



## Leadership Letter *Love tips?*

In only two weeks it's Valentines Day and love will be in the air! So this month I want to focus on couples and share a few personal tips on marriage from the last thirty-five years of experience. I am a blessed man having a beautiful and fun loving wife to share these years with and she has edited and shared some valuable insights to this letter.

1. **Invest in your relationship:** Every year Rite and I have taken the time to attend a marriage or family seminar. What made these times special was the fact that there was time to focus on our marriage relationship without interruptions. Books have also been a tremendous resource to us. We love reading out loud together and so one of the books we choose to read during the year will relate to our marriage. We read a chapter at a time, share our thoughts on the content and then explore how we are able to apply the concepts to our lives. This kind of intentionality is vital to keep developing relationally together. We all need resources and reminders to keep an agenda of development in our marriage. Take a look at a few book titles that we have enjoyed at the end of this letter and pray about joining us in Malaga for one of our couples retreats (Feb 13-17; 22 July-2 Aug; 10-16 Aug).
2. **Give daily expressions of love:** The bible tells us to encourage one another daily. This is especially important in this very special relationship of marriage. It can involve a kind word, a meaningful touch, a helping hand, a little note, a humorous comment or something unique that comes from your heart. Every couple will develop their own expressions but it certainly helps to know your spouse's love language. Remember one thing - predictability kills, so make sure you mix it up so that you don't get stuck in a rut.

For nearly three decades, relationship expert Terri Orbuch has conducted a research project following 373 married couples. She's found that couples who regularly give each other "affective affirmation" — meaning "compliments, help and support, encouragement and subtle nonsexual rewards, such as hand holding" — are the happiest.

3. **Develop your spiritual relationship:** In a survey in the U.S., Jim Burns writes that the area couples found least satisfying was that of spiritual intimacy. Paul encourages us to discipline ourselves daily for the purpose of godliness. (1 Tim 4:7) Rite and I have shared a devotion each morning together for many years now, that enabled us to start the day being spiritually connected. For a long time we knew the importance of praying together and praying for each other but it wasn't a daily habit. What a difference takes place when it becomes the daily priority. Schedules can be difficult to manage but carve out some time, even if it's just a few minutes to start with and you will see a new dynamism take place in your marriage. Before you know it, your walking and talking turns into spontaneous prayer and you become comfortable moving in and out of prayer. As a need or concern arises, a prayer is prayed and you begin to understand what it is to live and walk in the spirit.
4. **Make memories:** As you look at your year ahead, plan in the celebrations ahead of time. Birthdays, anniversaries, milestone events, weekends away (every couple needs several of these), holidays, family gatherings, etc. Sometimes it can feel like there is so much work to do to actually get away, you wonder whether it is really worth it. Finding baby sitters, dog sitters, saving or praying in the money, organising and planning it, can take time but it really is worthwhile. Some personalities are more spontaneous, like my wife, so I plan some spontaneity on route!

Last year I asked my son if he could paint our bedroom while we were away on a ministry trip. Rite has never enjoyed the clinical white walls of our villa, so what a joy it was for her to come home to a renewed soft toned room. During another ministry trip, I was able to add an extra day for us to enjoy a time in London. As I write this letter I have planned a trip to Scotland to celebrate our son's birthday but what Rite doesn't know is that my sons & I planned a surprise and we are heading to a hotel together for a couple of nights. Surprises always add a little spice to our lives.

- 5. Make meal times special:** Even if it's just the two of us, we still like to lay the table nicely and make time to talk together about the happenings of the day, share our thoughts and inspirations as well as our struggles and challenges. Background music rather than the TV makes for a meaningful connection. When the kids are with us this is a key time to share their stories in a relaxed setting. When they were younger, we set aside one night a week where we fed them first and had our meal later – a fondue, easy to make and delicious to eat. That was our date night at home. Of course meal times out are a nice treat too. Create these spaces in your week to enjoy some romantic moments.

As the kids were growing up we established “blessing meals” every few months. They looked forward to their special night. The menu was their choice, and they could decide on the game or activity that we would all be involved in after the meal. We would all come prepared with a card, or small gift and be ready to share affirmations to the person being blessed. Sometimes the boys would need some encouragement to encourage but generally these were very special times. We have had blessing meals for our parents too that were very honouring for them. Who doesn't love to be blessed?

