey's wife is on podcast today. So we actually get to hear about the real Carey Nieuwhof. Actually, Toni is a writer in her own respect and Toni has a new book coming out, it's on marriage, and it's not just because she's had to be married, but she's actually had a bird's eye view to a lot of fault lines in marriages over the years. So, Toni, thanks for joining us today and making time, really appreciate it.

Toni Nieuwhof:

Hey, it's my pleasure. Thank you, William. I am glad to be here.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. I would love it if you would introduce yourself to our audience, like who are you, and what's your story, and eventually how'd you end up wanting to write a book about this?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Aside from being an author, I am a podcaster. I do co-host a podcast called *Smart Family* podcast, just aimed at helping parents and couples love being home. I am family law mediator, and that came on the heels of practicing family law for several years. Seeing what couples were dealing with on the other side of the decision to divorce, and walking through that difficult journey, as far as the inspiration goes, the inspiration for this book was a couple of different sources. The main one being the struggles that Carey and I went through, that led me to a place where, once I practiced family law, I could have seen myself on the other side of the desk.

Toni Nieuwhof:

I could have been someone facing divorce, because we reached a place after a long, rough season in our own marriage, where I was asking myself the question, "Did I just sign up for a lifetime of misery?" And I don't say that lightly because we both were Christians when we came together and we were passionate about serving Christ and passionate about leading in the church. We had chosen Ecclesiastes 4:12 as the cornerstone of our marriage ceremony, where a cord of three strands is not quickly broken. So, we had on the one hand, all the best of intentions to serve each other and serve the church and live this life founded on God's love and Christ's mercy.

Toni Nieuwhof:

Then on the other hand, just found ourselves embroiled in this cycle of conflict and negativity that we just couldn't seem to pull ourselves out of. So, I just know what it's like to be in that desperately unhappy place, and I've also now gone through the experience of what it's like to get out of that spot. For any people who find themselves where I was desperately unhappy, but not knowing what to do to get out of it, if I can jumpstart that journey for people, I am more than willing to overcome my own wiring, which tends to be very private. I tend to not have that drive to speak out, but I'll do it for the sake of helping someone who is in the same place where I was.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I don't know if you know, but I've been through a divorce, and I went through these seasons where I felt like I was failing spiritually because I wasn't happy in a human relationship. Because if you love Jesus and you say your marriage is founded on Jesus, and then you just believe enough, then everything should work out. I mean, does that sound familiar at all?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Oh, I identify with that so much, I really came into my marriage pretty quickly after meeting Carey, and also becoming a Christian. I became a Christian then Carey and I met and we were engaged and married within a year and a half. So I was still young in my Christian faith and we were starting out hitting the ground running, we were married during law school. So, our lives started out busy, but I just remember reading scripture and wondering like, "Where is the love? Where's the peace? Where's the joy?" Inside I was feeling quite numb. I know now in retrospect that I was completely emotionally unprepared for marriage.

William Vanderbloemen:

What would you have known? What was unprepared that's prepared now?

Toni Nieuwhof:

The ability to even draw close to someone, like to know what that looks like, to understand what it takes. Emotional intelligence was something that I had to learn. I'm guessing, but I think it's probably true that there's a significant portion of your audience who also had a steep learning curve, that they grew up in circumstances that were hard, maybe traumatic, and learning to be real with someone else into love and to give and to even know what that looks or feels like, can be pretty foreign.

William Vanderbloemen:

So, if you go back to the ... you guys both love Jesus, I'm assuming both miserable. What does that look like, and how did you recognize it? What did you do to address it?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Yeah, that's a great question. When we got into this negative cycle of conflict ... what we've come to realize on the other side of the journey is that we're wired completely differently. So, even our wiring was contributing to how we were carrying out our differences, we're both opinionated, we're both trained as advocates, so we could really zealously go for our own opinion and winning the other person over and showing each other that our opinion is the better one. We went with that kind of scrapping for too long. John Gottman is a marriage researcher and expert, and he's done a lot of research into what it takes to live successfully in a marriage, and what are the warning signs of the red flags for a marriage that's going off the rails.

Toni Nieuwhof:

He talks about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, he describes defensiveness criticism, stonewalling and contempt as red flags in a relationship. When you see those flags, they're dangerous signs. Unfortunately, Carey and I had just unwittingly gotten into all of them. We weren't happy with the way each other responded to home life, the way we approach parenting, we had some significant differences, but we didn't have the tools to really work through them in a way that made it emotionally safe for each other. So we got caught up in cycles of blame, and blame and shame leads you nowhere good.

