

Maintaining the Romance in Marriage Elders' & Deacons' Meetings - September, 2011

Let us embark on this topic with a couple of stories. The first is called, "Looking Good." "Soon after our last child left home for college, my husband was resting next to me on the couch with his head in my lap. I carefully removed his glasses. 'You know, honey,' I said sweetly, 'without your glasses you look like the same handsome young man I married. 'Honey,' he replied with a grin, 'without my glasses, you still look pretty good, too.'" A second brief exchange that may not enhance relationships went like this; a wife who is in the kitchen enquires of her husband who is watching TV in the living room " 'What's on the TV?' He replied, 'dust.'" Of course, the whole intent of what I just related is humor, but it has an element of truth in it as we live out our marital lives for better or for worse. As one wife said after a period of time had past, "I took him for better or for worse and I found out he was a whole lot worse than I took him for." Well, I guess there were some surprises for us all as the honeymoon ended and we got down to the real business of living together as husbands and wives.

Maintaining the romance in marriage is a big topic with perhaps a less than competent presenter. You know the old saying, "Those who can do; those who can't teach." However, I will make an attempt at providing some thoughts on this topic, some of which are my own and some of which have been borrowed from others. Some I have put into practice and others I just promise to get around to some day. Irene has heard all of this before, or at least the "I'll get around to it someday" line.

Married couples over the process of many years make some significant purchases that they put a lot of thought and effort and money into. One of the most common major purchases is a house and the property that goes with it. It may be years before the mortgage on that home is paid in full. They see it as an investment as well as a very important need for the family. They may visualize the day when they can sell that property for a lot more than they paid for it because real estate tends to appreciate in value.

As a homeowner, there are some accompanying responsibilities, one of which is maintenance. What breaks down must be fixed or replaced. The yard requires care, the garden needs to be weeded, wooden structures need repainting, shingles and siding will require replacement and the rotting deck needs attention and on and on it goes ad nauseam. In addition, from time to time it will be necessary to redecorate, remodel and install some modern upgrades. It would be a foolish property owner who neglected the necessary upkeep and who expected to receive full value for dilapidated property, rundown and entirely out of fashion.

Similarly, the vehicles that we find so necessary and put so much money into need repair and maintenance if they are to run at peak performance. In fact, if we neglect the maintenance, we may find that they become unreliable and thus leave us stranded on the road. Maintenance of material things is of utmost importance if we want good performance and we want to extend their life. We take this as a given when we purchase something that is subject to wear and tear and deterioration.

Now, isn't it odd that we have no trouble understanding the concept of maintaining consumer products, but somehow think it is different with human relationships? The ceremony is over, the fanfare has subsided, the vows have been said and the honeymoon has waxed and waned and now comes the reality of living together as husband and wife. How can we possibly think that this relationship can survive without regular maintenance? What I want to talk to you about are some ways in which married couples might keep their marriage in good running order and at peak performance. It will require maintenance on the part of both parties. This is not a one-sided effort and in that there must be mutual agreement.

Quite some time ago I read a book titled "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey. In one of the chapters he presents an interesting concept. He uses a bank account as a comparison to deposits and withdrawals in human relationships. We all know what happens when we make withdrawals from a bank account and never make any deposits. The account becomes depleted or maybe even overdrawn and cheques may be returned N.S.F. Similarly, in our marital or other relationships, we can easily overdraw the emotional bank account if we do not balance deposits and withdrawals. When we continually take from a marriage and never give back to it, that relationship could become strained, it may fracture and it may even end. Constant taking and never giving is one of the characteristics of immaturity.

Let me try to explain by example. If you are the kind of husband who, for some reason, forgets to inform your wife that you will be late for supper or for some other commitment that is important to her, you are making withdrawals. You are failing to communicate and such failures can cause friction in marriages. If you are the kind of wife who cannot seem to resist impulse buying and your husband is constantly coming home to "new surprises" as a result of uncontrolled spending, you are making withdrawals that may cause conflict.

