

▶ **A Living, Breathing State of Grace by Maureen K. McCarthy**
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When my husband, Zelle, and I met eleven years ago, before there was ever a stressful moment or tense argument, I told him something I had never told anyone before.

"When I'm really stressed," I said, "I run. Give me the keys to the car and let me out of here. I don't want to process anything with you, I don't want to discuss it, I just want to run. It's a pattern I've had for most of my life, and one that has weakened several relationships over time. But here's the part, Zelle, that I've never told anyone: *when I run, what I really want is for someone to come after me.* I want to know that even in my monster moments, it's still possible for someone to love me. But trust me, I said, my behavior and my words in that moment will scream the exact opposite, which is why no one has ever even considered coming after me."



"So here's how it will go, and I can tell you this is how it will play out because I've done it many times over in the course of my life. You and I will get into an argument and I will yell something at you like 'I'm outta here, I've had enough of this!' And then I'll stomp

out of the room. *And I want you to follow me.* Then I'll go into another room and slam the door in your face. *And I want you to open the door and walk in.* Then I will scream at you to leave me alone because I want nothing to do with you. *And I want you to come and sit down beside me.* Then I will tell you to get the hell away from me. *And I want you to put your arm around me.* Then I will physically push you away. *And I want you to hold on tight and not let me go.*"

Of course this sounds ridiculous when I say it, even humorous. Zelle actually laughed at the thought of me ever being so intense, because it's far from how I usually show up in the world. But as I shared this pattern with him, I realized that running was a way for me to remove myself from the situation before I said something I would regret. It also was a way to find my center again. When I stayed in an argument, I found it hard to find enough space to calm down and work toward peace.

So two times in the first couple of months of being together, Zelle and I found ourselves in a big blow-up. And I'm not sure how he did it, but Zelle followed my request both times. Even though every word and action I displayed said go away, he kept coming until I softened and fell into his arms. It was remarkable. I thought that by sharing this part of me before we ever found ourselves in a heated moment might possibly mean someone would come after me every time I ran. But the reality of the situation was one I never anticipated! When he came after me those two times, the power of running completely vanished. It's as if just one person showing me that I was lovable in my worst of times had made running unnecessary. And in the eleven years we've been together, I have not run from an argument since! And what really blows my mind, is that I have not run from an argument with *anyone* in my life since then.



And that has dramatically altered the course of my life and healed many long-term relationships that are now stronger than I thought possible.

Zelle calls the information I passed on to him early in our relationship the “*What to Do in Case of Fire Manual*.” He says that knowing ahead of time that this has been my history with others, helped him not to take my reaction so personally. He didn’t have to blame himself, trigger his own negative thoughts, or go into his life-long pattern of turning inward and shutting down. He had another option at his disposal, which would put out the fire and return both of us to a good place. And in a moment of uncertainty, as I slammed that door in his face, he thought ‘What have I got to lose?’ and he embraced it.

The impetus for sharing my running pattern with Zelle was born out of a tool he and I created at the start of our relationship, called the Blueprint of WE, and the Document has proved an insightful guide to how to interact with each other in our relationship. It is now being used in 50+ countries around the world to build healthier business and personal relationships. It is often being used to replace or enhance traditional legal contracts. They are being used by corporations, schools, non-profits, families, couples, friends, partners, tenants, siblings, communities, etc.



When we met, I had just come through three intense, personal experiences that would deeply impact my perspective on beginning a new relationship. First, at age 32, I was coming into the year when doctors told me I would die from the rare, fatal lung disease I had been diagnosed with a few years earlier. Second, I had just come out of my 10-year marriage to my former husband, Bill, whom I still adored and wanted to keep in my life, as we had no desire to be enemies while we transitioned our relationship. And third, I had gone into business with my best friend, whom I had successfully worked with for many years, and it painfully ended when she asked me to leave. She didn’t speak to me for 3 years, and I felt more traditionally divorced from her than I did from Bill.