Toni Nieuwhof:

We both discovered over the years that we were each seeing ourselves as the victim of the other person. This is a theme that I saw pretty much a common thread through all of the couples that I ended up sitting down at settlement tables with as a family lawyer. In every case, both people had a narrative that they were telling themselves in the background, maybe not consciously, but it was part of the force that was driving their words and behavior at the time. What I've come to discover is that, we tell ourselves these victim's stories, but the problem is, a victim story is partly true and it's partly fake, it's part fiction and part truth.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's right.

Toni Nieuwhof:

The truth aspect of it tends to take over and cloud our vision so that we lose sight of our own role. The part of it that is my own responsibility gets blurred. Unfortunately, our human tendency is to latch onto the victim story, to lay blame and then in doing so, we let ourselves off the hook. So, when I do that, it allows me to take the path of least resistance, and the path of least resistance doesn't help to resolve the conflict. I'm sorry if I'm making this sound more complicated than it should be-

William Vanderbloemen:

No, no, no, no.

Toni Nieuwhof:

But the thing is when there's a vicious cycle of conflict going on, that the problem is that you don't see your spouse the objective way you need to see them, you need to keep sight of the positive qualities and the value of the other person. All the ways that you are not tragically different, but you are wonderfully different, you are designed to be different. So, I think that Carey and I just got stuck in this really negative place, and it took us a lot of prayer and counseling and working through, and introspection and help from friends to start to see more clearly and to ditch the victim stories and stop laying blame and start assuming some personal responsibility for next step.

William Vanderbloemen:

I've talked to a lot of people over the years about divorce, our counseled couples have gone through it, and I've gone through my own counseling and I'll never get what one counselor told me at one point, he said, "William, I have never, in all of my professional career, seen a divorce where all the fault is on one side." Then he was talking about healing afterward. He said, "And I don't know anybody who heals from their divorce, who hasn't had to figure out what part was theirs and how do I learn not to do that again." Man, what I would have given to have known that when I was 20 years old or something younger, but ... and it called up, it's so funny how all the best advice sounds like something Jesus would have said, right?

William Vanderbloemen:

So, he called up this notion that Jesus said, "Hey, before you talk about the splinter in that guy's eye, why don't you get the log out of your own?" I don't think he was just trying to shut people up. We've done over 20,000 interviews with candidates and we're forever asking them, tell me about a time where you slipped or fell, tell me about valley of failure. Man, the percentage of people that begin that story with, "Well, here's where I messed up." It's very, very small. Most people start with, "Here's what happened to me." It's just a slightest ... The King James, when it talks about the serpent in the Garden of Eden said, "Now the serpent was the subtlest of the beasts."

William Vanderbloemen:

It's just such a subtle thing to say, "Here's what happened to me." I know I've been guilty of that. I don't know if you see that as a thing to consider. The name of the book is Before You Split. Before you split, it seems like one of the things I'm hearing you say is, ask yourself what part of this is yours? Is that fair?

Toni Nieuwhof:

I agree with you 100% that if I had to had these insights, some of the things that we've collected along the way, if I'd had them in my late 20s or as we were starting out, it would have been such a gift. I'd like to believe that I would have been open and fully absorbed, all of it. That's another question, but yes. It's funny, Gary Chapman says the same thing. He tells people that, maybe you think that the division of responsibility for all the unhappiness in your marriages is 90% your husband or wife, and 10% you. Let's say just for the sake of argument, that's true. Then really dig down and figure out what your 10% is, because whatever part of it is yours, regardless of what the number is, and you're not going to figure out the number anyway, at least be determined to do what it takes.

Toni Nieuwhof:

Sometimes it means you have to get through some first personal pain and you have to really be willing to look at the ways that you are deceiving yourself about what you're seeing. You actually really have to get serious about what does confession really mean? Like what does it really look like, and get serious about those things that are hard. We tried to run away from those things, but the reality is that, there's

no shortcut route to a life of beauty and freedom. You have to journey through the pain, you can't go around it, you can't avoid it, you can't deny it, you can't hide from it. You actually have to walk through the pain of your own personal junk to get to the beauty that is redemption, and that is what Christ offers us.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. If you could go back and advise the young law student, Toni, with what you know now, and some of what's in the book, what would be two or three of the key lessons that you'd say, "Hey, just learn this now and you'll save yourself a lot of pain."