How can we compensate for withdrawals such as these? I submit to you that this is possible through dialogue and changing behavior. None of us change overnight, but if there is a sincere desire to please our mates, a real desire to change and by asking God to help us, we can begin to balance the account with some significant deposits. Now I will briefly focus on ways in which we can build the emotional bank account by making deposits:

1. **Understanding the other person – understanding comes from listening, observing, empathizing, and dialogue. When we understand and are understood, it triggers a powerful bonding experience in a relationship.**
2. **Attend to small things – little kindnesses and courtesies make big deposits. This will be dealt with later when I talk about practical maintenance ideas.**
3. **Keeping commitments – keeping them is a major deposit; breaking them, a major withdrawal. Keeping promises builds trust.**
4. **Clarifying expectations – it takes communication to clarify the expectations that a husband and wife hold for each other. When expectations are clear most people try to honor those expectations.**
5. **Showing personal integrity – loyalty, honesty, truthfulness, and maturity. You recognize, respect and honor the dignity of your spouse.**
6. **Apologize sincerely – a sincere apology is a deposit that helps to heal and mend. An insincere apology attaches conditions to it and is therefore a withdrawal.**

Marriages, like vehicles, require regular maintenance. Here are four general maintenance features that every marriage should possess: (1) Love is the oil that keeps friction from developing in the marriage. The Holy Spirit causes love to flow in our marriages and we are enriched and empowered by that Spirit, (2) Communication keeps the light of understanding flowing between husband and wife, (3) Forgiveness is “the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it” (Mark Twain). Forgiveness heals hurts and offences that we all have experienced in our marriages, (4) Headship and submission is a biblical concept that, when fully understood, result in a husband and wife living together in unity and harmony.

Here are a few practical maintenance ideas, some of which you will reject as ridiculous, others you will have already put in place and others you may think are worth an attempt. You be the judge.

I have been reading a book titled More Stories from the Heart and one of the items that I came across is called “50 Promises for Marriage.” If I do not have time to get through them all, you will be able to read them in the handout. Here they are:

1. **Start each day with a kiss. It’s easy, doesn’t cost anything and doesn’t consume a lot of time.**
2. **Wear your wedding ring at all times. The ring is a reminder of the vow you made to one woman and her alone. It also tells anyone who may be interested that you are married. You are committed.**

3. **Accept differences.** Even husbands and wives do not always agree about everything. When the difference becomes a source of conflict is where the problem arises. However, there are those things that are so fundamental to a good marriage relationship that there should be basic agreement or understanding before marriage. We should hardly get ourselves bent out of shape over something of little consequence or of only passing significance. Whether the toilet seat is up or down when I want to use it matters not a whit to me. I'll just put it in the position that serves my purpose in using it. There will be no words exchanged.
4. **Be polite.** There are some things best left unsaid. Because you think it does not mean that you have to say it. I have trouble with this. When I say something on the sarcastic side, my wife will say, "Was that really necessary?" Or "That's sarcasm, you know! Politeness is accomplished in many ways, but mainly by what we do and say.
5. **Be gentle.** Philippians 4: 5, "Let your gentleness be known to all men" (NKJV). "This noun identifies a person who manifests a calmness and fairness of spirit. A person who is gentle is willing to sacrifice his or her own personal rights to show consideration to others" (Nelson Study Bible, p. 2005). It is especially true that one should be gentle and kind to one's spouse.
6. **Give gifts.** A gift does not have to have a high price tag. A card is a gift. It can be for an occasion or it can be a surprise. I think most women like surprises and men don't mind them either. The most important aspect of gift giving and surprises is that the person will like what you do. You know or should know what your wife/husband likes.
7. **Smile often.** A smile is a universal language. Everyone understands what a smile conveys. "I like what you said. I like what you did. Your kindness makes me happy. That was so considerate of you. "
8. **Date once in a while.** When you make a promise to your spouse, there must be a good reason to break that promise. Therefore, when you make a date to do something together, you are more likely to carry through on whatever you have agreed to do. Remember, when you were going together, you looked forward to being together and doing things together.
9. **Touch.** There is something about touch that is very special and especially from the person you are in love with. It conveys feelings of affection without a word being spoken. There are times when a touch or a hug will speak louder than words.
10. **Talk about dreams.** What are some future dreams that you want to see fulfilled. Plan to make them come true, knowing it will take effort and setting aside time to work on whatever it is you have agree upon.
11. **Select a song that can be "our song."** A song that has been important to Irene and me is one that we asked my father to play on the violin on our wedding day. Whenever I hear it, I think of the day we were married.
12. **Give back rubs.** This is another form of touch that can be therapeutic as well as romantic.

