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Spiritual Ponderings
Practical Relationship Advice

I am not sure how the month of February became associated with the ideas of love, lovers and romance but I have found the month of February to be an excellent month to reflect on these things. As I was pondering what to say this month about love, I kept feeling God call me to speak about how love is really not so much a feeling but rather a series of choices. I eventually came across this quote from St. Gregory the Great that I think summarizes my thoughts and feelings on love that I wish to share with you this month: "The proof of love is in the works. Where love exists, it works great things. But when it ceases to act, it ceases to exist."

While I will be doing a lot of writing about marriage, it is my hope that you will not limit these insights only to that great sacrament but rather that you may open them up to all sorts of relationships, family, friends, and even the enemies that we have in this life that Christ has called us to love. For I believe that those things that make a good marriage also work well in strengthening everyday relationships. For the month of February therefore I present to you ten practical ways in which we can strengthen our relationships with others and love everyone in a more Christlike manner.

1. Be the Best Person that You can Be.

One of the first pieces of advice that I give engaged couples is: "If you cannot live without each other, then don't live with each other." Marriage and in fact all healthy relationships are about two independent people coming together and is not about two needy people feeding off of each other's insecurities. Blessed John Paul II great insight in the world of relationships was that the opposite of love is not hate but rather objectification. If love is wanting what is best for the other person even if it requires me to make a sacrifice then the opposite of true love is using another person for my own selfish needs even if that means hurting them. For example, I show my mother love by calling her each day. I give/sacrifice to her fifteen minutes of my day so that she knows that I love her. I do this not out of any other desire than to see her happy. On the other hand if I was to only keep up a relationship with her in order to get money from her then I would be using her because I would have my best interest at the center of my heart and not her own.

In order to be in a healthy relationship with others we must therefore strive to be an independent person and recognize the other person as an independent person and respect each other's decisions. If you enter into a relationship with fear as a primary motivator (the fear of being alone, the fear of not finding the right person, the fear of not being a part of the cool crowd) our relationships are destined to become dysfunctional. While we might feel more comfortable being around a certain person and less fearful, we can at the same time become possessive and controlling of that same person if we fear losing them and the safe feeling that they give us. Being controlling and possessive is never being loving. Being the Best Person that I can be also means that I am giving to others that I am in relationship the best of me.

2. Positive Sentiment Override

Positive Sentiment Override, also called Emotional Banking, is the psychological principal that the more positive feelings we have toward someone the more we will tolerate their faults. If you think of every positive feeling you have toward someone as putting money into an emotional bank account and every negative feeling you have toward that same person as withdrawing money from that same account, you will react better to that person when you have some emotional currency in the account. The more emotional currency the better your reaction will be.

Fortunately for us, creating emotional currency is very different from making actual money. One of the best ways that I make emotional currency is by stopping and saying a quick prayer of gratitude to God for the person that I am about to meet and while doing so I name three positive qualities about that person (trying to be as sincere as possible). Over time I have used Positive Sentiment Override to change my relationships with coworkers, family and myself for the better. Due to the emotional abuse that I received as a child, I had discovered that it is important for me to say a prayer to God each morning thanking Him for two to three things about myself. This allows me to love myself better and when I love myself better than I am able to love others and God better.



As we continue our look at my top ten ways to improve your relationship marital and otherwise, I would like to look at some relationship insights from Dr. John Gottman. When I was preparing my marriage preparation classes, Dr. Gottman was a counselor and author, which people recommended to me. As I began to read his many books, I felt that most of what he was teaching made a lot of sense. Dr. Gottman stated in many of his books that he believed in two important things. The first was that all good marriages are based on a deep lasting friendship in which both persons feel that their needs are being met. The second premise was that the difference between a good marriage and a bad marriage was found in little things and not big things. Couples who performed these little things well would stay married and couples who did not perform these little things well would end up getting divorce. Happiness as a couple for him did not depend upon wealth, social status, or even how much arguing a couple did. What mattered was small little choices that the couple made through the day.

3. Avoid the Harsh Start Up.

One of the little things that make for a good marriage according to Dr. Gottman in his book: *The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide, From the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert* concerns about how couples argue with one another. For Dr. Gottman it was not how much arguing took place in a marriage but rather the way that couples argued that matter.

Dr. Gottman states in his book: "The research shows that if your discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end on a negative note, even if there are a lot of attempts to "make nice" in between. Statistics tell the story: 96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of the fifteen minute interaction! A harsh startup simply dooms you to failure. So if you begin a discussion that way, you might as well pull the plug, take a breather, and start over."

People in a healthy relationship avoided what Dr. Gottman called a "harsh start up." In a harsh start up one person in the relationship begins an argument by attacking the other person's character or human nature. This often happens because one person instead of complaining about an event criticizes their partner about the event. When a person complains according to Dr. Gottman he talks about an event for example: "You did not take out the garbage last night." When a person criticizes according to Dr. Gottman he attacks his spouse's character and human nature for example: "You did not take out the garbage last night what are you worthless?" You can see how just adding a few words changes and strengthens the emotional impact of the argument. Many counselors encourage people to avoid criticism by using "I" statements instead of "you" statements for example: "I felt hurt when you..." verses "You made me mad..." The trick is to remember to do this in the heat of an argument.

4. Don't Be Afraid To Make A Sincere Apology

Many problems in relationships occur out of neglect and often we do not know or understand how we have hurt a person through our words, actions, or things that we did not do. When people inform us of the hurt that we have unknowingly caused it is important to apologize for it and admit that if we would have know that our actions or non-actions would have hurt our friend then we would not have committed them.