Toni Nieuwhof:

I would say completely dispel any notion that you are the judge or that you have a corner on justice. Because I think in our early years, and I will just apply this to myself, I had this perspective that I was right and that I had a corner on what was going on in our conflict. I'll even give you an example of that. So let's say, Carey and I had a difference and it started to get very heated, Carey is wired as an Enneagram eight, and so he will go after a solution. Like that's just his personality and he's not doing that maliciously, he's just wired to be doggedly determined about getting to an outcome or resolving the conflict, and I'm wired differently.

Toni Nieuwhof:

So as an Enneagram five, I don't know how I feel about something in the moment, I need to and process it and maybe I'll know a few days later, but I'm not going to know it in the moment, I'm not going to experience it in the moment. So, I tend to really resist resolving something that is complicated right on the spot. In our conflict, where I would accuse Carey of being aggressive and being the one who was perpetrating the conflict, where I wanted to just be silent and let this sit, and I'm trying to keep the peace. So, I've seen myself as being the one who's the peace maker in this conflict, where that it's not really the truth. Maybe my intentions were good, I was trying to opt for peace, but it would end up sometimes slipping more into stonewalling, more withdrawing and putting up walls.

Toni Nieuwhof:

So that's not actual peacekeeping, as John Gottman labels it rightfully, it's a real problem in a relationship and it's a barrier to intimacy. So, I just came to realize that I am not the judge and really, I need to leave justice in God's hands where it should be.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow, wow. Powerful, and it starts with some self-awareness, Enneagram is a tool that we talk about all the time, but it really, whether it's Enneagram or Myers-Briggs or whatever, it's just like, "How do you know yourself well enough to serve the people you're in relationship with?"

Toni Nieuwhof:

Exactly, and how do you use it as a tool to expose your blind spots and become a more loving version of yourself so you can serve your spouse in love.

William Vanderbloemen:

So, let's shift a little bit, you talked about serving your spouse in love, here in the United States and I think in Canada as well, for the last six months we've had a lot of opportunities to serve each other in love because we can live in together a lot. Thankfully, it's been a really great time for us in our relationship and our marriage, but I know that's just not the case with everybody. So, are you hearing, and as you write this book ... I know when I write a book, I start seeing everything through the lens of that book. Are you hearing that people are having more stress than normal in their marriages? And if so, what are the stressors that you're hearing as people spend all this time together?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Spending that much time together really does either show you what's really good about your relationship or highlight the struggles you're in, and I can't even imagine what it would've been like for Carey and I to be in lockdown during our rough season. My heart goes out to people who are really struggling in their marriages and needing to spend so much time in close quarters without all the distractions that frankly, we're all used to. We're used to being out and about or on the road or at the workplace, and so all of a sudden being placed in close quarters with each other, it just highlights either the negative communication habits that you've gotten into, or snarkiness irritability.

Toni Nieuwhof:

We're also going through some grieving because frankly there are losses when we have a lifestyle change that is that drastic, we're also grieving and maybe there are financial tensions and that certainly makes it worse. So, I think we're seeing the combination of a lot of those factors that some couples are deciding that this is it, I can't tolerate this relationship anymore, and they're making the decision to get a divorce. I've heard of couples who come to that place where they're recognizing that this version of our marriage is really untenable. We can't go on this way. That's really the reason that I've written this book, because I want to intersect with couples who are at that place, because I know what that desperation is like, and I know how stuck I felt when it seemed like neither option was what I really wanted.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right.

Toni Nieuwhof:

I didn't really want to leave, and I didn't really want to live the misery that our marriage had become.

William Vanderbloemen:

So, then finish this sentence for me, before you split ... finish the sentence with one or two or three things that are like, "Yeah, these are the key ideas that I'm trying to tell you." Before you split, what?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Before you split slow down and really consider your options. I say that there's three options for a couple who are really struggling. We often think it's, "Well, do I stay or do I go?" But I really believe that, for a struggling marriage, there are three options, there's split, survive or save. Splitting is obvious, but surviving is that place where you're staying together under one roof, but you are not emotionally connected. I would really encourage a couple struggling to take stock of where you are, are you at the place where the marriage is so ... let's say it's become toxic or destructive for some reason. I would say that's a harmful marriage.

Toni Nieuwhof:

There's a difference between a harmful marriage and an unhappy one. So, I don't want to be heard as encouraging anyone who's in a situation of real harm to stay in the current circumstance, at least under one roof. There are ways to become safe and separate even if you haven't decided what you're going to do with your marriage. So, really to take stock and then for couples who are unhappy, really to step back and consider the reasons for your unhappiness. What I walk people through is, there's many different reasons you may be unhappy, and there are some next steps that you can take to own your part of what that unhappiness is.