- 6. Let things go:** As a couple we have very different personalities and come from different cultures, so we are not going to agree on everything. Surprise, surprise! There's a myth out there that if you have a healthy relationship you won't have conflicts! Not true. It's just that healthy couples are able to work through them successfully by talking without blaming, manipulating, losing tempers or going into huffs. The key is to let the things that don't matter go! Have you heard couples squabbling over the date that something occurred in the past, or who had done what when? How pointless! Learn how to agree to disagree nicely. We all have our own special ways of repairing a damaged relationship. For Rite it's often humour, and for me it is usually a kind gesture of some sort. It can be whatever helps diffuse the escalating temperature in the room! When differences are viewed as assets, and husbands and wives work together in harmony, life is beautiful.
- 7. Stop it!** Some of the most damaging things in a marriage are criticism, defensiveness and contempt – the putting down of the other, the judgement, the self-protection, the devaluing or making the other person feel worthless. These are like the clothing items that we read about in Colossians 3 that we definitely need to take off. Other reactions of withdrawing, attacking, stonewalling or ignoring are also extremely damaging. Both Rite and I have had a habit of withdrawing in conflict, which does nothing to resolve the issue. We have to 'stop it' and instead step out of our comfort zones to address the issue in conversation and behave like the mature adults we long to be!

Never discuss sensitive subjects or bring up decisions that need to be made or ask for favours when your spouse is hungry, angry, lonely or tired (HALT). A little bit of psychology goes a long way. It is important to create a safe environment to talk that includes privacy, adequate time, calmness of spirit and having a goal of reconciliation rather than seeking to prove a point or win the argument. When these elements are in place, things are dealt with much quicker.

- 8. It's not about me:** We live in such a self-centred world where everything revolves around the individual. Even when we talk about his/her needs in the marriage, valid as they are, our focus needs to be meeting our spouse's needs and not focus on how my needs are being met or not being met. Didn't Jesus talk about coming to serve and not be served? Sometimes I think we forget the real message of the gospel that He must increase and we must decrease. Love is the unconditional giving of myself to another, not the conditional; 'I will love you if you will love me.' So my goal must be serving, blessing, praying for, helping, encouraging, protecting, releasing and seeing my spouse grow and develop in the best possible way. If we both have that attitude then we will be among the happiest couples around.
- 9. Listening with ears and heart:** Sometimes I have no idea what is troubling Rite and it's easy to jump to the conclusion that I have said or done something that has caused a problem. I pray for words of knowledge, read my emotional intelligence books for inspiration but none usually comes. Rite used to expect me to know intuitively what was wrong, but now she recognises the importance of vulnerability and sharing what is on her heart (and realises I am disabled in some areas of intuition!). My role is to be observant, listen well and respond in a way that she knows I understand and am standing with her. Of course when I have said or done something wrong I need to be ready to respond with a heart felt apology. Listening with the heart is a challenge for some, and requires not a fixing it mentality but one of empathy and understanding. Feedback is also important for clarifying that you are on the same page and protects you from assumptions and even judgments. I am still learning this new language!