When Zelle came into my life it was a complete surprise. I did not leave my marriage to find someone else or something better. In fact, I thought I’d be dead before another relationship would even enter my consciousness. As for Zelle, prior to meeting me he had lost the then love of his life when she chose to move back to Sweden, and he was in a very painful place. On our second date Zelle said to me, “I just need you to know that you and I could be together for 30 years and have 10 kids, but if she ever comes knocking on the door, just know that I’m gone.” Well, I looked around the restaurant that night and asked him, “Is she here right now? It doesn’t look like it. So that’s fine with me.” I thought I would be dead before she came knocking, so it wasn’t a problem. I was able to truly be in the moment that evening, whereas most women would have walked out the door. (*Zelle’s desire to wait for her has since completely disappeared.*) One of the greatest gifts I’ve ever been given was that neither one of us felt the need to measure up the other against forever. And even years later we still choose one another every day, forever is not a given. So if it wasn’t forever, what exactly were we aiming for?

During an enjoyable dinner conversation about a month into our relationship, Zelle and I agreed that our ultimate goal in the relationship was to be in a state of grace the rest of our lives. We knew too many people who found themselves in strained relationships that continued to have a negative hold on them even years after the relationship ended, and that wasn’t of interest to us. When we gravitated toward the term “state of grace,” we weren’t thinking of it in a religious or even spiritual context. For us, the word grace actually conjured up the image of Fred Astaire and

Ginger Rogers dancing. Don't they make it look effortless? Like you could just get up and do it yourself? That's what we wanted our relationship to be: a foundation of strength built at the start, which would enable our day-too-day interactions to be more effortless, more graceful. We didn't want to fix what was broken down the line, we wanted to build a more solid relationship from the beginning that would make stressful times a little blip on the screen rather than an enormous hurdle to overcome.

Arriving home after dinner that night, I thought that our commitment to being in a state of grace sounded good, but could we actually ensure our success? That "in love" state we all go through in any relationship, whether business or personal, makes us believe that it will always be this good. But relationships often take unexpected turns.

With the idea of creating a strong foundation in mind, I sat down that night and wrote my half of the first Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document. The next day I showed it to Zelle and asked him if he would write his half, and then we would merge them together. Luckily he jumped at the idea.

A Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document is made up of five components of which each person writes and shares with the others involved in the relationship, whether its two people or an entire organization. The Document is, in essence, the building and exchanging of "the blueprint of me" in order to create a more effortless, less stressful and ultimately far more enjoyable daily relationship. It also acts as a third party mediator to bring people back to peace if the need arises.



The 5 Components of a Personal or Business Blueprint of WE are:

1. The Story of Us
2. Interaction Styles and Warning Signs
3. Expectations
4. Questions to Return to Peace
5. Short Term and Long Term Agreements



1. The Story Of Us

This Is The Story Of The Individuals As They See One Another While Things Are Going Smoothly. It's Written From Their Own Viewpoint In Order To Capture The Affirmative Perspective, And Remind Us Why We Are Drawn To This Situation Or Person In The First Place. In The Event That Things Go Astray, And We Lose Sight Of What We Once Found So Amazing, The Story Of Us Can Link Us Back To What We Love. When Zelle And I Created Our Story Of Us, I Wrote The Story Of How We Met And Why I Was Drawn To Having Him In My Life. I Talked About The Things I Loved About Him And What Inspired Me To Choose Him At This Time In My Life. Capturing These Thoughts In Writing Enables Us To Be Very Present And Have A Heightened Awareness Of Who We Are Together. It Also Allows Us The Ability To Look Back, As We Move Forward, To See If The Story Is Changing, And If Our Relationship Needs To Change To Accommodate Where We Are.



2. Interaction Styles And Warning Signs

This is the section where I told Zelle about my pattern of running. In this section each person creates a bullet-pointed list of his or her Interaction Styles and Warning Signs. The

Interaction Styles are an account of how you generally like to work and live. Do you need to think out loud with a group, work alone at times, need an agenda? Do you tend to prefer quiet time, are you high energy, direct when you communicate, do you lean towards the optimistic? Interaction Styles deal with how each person likes things done, what's non-negotiable, what their preferences are, etc.