13. Laugh together. I have read where laughter is an excellent form of therapy. Somehow one feels better after a good laugh. Cultivate humor in your relationship, even if it means at times laughing at yourself. Someone said, "He who has learned to laugh at himself will never cease to be amused."
14. Send a card for no reason. She may even enjoy receiving it through the mail or email or text message or hand delivered. The point is you are demonstrating that you are thinking of her and you took the time to find a nice card that expresses how you feel about this special person. If you have the courage you can even write your own little love letter or poem to her. I have written many poems to Irene over our 42 years of marriage. I know there is nothing particularly profound about any of them, but they are personal and they attempt to relate my feeling of deep love for her. Here is one of them.

To Irene on Mother's Day - May 11, 2009

Winter is past with its cold and snow;
Green shoots appear and warm breezes blow.
The singing of birds heralds the spring's debut
And the backyard's teeming with life anew.

Lilies have sprouted; daylight's increased;
Winter's cruel grip has now been released.
The month of May will bring spring showers;
The nourishment needed for June flowers.

How appropriate it is for Mother's Day
To annually fall on a Sunday in May.
For mothers are like the spring of the year,
As they've given life to their offspring, so dear.

I appreciate you as mother and wife,
As you have done so much to enrich my life.
Like the flowers of summer your fragrance grows
And in the garden of God, you are a ROSE.

With my love,
Mervin

15. Do what the other person wants before he or she asks. It may be hard to read the other person's mind, but after living with your spouse for many years, you have learned to respond to his/her needs without very much being said.
16. Listen. The art of good listening is often reading between the lines and picking up what has not been expressed in words. Hear the other

- person out without interruption, except for occasional clarification. A woman may not always be looking for a solution, but she is always looking for an attentive ear.
17. Encourage. More is accomplished by encouragement than by criticism. We are all fragile in some ways and need to be treated with care and respect.
 18. Do it his or her way. There are things that do not matter very much how they get done, but what does matter is that they get done. Even better, decide together what the approach will be, especially when important decisions are involved. E.g. "How will we approach your mother about leaving independent living accommodations and going into a care facility?"
 19. Know his or her needs. You have to know what his/her needs are in order to respond to them. That takes some careful observation and some listening.
 20. Do something that your wife or husband normally does. E.g. make breakfast, make the bed, mow the lawn, weed the garden, vacuum, take out the garbage, wash the car, wash the windows, do the grocery shopping, etc.
 21. Compliment often. Be sure it is sincere. There are many opportunities to give compliments if we look for them. Many of the things we take for granted everyday deserve to be complimented. E.g. How often do you compliment your wife on the meal you have just enjoyed?
 22. Call during the day. Do you ever call you spouse just to ask how things are going? A call signals interest in the life of your spouse and it shows that you care.
 23. Slow down. Our lives are fast paced. Stop and smell the roses. Watch a sunset. Walk in the rain. Watch the electric storm. View the Northern Lights with awe. Watch the birds on the bird feeder or the birdbath.
 24. Hold hands. This is what you frequently did when you were dating while walking in the park or under the moonlight. There is nothing about marriage that dictates an end to holding hands.
 25. Cuddle. There is security and warmth in closeness.
 26. Ask for each other's opinion. It is respectful and better decisions may be the result. It says, "I value your opinion."
 27. Show respect. We also earn respect from our mate and earning respect has a lot to do with how we treat each other. Kindness and forgiveness go along way in generating a respectful attitude.
 28. Welcome the other person home. Relate the account of meeting Irene's flight home after we had been parted for a few days.
 29. Look your best. Take pride in your dress and grooming. We don't always have to be dressed up, but we can look neat. Of course, it depends on the job at hand. I don't expect Irene to have her Sunday clothes on in the garden, but when we go out for coffee, we want to look presentable.
 30. Wink at each other. A signal of friendship that says, "I like you."

