

Lasting Marriages

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Vision

Happy New Year!

It's the time of year for resolutions. Goal setting. Looking back and taking stock of where we've been, deciding if the new year should be any different, and how we might resolve to reach some new goals. It's a wonderful time of year, and one of my favorites. Goal setting is critical to success in any human venture, and as one of my favorite 20th century philosophers, Yogi Berra, once said, "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there."

What does goal-setting have to do with building a lasting marriage? Maybe everything, the more we think about it. On the first, most fundamental level, if we are to build a marriage for a lifetime, we must make it our firm uncompromising purpose to do so. The achievement of success (mission accomplished) in the words of H.L. Hunt was three simple steps: decide what you want, decide what you are willing to give up to achieve it, then be about your work. Simple? Yes. Easy? No. It is self-evident however, that the first step toward a lasting marriage must be the decision that in fact, that is what we want. This seems too easy. Until we begin to realize that there are other goals that we have in life, and conflicts begin to arise in our minds. How do I place a relative value on the several goals that I hold dear? Are those decisions always conscious ones? I suspect that all of us reading this letter would say that a lasting marriage is a main goal of our lives, but many times our behavior betrays another

subconscious agenda. Now I (Robert) will get personal. When in a pinch, I really place a higher value on being right. So, my subconscious image of myself as being a near-infallible authority figure drives my behavior as surely as the auto-pilot mechanism of an airplane. When I consciously assert that my goal is to build a lasting beautiful marriage, my argumentative self-righteous behavior betrays another goal that I had not verbally expressed, to be seen as correct. And what did I just give up in order to achieve success in reaching that goal? I took a brick out of the building of my marriage. So now we're back to H.L. Hunt's description of success. If I *really* set a lasting marriage as a higher goal, then I will be willing to give up always being right in order to achieve it. Now as I look at this, it seems clear that goal-setting is in fact soul-searching. I need to ask myself the questions, what are my highest goals, and how do I rank them in order of importance? This is a critically important exercise for all of us, and should be repeated at least once a year (I like to review my life goals and mission on a quiet retreat at the beginning of each new year). Once I bring my goals into conscious awareness and rank them, my daily tasks become more clear, and how I make choices when faced with major and minor decisions is less perplexing. Stephen Covey put it well in the *Seven Habits* book (see web site link to books): Begin today with the image, picture or paradigm of the end of your life as your frame of reference or the criterion by which everything else is examined. By keeping that end clearly in mind, you can make certain that whatever you do on any particular day does not violate the criteria you have defined as supremely

important, and that each day of your life contributes in a meaningful way to the vision you have of your life as a whole.

We believe from our own experience and our observation of others is that goals and mission have another realm of importance in marriage as well. Couples who stick together through thick and thin are those who have some other goals in common besides the marriage itself. Some worthy project or ideal, a mission toward which they strive together. And, usually, a mission that really binds a couple together for life is one which is to be achieved with great difficulty. Something which is too big to be accomplished alone, which draws out the best thinking and talents of each individual into public view. We know what you're thinking: parenting, right? Well sure. Nurturing children, launching them into adulthood as mature, responsible, loving and contributing adults is a huge task, a mission really too big for any of us, and one that requires prayer and the grace of God (especially as they get closer to leaving the nest). True, looking at parenting as a partnership, shared responsibility, strict avoidance of finger pointing (your father has really set a bad example for you kids when it comes to TV watching...), creates a sense of security and warmth in a marriage that is wonderful to lean on when parenting becomes stressful. But what happens when the nest is empty? We need a mission that will outlive our responsibility as parents, and really to outlive us. This doesn't mean we have to always work on the same things, or have any independence; but we each bring our own unique strengths and gifts to work on a common goal, and when the world sees what we have done together, it feels good to point to our spouse and say, I'm lucky to be working with him/her!

An analogy is helpful here. When pilots are being trained to fly in stormy weather, we have been told that there is a critical skill to be learned in order to fly safely through a storm. The tendency of rookies in flight, when trying to

navigate the storm is to look intently into the storm itself to try to find a course to safety. The unfortunate fate of many pilots who watch the storm is that they lose control of the airplane and spin out of flight into a crash. Instead, they are instructed very early to watch an instrument called the attitude indicator, which tells them whether or not the wings of the plane are level. Instead of watching the storm, the pilot simply has to keep one goal in mind, keep the wings level, and they'll get through to the other side. Isn't this much like life, and marriage in particular? Storms will arise in all marriages; life will deal us some hard blows. We will feel the very relationship threatened by some of these. But to focus on the storm itself may spell disaster. The goal, the mission, the image of the end of your life in mind should instead be the focus. Regardless of what comes, we are going to keep this thing level. When that is our firm resolve and attitude, to our surprise, the storms will not wreck us, but strengthen us, and we will reach our intended destination.

Focus on the best this year! Make it great.

Warmly,

Robert and Gail

p.s.: e-mail your comments to us, we want to incorporate your thoughts into our network discussion.