Toni Nieuwhof:

If you're parents, let's say you have kids, and you're so unhappy, and the situation is so messy that you really don't want your kids to be exposed to what's going on, and I understand that, I know that all our listeners who are parents want the best for their kids. I know that without a doubt. When relationship gets messy and there's a lot of fighting, for example, you don't want that to impact your kids, or let's say it's a cold war and you just have this icy coldness that is developed, you don't want your kids to be exposed to that either. I get it. But the point I want to highlight is that if you have kids, you also still need to have a cooperative relationship with your partner, and it probably doesn't look like your relationship right now, if you're really struggling, it's going to have to improve.

Toni Nieuwhof:

So, as parents, I would say, what is it that you can do now to bring more peace, a more cooperative tone, more kindness, more respect, into your current circumstances? If there's one or two steps that you can take, or if there's something that you can own, or if there's an apology that you can make, that is actually going to influence the trajectory of that relationship, who knows where that will go? But you're going to need to do that work for the sake of your kids. So, I just want people to see that, if you want to separate your kids from the pain of what you're going through in your marriage, splitting may seem like it's the first and obvious step, but maybe it's not, maybe there's another step that needs to happen first, and who knows where that step might lead you in the future if you head down that path?

William Vanderbloemen:

If you talk to people who have been through divorce and say, "Ah, I wish we hadn't put people through that." I mean, you can't undo these things, but where do you hear, and what have you discovered in writing this book that people say, "Man, I wish I had done this before we decided to split."

Toni Nieuwhof:

That's exactly where some of my clients ended up, that after divorce, they needed to work out things, and usually the most difficult of them was the parenting schedule. So, it was how much time are our kids actually going to spend with each of us? I empathize with parents who were in that position of making those decisions. So, my clients would be working on that tough issue that they'd reached an impasse on. Really, they only had two choices. They could go to court and battle it out, or they could try to settle the issue somehow, and often settling the issue meant that they needed to dig a little deeper, they needed some help from a counselor.

Toni Nieuwhof:

People who had already made the decision that they were done with this relationship and they just need to make the arrangements and move on, really resisted the idea of going to a professional counselor to work together on their relationship, and I get it, because the whole point of getting the separation was that you could close that painful chapter, get a clean slate, move on, move into the future. That feels positive. So, they weren't expecting to need to go to counseling so that they could cooperate better as parents for the sake of their kids. In some cases, when they started doing that work, led them into the heart level work that then they could see that they might've been able to do if they were actually on the pre-side of their decision to divorce.

Toni Nieuwhof:

So, sometimes it not always, but in some cases there was a hint of that regret of, "Oh, what if we had done this earlier? We got forced into it because we didn't want to go to court, but what if we had just done this a few years ago?"

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I know that the book is Penguin publisher, so it's written for any and all readers, but if you go through the book, you see underpinnings of faith. It's interesting, you mentioned you and Carey's story was, "We both love Jesus, we both wanted to get married and we were miserable." Let's flip that around, how can a couple employ their faith to either bring their marriage to a survival for a while or a save?

Toni Nieuwhof:

Yeah. William, I'm glad that you mentioned the survival again, because I do want to highlight that, surviving, if you choose it as a season that you're going to go through, as you work on your connection and work on building some building intimacy and rebuilding closeness, that's a good thing. We had to do that, we had to survive for a long season, as you mentioned, pulled out our tools of faith and prayed together and prayed on our own for insight. Pray the prayer that is vulnerable, asks Jesus to shine his light on the darkness in me, so I can see it like illuminate it for me please, because I need to be able to see it and then surrender it and then confess and ask for forgiveness.

Toni Nieuwhof:

In taking those steps, I would say, scripture was invaluable. It gave me strength during the tough season. Psalm 34 says that, "God is close to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed spirit." In that broken place, just having the confidence that, that is a promise. It's not just a good idea. Jesus actually does draw near to the brokenhearted, whether we can see it at the time or not. That was critical [crosstalk 00:32:09]

William Vanderbloemen:

It's interesting, that Psalm was one of the first ones I preached from ever, and growing up in the South, the kind of the buckle of the Bible belt in the Southern United States, when you say, use your faith so you don't get divorced, what I would have heard growing up is, you read the scriptures that say, "Don't get divorced." Use your faith because Christians get divorced. I'm not hearing that from you though. I'm hearing vulnerability, I'm hearing confession, I'm hearing forgiveness, I'm hearing soulless and that the faith is not ... well, we just don't do that, it's more of a way to dig past the pain into a different spot. Am I hearing that right?