Asking for an apology also lets us relax and be human and part of being human is that we will make mistakes. I have discovered that my best relationships are relationships in which I have apologized for hurting the other person without being aware of it and when they have apologized to me for the times that they have hurt me and they were unaware of it. Part of what makes this possible is the unspoken guarantee that forgiveness will be granted when it is asked for. We must avoid the temptation to punish people who have hurt us knowingly or unknowingly.

"Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." – Mother Teresa.



As we continue our look at my top ten ways to improve your relationships, I would like to continue with some insights from Dr. Gottman.

5. Avoid the Four Horsemen (Or Be Aware of the Warning Signs)

Dr. Gottman goes on in his book to talk about what he calls the “Four Horsemen of a relationship.” The Four Horsemen in the Bible represent the coming of the end of the world and for Dr. Gottman there are four things that can warn us that the end of a relationship is near.

The first of four horsemen is criticism. As we mentioned in an earlier reflection criticism is all about attacking the other person’s human nature and trying to make them feel worthless. Here are two of my favorite quotes from Dr. Gottman on criticism: “You will always have some complaints about the person you live with. But there’s a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism. A complaint only addresses the specific action at which your spouse failed. A criticism is more global—it adds on some negative words about your mate’s character or personality,” and “Here’s the recipe: To turn any complaint into a criticism, just add my favorite line: What is wrong with you?”

Criticism which can be found in many good marriages will eventually lead to the second and worse of the four horsemen called Contempt: “This sarcasm and cynicism are types of contempt. So are name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, and hostile humor. In whatever form, contempt—the worst of the four horsemen—is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It’s virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you’re disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than reconciliation.” How many times do we treat family members worse than we treat business associates and strangers? This is because on some level we have developed a contempt for them.

The third of the four horsemen is defensiveness. Dr. Gottman explains: “Although it’s understandable that a person would defend herself, research shows that this approach rarely has the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You’re saying, in effect, ‘The problem isn’t me, it’s you.’ Defensiveness just escalates the conflict, which is why it’s so deadly.”

“Where discussion begins with a harsh startup, where criticism and contempt lead to defensiveness, which leads to more contempt and more defensiveness, eventually one partner tunes out. This heralds the arrival of the fourth horsemen,” explains Dr. Gottman. The final of the four horsemen is Stonewalling and this is what happens when one person in the relationship is to hurt, wounded, or angry to continue to discussion/argument. According to Dr. Gottman: “Usually people stonewall as a protection against feeling flooded. Flooding means that your spouse’s negativity—whether in the guise of criticism or contempt or even defensiveness—is so overwhelming, and so sudden, that it leaves you shell-shocked. You feel so defenseless against the sniper attack that you learn to do anything to avoid a replay. The more often you feel flooded by your spouse’s criticism or contempt, the more hyper-vigilant you are for cues that your spouse is about to “blow” again. All you can think about is protecting yourself from the turbulence your spouse’s onslaught causes. And the way to do that is to disengage emotionally from the relationship.”

The important things to remember is that the four horsemen are warning signs and that much of this could be avoided if we learn to complain and not criticize others. Keep in mind the idea of positive sentiment override also.

“It takes three to make love, not two: you, your spouse, and God. Without God people only succeed in bringing out the worst in one another. Lovers who have nothing else to do but love each other soon find there is nothing else. Without a central loyalty life is unfinished.” – Fulton Sheen.



It is hard to believe that the month of February is almost over and I still have five more things on my top ten list. Let us get to work:

6. Dialogue versus Conflict – Be Attentive to Repair Attempts

In a dialogue two or more people come together in order to find the truth or the best way to do something but in a conflict at least one person is more concerned about “winning” the argument than about finding the truth or the best way to do something.

7. Know the difference Between Solvable and perpetual problems.

Dr. Gottman divides problems into two different types: solvable and perpetual. Solvable problems are problems that couples can eventually solve through working together and compromise. Perpetual problems are not necessarily problems that the couple can control for example a mother-in-law. The important thing with perpetual problems is that couples develop a plan for when these problems come up that both people can live with.

8. Practice Good Conflict Resolution

“My fifth principle (practice good conflict resolution) comes down to having good manners” summarized Dr. Gottman.

1. Complain but don't blame
2. Make statements that start with “I” instead of “You”
3. Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge.
4. Be clear.
5. Be polite
6. Be appreciative
7. Don't store things up.

9. Acknowledge Emotion

Dr. Gottman is a big believer that it is important to acknowledge someone's emotions (which are always neutral) in addition to addressing behavior. “I understand that you are mad, but that was not the way you should handle the situation” is much better than saying “What in the heck did you do that for?”

As a priest, I have learned a lot about the power of emotional facts. An emotional fact is a fact that someone believes to be true even if there is no actual proof of it to be so. Sometimes emotional facts have more control over a person's thought process than real facts.

10. Understand the Meaning of Money

There are some people out there that believe that money is the number one reason for marital conflict and divorce. Dr. Gottman would agree with them to a certain extent. For Dr. Gottman most money issues are not issues about money but what the money represents: our dreams and hopes: “since money is symbolic of many emotional needs—such as for security and power—and goes to the core of our individual value system.”

In one of his books Dr. Gottman talks about a couple who were heading toward divorce because the wife wanted to have a cabin in the woods and the husband wanted to have so much money in their savings and there was no way that they could do both. When he got them talking about what the money symbolized to them he discovered that the wife had a dream of giving to her children what she enjoyed as a child (hanging out in the country on weekends) and that the husband was actually trying to avoid a nightmare (ending up in a state run nursing home like his uncle). Once they stopped talking about money and began talking about their dreams they were able to understand where each other were coming from and could make a compromise that both could live with. What does money symbolize for you? “As the family goes, so goes the nation and so goes the whole world in which we live.” – John Paul II