

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Felt and True

*Why Good People Aren't Always Good Partners,
and Good Partners Aren't Always Good People*

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An excerpt from the forthcoming book

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ABOUT THIS SAMPLE

Felt and True is a short book for couples in the middle years of a partnership. It argues that a partnership has two axes, not one. Character, the person a partner actually is when the conditions get harder. Artistry, how that care reaches the other person in the daily texture of life together. A large gap between the two, in either direction, is not a trade-off to accept. It is a signal to read.

This sample contains Chapter 3, A Zambian Frame. It is the book's pivot chapter, and the one in which the argument is grounded inside the kin-embedded traditions of Zambian marital teaching. It is reproduced in full and without alteration. The complete book runs to nineteen thousand words across thirteen chapters, three interludes, a prologue, an epilogue, and an appendix, and will be published on Amazon Kindle and paperback in 2026.

A Zambian Frame

Seven days after the wedding, the bride is brought to the compound of her husband's eldest aunt. The visit is nominally a formality. It is not. On the Copperbelt, among Bemba families, the senior aunts have been expecting her. They have been told things during the week. They will tell other things afterwards. What they observe this evening will travel.

The bride greets. She kneels without haste, without drama. She holds the kneel. She greets the aunts in order of seniority, beginning with the one whose knees are stiffest, because someone told her a month ago which aunt had the stiffest knees, and she remembered. When the eldest aunt is handed her cup of tea, the bride does not reach for her own until the aunt has taken the first sip. None of this is written down. All of it is noted.

Much of the Western relationship canon treats the couple as the unit of analysis. Two people meet, test their compatibility, form a dyad, and either succeed or fail in something the dyad itself is asked to produce. Families appear in that frame as complications, obstacles, or warm backgrounds, but rarely as participants in the work.

In a Zambian context, the unit is different. Marriage is not a contract between two individuals who happen to invite their families to the ceremony. It is an alliance between families which is consummated, represented, and daily tested through the couple at its centre. The bride on her post-wedding visit is not being received by relatives in a social sense. She is being assessed by parties who have a stake in whether the alliance holds, and whose assessment will carry weight in how the union is supported, corrected, or, if necessary, dissolved.

This changes what character means, and how it is detected.

In a purely dyadic frame, character is largely inferred from how a partner behaves when the two of them are alone. The problem is that behaviour in the two-person setting is relatively easy to curate. A person of ordinary self-awareness can manage their conduct well enough, for long enough, to fool a partner for years. In a kin-embedded frame, the curation becomes much

harder. Character must hold up under the observation of many. How a person treats an aunt they do not like. How they show up at a funeral that falls on a busy week. Whether they remember the names of nieces and nephews. Whether they extend themselves to a cousin who cannot reciprocate. These are not peripheral data about the person. They are the central evidence.

The two-axis model still holds under these conditions. Character and artistry remain distinct. What shifts is the visibility of the character axis. Community makes character harder to hide and harder to fake. Witnesses do not merely observe; they correct, advise, warn, and, when the moment calls for it, confront.

Artistry, in many Western accounts, is coded as public affection, verbal declaration, and romantic gesture. Candlelit dinners. Public compliments. The articulated “I love you” delivered in the right register at the right time.

Zambian artistry is usually quieter. It lives in care rituals. The particular relish a husband likes, prepared on the day he needs exactly that relish, without a word said about why. The braiding done without impatience when the day has already been long. The ironed shirt laid out the night before a presentation the partner did not know you knew was tomorrow. The remembering of a nephew's graduation, a cousin's new job, the people whose lives form the mesh around the lives you share.

The grand gesture is not absent from Zambian partnership. Engagements are marked. Anniversaries are noticed. Chilanga mulilo, the post-engagement ceremony in which the bride's family presents the food and household essentials the couple will begin their life with, is itself an artistry of family toward a new union. But these are punctuation marks. The substance of artistry lies between them, in the daily texture, in what is sometimes called service and should more accurately be called attention.

There is a temptation, in a book written partly for Western readers, to flatten this into a generalisation about “African cultures” being less verbal, less demonstrative, more practical. The generalisation is untrue and does the subject a disservice. Zambian partnerships include declaration, flirtation, erotic playfulness, and verbal affection. Watch any Zambian couple in the third year of marriage when they think no one is looking, and you will see as much laughter, as much teasing, and as much tenderness as in any other culture. The idiom is different. The substance is not missing.

What is distinctive is not the absence of declaration but the weight placed on its alternatives. In the Zambian idiom, a husband who says “I love you”

every morning and forgets his wife's uncle's funeral has not shown love. A wife who cannot remember the last time she said the words but who has been preparing her husband's favourite breakfast for seven years has. The idiom rewards demonstration over declaration, noticing over announcing. Artistry still has to be received to count. What changes is the currency in which it must be paid.