10. **Share ambition for each other:** The affirmation of our spouse for our growth and development is so vital. I so appreciate Rite being my best fan, cheering and spurring me on constantly. Sometimes having ambition for our spouse requires the sacrifice of time, money and energy from us to enable them to invest into a passion, desire, relationship or project that is fulfilling for them. That sacrifice is so worth it. We can enjoy the successes with them and know that we have helped make it happen. At times it will be our belief in their ability and prayers that will enable them to persevere through. One of Rite's passions is the training of preschool teachers in the developing world. It has been a joy for me to help her in this project bringing my gifts to the table and being as supportive as I can possibly be. She does the same for me in my passion for developing leaders. Let's invest all we can to see one another reach our fullest potential.
11. **Mindfulness:** How encouraging it is to know that someone has thought of you, has shared their concern, or has blessed you by doing something practical. A little note written on a post it note and stuck on the mirror communicates: 'I was thinking about you this morning and wanted you to know.' Or doing a job that you know your partner would rather not do, which in my case involves doing the ironing or helping in the garden! When we give gifts, it's not the amount of money you spend but the thought that goes into it that is meaningful. Get creative and come up with some little surprises to top up your spouse's emotional tank that let them know they are on your mind.
12. **Date even though you're married:** We are often on our best behaviour during our courting days and want to impress our date. Once we are married it's all too easy to get sloppy and not make the effort to do special things together. It's fun to have something to look forward to, something to dress up for and make time to spoil one another for an evening. For us it can be a simple picnic on the beach, a drive to visit a new town, or a meal out with time to share our hearts. Keep romance alive and put that energy into thinking and being creative for an evening or day out on a regular basis.
13. **Enjoy intimacy:** Intimacy involves spirit, soul and body. God intended for us to communicate spirit-to-spirit, converse deeply and stimulate one another's minds and hearts and enjoy physical closeness and sexual relationship. What many couples do not understand is that love must be nurtured. Intimacy is not static. You don't "get it" and have it forever. We move in and out of intimacy based on our behaviour toward each other. It takes time to be intimate but it can continually grow through the years of married life together.

Looking back to our courting days in YWAM, I am so glad that Rite and I had a 'special relationship' where we were encouraged to focus on our spiritual life as our foundation and hold back initially on the physical side. Of course when we married all three aspects needed a focus. Intimacy physically reaches its fullness as it is combined with spirit and soul intimacy. As we become relaxed, vulnerable and transparent with each other's spirit, soul and body, we will experience a deepening relationship and enjoy making love regularly as an ultimate expression of our love for one another.

14. **Cultivate a teachable heart:** I have been cooking for a coaching retreat this week and taking my orders from Rite. It's her area of expertise and so I put on my submission hat. At one point in the week I was making beer bread and forgot to add sugar. The response could so easily have been; 'How could you do that, now its ruined!' Instead she gave options to people – with/without sugar - and everyone thought it was on purpose! I am sure I won't make that mistake again. But in every area of our lives we need an attitude of teachability. We need to be able to learn from one another and admit; 'you know best.' Other phrases include: 'I am sorry.' 'Please forgive me.' 'You are right. I am wrong' Why are those words sometimes so hard to say? Usually because our heart isn't soft and teachable enough yet.
15. **Develop common interests and play together:** In our task oriented world it is possible that we develop as better ministry partners than marriage partners! Life is about a lot more than work. To see our marriages flourish, there is a need to be best friends and enjoy one another's company by sharing common interests. We have always enjoyed games as a couple and as long as I don't get too competitive they are great fun. Since owning our border collie, we have enjoyed walking together and appreciating the beauties of creation. We love seeing films, reading books together and working on creative ideas. Friendships develop with common rhythms where both parties are mutually enjoying the activities. Every season can involve a new interest. What interest can you cultivate together that will bring delight and fresh inspiration into your marriage for this year?

**16. Dream together:** We love thinking creatively about the future and dreaming together. Moving to Spain, starting a church in our lounge and establishing a leadership retreat centre all grew out of walking, talking and dreaming together. Even if you don't do all the things you talk about, it's worthwhile and fun to do. It is so easy for our passions to go in different directions, so the more you talk and share together about the future, the more opportunity you have of helping to shape and be involved in each others dreams.

Be blessed this year in your marriage.

Until next month,

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**Books we can recommend:**

Sacred Marriage. *Gary Thomas*

Marriage Spirituality: 10 disciplines for couples who love God. *R. Paul Stevens*.

Life after marriage. *Byrne & Byrne*

Laugh your way to a happy marriage. *Mark Gungor*

The marriage course (HTB manual). *Nicky Lee*

His needs, her needs. *Dr. Bill Harley*

Marriage coaching. *Jeff & Jill Williams*

Love & Respect. *Emerson Eggerichs*

Sixty minute marriage. *Rob Parsons*

5 languages of love. *Gary Chapman*

The two sides of love. *Gary Smalley*

Crucial conversations. *Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan & Al Switzler*