31. Celebrate birthdays; the date not necessarily the years.
32. Apologize. It is better to say, "I was wrong" than to find excuses.
33. Forgive. Forgiveness heals relationships. Once there is forgiveness, the circumstances should never be brought up again. It is over, finished.
34. Set up a romantic getaway. Plan it and make it special.
35. Ask, "What can I do to make you happier." This shows selflessness and a desire to make your spouse's life easier and more pleasant.
36. Be positive. This is sometimes hard to do when the situation is pretty bleak. However, look for the positive in every circumstance.
37. Be kind. Kindness is manifest in word and deed.
38. Be sensitive to your mates feelings, needs and vulnerabilities.
We all have weaknesses and need understanding and support.
39. Respond quickly to the other person's request if possible. I have been guilty of dragging my feet and then discovering that my wife who was tired of waiting went ahead and did the task herself. The result is a feeling of having let her down.
40. Talk about your love for each other.
41. Reminisce about your favorite times together.
42. Treat each other's friends and relatives with courtesy.
43. Do not forget important days like Valentine's Day and your anniversary.
44. Admit when you are wrong. You can find all kinds of reasons to justify what you did or what you said, but wrong is wrong. Period.
45. Be sensitive to each other's sexual desires. How satisfying this part of the marriage relationship is will be, to a great extent, dependent upon all of the things we have talked about in the other 49 items. The entire marriage relationship, in all of its facets, should grow deeper with the passing years and the sexual relationship is no exception.
46. Pray for each other daily. It is hard to fight with the one you pray with and for on a daily basis.
47. Watch sunsets together or whatever kindles the fires of romance.
48. Say, "I love you," frequently. You may think that she/he should know that, but there is something about hearing it that one never tires of.
49. End the day with a hug.
50. Seek outside help when needed.

Marriage is an adventure of the inexperienced. When we started out on this journey, we did not know what to expect because two lives that were once separate have now merged in to one. It was a sharp learning curve and success was based on a desire on the part of both partners to make it work. After the vows have been said and the honeymoon ends, the couple has to get down to the nitty-gritty of everyday living and that may not always be that romantic. Therefore, it is imperative that we put into place maintenance practices that will stoke the fires of romance even in the midst of the difficulties that confront every married couple from time to time.

Tim LaHaye, a Christian author, says that in counseling married partners he has come to one conclusion. "Most men do not know how to make a woman happy. I have learned that it isn't money, diamonds, furs, houses, or other things that make a woman happy, but just plain love. Not lovemaking, but the treatment that produces lovemaking – kindness, thoughtfulness, understanding, acceptance or approval, and the recognition by her husband that he is just not complete without her. Happy is the wife whose husband knows and tells her that he would choose the same bride if given the chance to marry all over again."

Introduction to Maintaining the Romance in Marriage

Let me say at the beginning of this class that there will be a handout on most of the material covered on this topic.

Someone said, "Marriages are made in heaven, but the maintenance work is done right down here." How true! I was thinking of an analogy between a marriage and a fireplace. We have all watched a fire slowly die for want of fuel. The flame begins to flicker and eventually go out. If you leave it long enough the glowing coals become smoldering embers and the fire dies completely. If you want to revive a fire you bring out the bellows, pump air into the dying embers until a flame is restored and you begin to add fuel. All that is required is oxygen and fuel and in order to maintain a certain level of flame and warmth, you must continue to stoke the fireplace. The more you feed the fire the greater the flame and the greater the warmth.

In a marriage, if all that remains of romance is the smoldering embers, be reassured that the fire has not gone out, but it is crying out for the application of the bellows in order that new breath might be breathed into it. It needs the added fuel of unconditional love and unconditional respect to revive, restore and augment romance in the marriage relationship.

Marriage is the best deal I have ever received on the human level. I get three meals prepared for me everyday. All I have to do is sit down at the table. My laundry is always done for me. My bed is made everyday. My messes are often cleaned up. I am shown compassion when I am sick. Although Erma Bombeck said this: "When a man gets the same cold as his wife, he is sicker and suffers more. My husband told me." Nevertheless, every effort is made to nurse me back to health. I believe I am loved and respected. I believe I am accepted as her head, not because I have provided such tremendous headship, but rather because she has an incredible faith that I will learn. I get to share my inner most feelings, my doubts and my fears with one who listens and empathizes. We get to share our financial resources, our dreams, our strengths and our weaknesses. Speaking of financial things, this is my approach to shopping with

Irene. She goes to the fitting room and puts on a dress and comes out to see what I think. I say, "Who pays? She says, "I do." I say, "It looks good."