The practices of pre-marital and post-marital instruction in Zambia have long taken both dimensions of partnership seriously. Among the Bemba, banachimbusa, the senior women who carry the ceremonial knowledge of marriage, teach brides a curriculum that includes both character-as-duty and artistry-as-craft. In Chewa and Nsenga contexts, the alangizi perform a parallel function. Among the Tonga, the role is distributed differently but not absent. The specific practices vary across ethnic groups and are not identical, and to pretend they are is to lose what is most interesting about them.

What is worth noting is that these institutions have, in their own idiom, long distinguished between the two axes the book is organised around.

The character instruction covers how to handle in-laws, how to manage household money, how to conduct oneself under the scrutiny of witnesses. It addresses fidelity, patience, and the small corruptions that erode a marriage over years. It is, in essence, teaching about the person one is becoming rather than the partner one is performing.

The artistry instruction is different. It covers the care rituals, the management of intimacy, the domestic choreography that makes a home a place a partner wants to return to. It includes the explicitly erotic. It includes the subtleties of emotional attention that the book has been calling artistry. The banachimbusa do not use the word artistry. They teach it anyway.

Two honest observations about these practices must be held alongside their wisdom.

The first is that the instruction has historically been directed at women more than men. Brides receive elaborate preparation. Grooms, in most traditions, receive far less. This asymmetry has produced predictable damage across generations: wives groomed into a sophisticated understanding of both dimensions, husbands left to improvise. The consequence is unequal labour in the maintenance of a union, and the book should not pretend otherwise.

The second is that modern adaptations are changing the balance. Urban banachimbusa and alangizi increasingly prepare couples together. Marriage-

preparation programmes run by churches and counsellors extend instruction to men. The old forms are being repaired from within, not abandoned.

The point for the argument of this book is that the two-axis model is not a Western imposition being applied to a Zambian setting. The distinction has been inside Zambian marital teaching for as long as that teaching has existed. What is new is the naming, not the noticing.

Every generation of Zambian couples since independence has moved further from the village of witnesses than the one before.

The Copperbelt-to-Lusaka move, common for professionals in the 1990s and 2000s, removed couples from extended family and placed them in neighbourhoods where their neighbours were strangers and their aunts were a phone call away. The Lusaka-to-Johannesburg move, common over the past two decades, added a border. The Zambia-to-UK, Zambia-to-Canada, Zambia-to-Australia moves, increasingly common among the professional class and the healthcare diaspora, added an ocean. Each move strips a layer of witness.

The couple that would once have been held accountable by a network of aunts, uncles, cousins, and church elders now holds itself, alone, in a flat in Stevenage or Perth or Sandton. The correction that would have come from outside when one partner began drifting does not come. The advice a young husband would have received from his senior uncles about a rough patch in the first year is replaced by a WhatsApp call in which the uncle struggles to read what is actually happening through the pixelated signal of a video chat.

This raises the stakes of the two-axis model considerably. Under scarcity of witnesses, internal character matters more, not less, because the external correction has thinned. A partner whose character only performs under observation becomes dangerous in a diasporic setting, because the observation has been removed. The artistry becomes more visible, because there are fewer other relationships competing for attention. And the character becomes more consequential, because there is no community to absorb the consequences of its failure.

The book addresses readers in villages, towns, cities, and diasporas. The model applies to all of them. Its weightings shift with context.

The two-axis model is not Western or Zambian. It is human. What the Zambian frame reveals is what a purely dyadic frame misses.

It reveals that character has always been read in community, and that the modern reader who tries to read it in private is working with fewer instruments than previous generations had. It reveals that artistry has always

been textured more than declared, and that a relationship language built around declaration alone is a partial language. It reveals that traditional instruction, despite its asymmetries and its limitations, understood something contemporary relationship writing has largely forgotten: that being a good person and being a good partner are distinct competencies, and that both can be taught.

The chapters that follow can be read in both frames at once. The first-date coffee in Johannesburg and the chilanga mulilo in Lusaka are shaped by the same underlying mechanism. The partner tested in private and the partner tested in front of an aunt are revealing the same axis. A Zambian reader may feel, reading what follows, that the language is slightly more their own than the relationship canon usually allows. A non-Zambian reader may feel that a frame they had not thought to use has opened up a dimension of their own partnership. Both experiences are intended.

THANK YOU FOR READING

If you have read this far, you have read roughly a tenth of the book. The rest moves from concept to mechanism to lived texture, with three realist interludes set in Lusaka, the Copperbelt, and Livingstone, and closes with a practical chapter on the conversations most couples skip.

The author would welcome an honest review once the book is published, whether on Amazon, Goodreads, or in any publication where you write. Honest readings are more useful than kind ones, and both are welcome.

For enquiries, queries, or advance feedback on the sample, please reach the author directly.

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