

“Taking Time to Talk: Communication in Marriage”

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In 2007 my husband was called as President to preside over a mission in Guatemala. The realization that we would be called for three years to leave our home, our family, and especially our grandchildren seemed overwhelming to me at the time. My husband, in an effort to best prepare for our new assignment, contacted the soon-to-be-released mission president, and that president was thoughtful enough to help orient us by providing us with a mission itinerary for the week of our arrival so we could “hit the ground running.” After reading through the itinerary we learned of round [the] clock meetings, traveling long distances on jungle roads, providing seven-hour trainings, interviewing over 200 missionaries and a long list of local ecclesiastical responsibilities; it all seemed so extremely overwhelming to me. This also served to augment my feelings of extreme inadequacy, anxiety and lack of self-confidence.

I was in this state of mind when I tearfully went to speak to my husband. I poured out my heart to him, telling about him my logic as to why we couldn’t possibly meet all the expectations that would be required of us. I told him how unprepared and unqualified I felt to meet such a huge assignment. I also reviewed to him all the unresolved issues we had at home with our family and how our leaving would surely aggravate the situations.

I remember the tender way my husband looked at me—perhaps he was mirroring my very same feelings. I could feel the empathy in his gaze. When he could tell that I had finally reached the end of my rant, he responded calmly by saying, “All you have said is correct. This is a very challenging calling, and it will be difficult for us to leave at this time. But the Lord has called us, so He will see to it that we succeed. This is His work; He will help us. We will just need to take it one day at a time.” He took me into his arms,

and just held me. At that instant I was comforted, and I knew it was going to be okay, so then I started to pack.

We find a similar story in the Book of Mormon. In first Nephi chapter five we read that Sariah had similar anxiety issues to mine. Her husband listens to her complaint, he acknowledges her views and logic, and then he reaffirms his steadfastness in the revelations he has received. He testifies of the source and reassurance of their deliverance, and then in beautiful conclusion to this scene, we read Nephi's words about his parent's resolve: "And after this manner of language did my father, Lehi, comfort my mother, Sariah."

I have learned in my 45 years of marriage that the way you communicate with your spouse has an effect upon your heart as well as your mind. Indeed, it can determine your entire outlook on life itself. The manner in which you communicate with each other can determine how you will resolve conflict, forge deep emotional connections and strengthen the bonds of your marital relationship.

Elder Marvin [J.] Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, "Communication is more than a sharing of words, it is the wise sharing of emotions, feelings and concerns. It is the sharing of one's self, totally."

We all know that there are different types and levels of communication within a marriage.

There is the Superficial mode of communication that is used in daily life to convey schedules, responsibilities during the day, weather, etc. Though this type of communication is necessary and needs to be clear so that our days run smoothly, it does not foster deep connections or bonding with our spouse.

Another form of communication is the Personal type. This is where beliefs, interests, passions, dreams, and goals are expressed. This is the type of communication that is usually conveyed during courtship. When this type of communication is expressed within a marriage, each other's personal expressions should be valued and respected as our own. These thoughts should also be treated with great confidentiality when necessary.

An additional level of communication is one that the Prophet Joseph Smith shared in counsel with the sisters during the first days of the organization of the Relief Society in Nauvoo. At the time the prophet was concerned about the relationship and the communication between husbands and wives. Perhaps because of some of the things he witnessed as the new members of the Church navigated the challenges of establishing the restored gospel as well as a new settlement.

He said: “Let this Society teach how to act towards husbands, to treat them with mildness and affection. When a man is borne down with trouble—when he is perplexed, if he can meet a smile, not an argument—if he can meet with mildness, it will calm down his soul and soothe his feelings. When the mind is going to despair, it needs a solace. . .When you go home never give a cross word, but let kindness, charity and love, crown your works.”

This form of communication in our day is known as communication that validates. It is the type of communication that edifies, nurtures, praises, consoles, soothes, comforts and sustains us, especially in times of difficulties and challenging times and trouble.

It is what my husband and Lehi did when they found their wives in distress. It does not matter whether that distress is real or merely perceived to be real. This type of communication can be like fertilizer to the marriage plant. It will cause the plant to grow abundantly, putting down deep roots. Without it, the marriage plant is in danger of dying and withering away.

