

Lasting Marriages

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Love

“Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit.” Peter Ustinov

Such a misunderstood term, love. One of the most profound and eternal concepts known to human beings, but so trivialized, degraded, and devalued these days. Being “in love” is a common thread for all of us who started one day on the path to marriage. How well I remember being absolutely head over heels “in love” with Gail, captivated by her voice, her look, her ideas, her energy and character, and so thrilled to give her that engagement ring. I can remember shopping for the ring (in February), and the exact time and place of presenting it to her, as if it were yesterday. And with equal certainty I know that I did not understand much about love at that young age, that I love her more now than I did then, and that the road from there to here has not been easy.

The thought of young love and the excitement of a new marriage reminds me of another story, this one from Glen Price, my old college roommate. Gail and I were invited to be a part of Glen and Carol’s wedding. All the usual events occurred: a rehearsal dinner (in Colorado, the steaks were HUGE, much bigger than this young Georgian was used to), family and friends gathering and enjoying time together, and then the ceremony in the church. It was during the

ceremony that my friend Glen showed wisdom and maturity beyond his age, more than I would have at that time, and that’s why it has stayed clear in my memory all these years. After they were “pronounced husband and wife” Glen wanted to say a few words to all gathered there. I will not get the words exactly right, but here’s what he said as a newlywed of less than 5 minutes: “I know that many of you sitting here today are thinking, ‘What a joy for Glen and Carol, how excited they must be, how wonderful to be in love and feeling the thrill of being married and newlyweds.’ And it is true, we are thrilled to be married, in love with each other, and filled with joy over the plans we have to make a life together. But we are not the married couple in this sanctuary that should be the most excited about our marriage right now. That honor should belong to the couple here who’s been married the *longest*. It is they who have had a lifetime to grow together, work together, refine their love for each other and their gifts of love for the world around them. So yes, we are thrilled, but not nearly so much as we should be 40 or 50 years from now.”

Wow. My friend Glen had always been a person of unusual insight, but that one took my breath away, and does even more now 18 years after I gave Gail that engagement ring.

How can I do that? How can I assure that the love and joy that I felt on the day I was married will continue to grow year after year, instead of becoming stale and tired? I believe that the first answer to that is related to a quote from another wise person I know, my father, who said, "Happiness is an epiphenomenon, and you can't catch it chasing it. It comes when you are doing something else, usually something difficult and strenuous." I think the same is true about the *feeling* of love. Chase it and it will run from you.

Work hard at the fundamentals, like loyalty, fidelity, respect, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, and service, and that feeling will sometimes surprise you, sneak up on you when you are least expecting it, and provide the natural reward of *being* the marriage partner you should be, *having* the feeling of love. But always notice that being comes before having.

Stephen Covey, in the book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, gives insight into the concept of love as a proactive choice. First he relates the influence of Victor Frankl (another landmark book, not yet available through our web site), "there are three central values in life - the experiential, or that which happens to us; the creative, or that which we bring into existence; and the attitudinal, or our response in difficult circumstances such as terminal illness. My own experience with people confirms the point Frankl makes - that the highest of the three values is attitudinal, ... In other words, what matters most is how we respond to what we experience in life."

He then goes on to contrast the "feeling" of love, with our choice to love. "In the great literature of all progressive societies, love is a verb. Reactive people make it a feeling. They're driven by feelings. Hollywood has generally scripted us to believe that we are not responsible, that we are a product of our feelings. But the Hollywood script does not describe the reality. If our feelings control our actions, it is because we have abdicated our responsibility and empowered them to do so. Proactive people make love a verb.

Love is something you do: the sacrifices you make, the giving of self..."

One last thought. As I was driving around Atlanta this past week, I was surfing the radio stations, trying to get away from the news, and found someone playing a song with a pleasant beat, so I listened, and discovered the singer was thinking about a love relationship (what a surprise!). I'm not much for pop music, so most of you probably know this song, and I may not get it quite right. But it went something like this: "I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter... and I think it has something to do with *forgiveness*... forgiveness... even if... even if..." and then you and I could fill in the blanks. There it was. In the middle of Lent. The pop radio reminding me of the Gospel. Isn't it true, how pivotal forgiveness is in our marriages, and in our lives. Without forgiveness, we are all slaves to the past. With forgiveness, we can move into the future with a grateful freedom to share with others the gift we ourselves have received. That's love.

grateful to be forgiven and loved,

Robert

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