Toni Nieuwhof:

Yes. I do think that our faith is all tied up in the Trinity, Jesus the son of Redeemer, God the Father and the Holy Spirit. It took years for me to really understand that the Holy Spirit is meant to be our supernatural force of power and passion and purity. There's a supernatural power of the Holy Spirit that only operates if we are actually open to it. If we invite the Holy Spirit in, we also have to be willing to face the pain of what the spirit actually reveals to us. For example, I mentioned stonewalling, that part of my unloving junk that I was bringing into our marriage, I had to be willing to face and to name it for what it is, and to confess it to Carey, and to acknowledge the pain that I had caused him by not fully engaging and not bringing love, withdrawing myself.

Toni Nieuwhof:

Everybody is much in offense in an intimate relationship as is being aggressive or any number of other things, we all bring our junk. So, the Holy Spirit's meant to bring us on a path toward purity. The only way that we can take those steps is to actually focus on what is the log in my eye? I think Jesus called it a log for a reason. For one thing, it blinds us. If you can imagine having a plank or a log in your eye.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's good.

Toni Nieuwhof:

I think he makes that larger than life contrast between the plank and the speck of sawdust, because one of them is the really obvious focus for my attention. There's no point me focusing on that little speck of sawdust, I think it's also, Jesus' way of telling us that, focusing on the speck of sawdust is not going to be effective, it's going to be irrelevant, because one speck of sawdust out of a whole plank is such a tiny part. The part that I have to focus on is the log in my [crosstalk 00:35:51]

William Vanderbloemen:

Adrian's grandmother used to say [inaudible 00:35:54] of the depression, went through World War II and all this. She said, "When life got really out of control, I found that I did best to find the things I could control and focus on those things." That sounds like what you're saying here. You can't even control the sawdust, that's the issue, but the one thing you can control.

Toni Nieuwhof:

The one thing I can control is how I am bringing love into this marriage, and what version of myself am I offering to Carey. I didn't see that for a long time. So basically, my writing exposes all the ways that I made mistakes, William, and all the things that I really hope that people will see, and maybe there's something in the book that will just help jumpstart a couple out of their unhappiness. If that would happen, I would be thrilled.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think that your book couldn't come out at a better time. I think the families are under pressure, like never before. I hope our listeners know, and I'm certainly not hearing it from you that this is not the ... if you've been divorced you're a bad person or you're evil or not even ... I mean, God hates divorce, so do I, but sometimes it actually is the option. I wouldn't say it's the common option, but I will say, of the couples I've talked to, I only know a couple that say, "I wish I had gotten divorced sooner." So, most

people ... it was a rushed thing. So, I'm just hoping people will pick up the book and say, "Okay, before we split, life's too short to go on miserable, but life's also too short to go on with the scar tissue that happens if you rush into this.

William Vanderbloemen:

So, you can pick up the book *Before You Split* in January, and it's through Penguin and we've got all of that in our show notes. Toni, any parting advice you'd give to couples that are out there listening right now, they're like, "I love Jesus, but I'm miserable." Any final thoughts?

Toni Nieuwhof:

I really just want to pick up on your comment about people being bad people if they've divorced. I think nothing can be farther from the truth. I want anyone, regardless of what experiences they've been through in the past to hear the message that they're loved, lovable, valuable, unique, God is captivated by each one, and the God's intentions are loving and pure. So, I don't want anyone to hear any tone of judgment through this book. I just want people to slow down and maybe look at themselves and their circumstances and their marriage from a different perspective before deciding what next step would be best.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Well, I really appreciate your work and I'm glad to have spent some time with the better of the Nieuwhofs.

Toni Nieuwhof:

I wouldn't say that's the case, William, but I've loved this conversation. So, thank you.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I think it's going to be super helpful. Of all the things COVID disrupted and continues to disrupt, one that really didn't make the headlines is, it's disrupting homes and marriages. So, please do get a copy of the book or pass it along to a friend, or just buy it for a friend, right? You can get all that through our show notes, if you don't get our show notes, just go to [vandernews.com](http://vandernews.com) and enter your email address, we won't bombard you with a bunch of emails, but we'll send you some show notes and point you toward Toni and her podcast and this book. Toni, thank you so much for making time for us today. This has been a delight, and I think it's going to be a blessing to many.

Toni Nieuwhof:

Well, my pleasure, and thank you again.

William Vanderbloemen:

Thanks for listening, and I hope you'll tune in again next week, as we have another great conversation about leadership in an unprecedented time.

Anna Baker:

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