This type of communication is what my husband conveyed to me when we were first married. As newlyweds, I was trying out my not-so-expert cooking skills, I attempted to cook for him a pot of chili beans. My husband loves chili beans. I did not tell him that I had substituted the two teaspoons of chili powder that the recipe called for (which we didn't have) for ¼ cup of cayenne chili pepper. I thought all chili powders were the same. I remember he said to me, through teary eyes and coughing voice, “it's good.” I quickly learned the truth when I took my own taste of my failed creation and quickly gathered it up and threw it into the trash can.

Overlook the failings in your spouse. Look for that which is good and tell them often of how you value that in them. Even the small things that you love about them. Listen to them carefully and express to them verbally what you hear them saying to you. In response, express ideas that are uplifting and strengthening to them. Be careful [to] never, never, ever intentionally hurt your spouse. If you do, be quick to offer a sincere and loving apology.

We all know men and women are different. I have noticed there may be times, you may need to express your communication needs lovingly and clearly. Our spouses really desire to fulfill our needs, but sometimes they need a little direction. I have said to my husband on occasion, “Could you please turn off the television? I need to talk to you.” My husband knows that if I make this request, I need his complete attention and he is always willing to comply. This is a much better solution than to just sulk in anger or despair because your spouse did not read your [thoughts] or understand the signal that you needed to talk to him.

I have a saying that “sometimes the best form of communication is silence.” This is especially true of situations where forgiveness is needed. To communicate love by holding your tongue when perhaps you may feel inclined to complain, blame, or ridicule may be the highest form of self-control and expression of love.

One Christmas season all the employees where I was working were looking forward with great anticipation to the company Christmas party. There would be a formal dinner, a raffle with expensive prizes, dancing, and a professional photographer to take pictures of each couple. It would be the event of year! And as the date for the party finally arrived and we started out towards the event, I suggested to my husband that since there would be many happenings in town, it might be prudent to avoid the freeway and go by way of the city streets instead. My husband disagreed and felt the quickest way to our party was to take the freeway.

Can you guess what happened? As soon as we were on the interstate to a place where you could not exit, the traffic came to a crawl. Even when we finally exited the freeway, the traffic to our venue was so congested we arrived at the building one and a half hours late, only to find that there was absolutely no parking available there. To this end we had to get back on the jammed streets to try and find someplace to park. When we finally made it to the party, it was over! Everyone had left.

During that stressful time as we traveled, I looked over to my husband and I could see the great despair in his countenance. Because of that one bad decision, it had cost us participation in a highly anticipated event. I have to admit, it was a challenge for me to hold my tongue and not to say something like, “If you would have only listened to me when I told you to avoid the freeway, maybe we could have made the party,” or “This was all your fault.” That would have been the natural man, or in my case the natural woman speaking.

Since we had missed dinner, I suggested that we stop somewhere and get a bite to eat. As we sat to eat our fast food, I said to him, to break the silence of frustration, “It’s okay, Hon. It wasn’t your fault.” I remember feeling relieved and happy that I had learned that day that no party was worth hurting this person who means so much to me.

Our highest challenge in this mortality is to emulate our Savior Jesus Christ. Nowhere is that more needed than when your spouse commits an error, wrecks the car, or forgets an anniversary.

The Savior loved deeply, forgave freely and remembered the sin no more. We too need to be forgiven, thus forgiving our companions in life will hopefully earn us that same forgiveness for ourselves.

Sadly, these communication skills I did not learn from my own family's example growing up. My parents were divorced. But with my sincere desire to improve myself and have a successful marriage, the Holy Spirit willingly taught me line upon line. That coupled with my husband's patient and forgiving heart, we are now at a place, these forty-five years later, where our greatest joy is to just be in one another's presence.

I am confident, if you have a desire to strengthen your marital relationship, even if it is only at present a one-way venture, little by little your kind words, your patience and love will soften hearts, erase misdeeds and clear many misunderstandings.

May the Lord bless you in your desire to strengthen your marriage, deepen and sweeten the bond of eternity that seals you together is my desire in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.