The Warning Signs is a list of the external clues you may show as signs of stress. The behaviors you exhibit right before things spin out of control. Are you less patient, do you immerse yourself deeper in your work, become a perfectionist, tap your pen on the table?

And most importantly, when you show these signs, *how might someone help you pull out of the spiral?* Tell them *now*, because in the moment, it might feel impossible to say what you really need. Come talk to me; give me space, then talk to me; help me see the data so I can step back from the emotional; offer me a back rub; encourage me to go for a walk, reassure me, etc. Warning Signs are the behaviors each person tends to display when things begin to go awry. Knowing these up front, and having someone tell you how to best assist, can alleviate a great deal of miscommunication and assumption that lead to a downward spiral. This is the part that truly is "the blueprint of me." When we share who we are and how we operate, we have a much greater chance of gracefully dancing together.



3. Expectations

The Expectations section in the Document is a place to list the type of things contracts traditionally cover in terms of what's to be done, agreed upon, or intentioned. This is also the space to let the other person know what overall expectations you have about the particular type of relationship you've entered into. Some people even place a traditional legal contract into the Expectations section, or attach a Blueprint of WE as an addendum to a legal contract. Which means their Document would be seen by a judge if it ever came to that.



4. Questions To Return To Peace

If during a stressful moment you could call in the perfect third party mediator, who might that be? Mother Theresa, Buddha, Martin Luther King, your grandmother? When you're in a peaceful place, it's much easier to call in the wisdom of not only people such as these, but your own higher wisdom as well. The Questions section of the Document is meant to hold this higher wisdom for when you desperately need to access it, but it appears to have vanished. Each person writes a list of Questions they commit to answer with one another to help them return to a state of peace if the need arises. Questions like:

- What am I afraid of?
- What do we need to say that we haven't been saying?
- What do I need from you right now?
- Does money play a part in this situation?
- What do I gain by continuing/ending this relationship?
- Is it time to redefine or redirect our work together?



5. Short And Long-term Agreements

Part of creating a Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document is also agreeing to a limited amount of time that can elapse before agreeing to come together to go over the Document. For Zelle and I it's three hours. If we feel out of a state of grace, we commit to sitting down within three hours and beginning the process of finding our way back to peace, even if the conclusion is that the relationship container as we know it needs to change. The timeframe you choose depends on your temperament, style of relating to one another, and to what degree you need alone time before you can calm down enough to have a more loving conversation. Once

you acknowledge the need for the conversation, each person re-reads the Document in order to re-orient themselves with the other person. Then they go over the Questions together.

The parties also agree on a Long-term timeframe of five years or more to find peace if the unimaginable happens and they can't seem to use their Document before then. They also agree that if they can't manage to come together, they commit to no outright harm of the other person. They will not speak negatively to others, or purposely create more pain for the other person.

Creating a Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document with Zelle all those years ago was a bright stroke of luck. It has enabled us to be completely present in our relationship which I believe has enabled us to be far more in love today than we were when we met. This relationship is better than any book or fairy tale I've read or movie I've ever seen. It is beyond what I thought existed in the world and it's made for an extremely stress-free life. It is now 10 years after my doctors told me I'd be dead from the fatal lung disease I still have. And I am certain their prediction would have come to fruition if I had not had a life that was so effortless and graceful.

Maureen K. McCarthy is Director of the Center for Collaborative Awareness and is the co-creator of the Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document with her business partner and husband, Zelle Nelson. As Maureen worked within corporations and communities large and small, she realized that rather than fixing what was broken, she was drawn to pioneering new foundations that would build healthier individuals and groups from the start. The Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document is one of those foundational tools, which is now being used in 100+ countries around the world in both business and personal settings. Visit www.blueprintofwe.com to download the concept paper and sample Documents to create your own Blueprint of WE Collaboration Documents. Maureen and Zelle teach and speak on the Blueprint of WE in many parts of the world, as well as offering a Facilitator Certification Program and online classes. You can reach Maureen at maureen@blueprintofwe.com. She lives in Asheville, NC, USA.