Tour the “Zone of Us”

John and Denise were an ambitious, driven couple. They met in their last year in college. They married at age 25 when John finished his MBA, and Denise had already started her career in a small start-up company. She took a topsy-turvy career ride, quickly becoming the manager of several fast-growing departments. Of course, they wanted kids. Their early marriage welcomed two children, and later they had an unplanned pregnancy and the birth of their third child. By age 38, they had an 11-year-old, an 8-year-old, and a toddler.

Their success allowed them to buy their dream home. John took up golf to utilize his business contacts. Denise couldn’t be home much, so they both tackled the home front like a tag team. Denise went to the gym every morning at 6:15 AM before putting in a 10-hour day at the office. The 11-year-old and 8-year-old had sports teams that required one or both parents on the weekend. The toddler needed time to be with Mommy or Daddy after daycare. After dinner, the kids went to bed early, but the second job of laundry and cleaning up kiddy messes exhausted them both, until they fell in bed, hardly saying goodnight. They knew how hard the other person worked, and were appreciative, but by year 13 of their marriage, nothing pleasant was happening between them. They could not enjoy each other’s company because they had no emotional space for it. Every bit of their life involved the tyranny of the immediate needs of work and family.

Before I tell you more about Denise and John, let me highlight the issue that couples

often talk about in therapy. “I married my best friend. What happened?” Sometimes it

is hard to understand why you do not feel emotionally close to your partner. Everything

on the outside looks fine, and you are getting through your daily routine. But your day

can be laced with inner loneliness. Both of you feel it and may express it in different

ways. “We need to have more sex!” “If he would just help with the kids, I would feel like

he is there for me.”