**Healing the Time-Starved Marriage**

*Time flies on wings of lightening;*

*We cannot call it back.*

*It comes, then passes forward*

*Along its onward track.*

*And if we are not mindful,*

*The chance will fade away,*

*For life is quick in passing.*

*‘Tis as a single day*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Careers, church responsibilities, children’s activities, household duties, and community involvement often interfere with maintaining a close connection with one’s spouse. For many contemporary couples, marriage is still a high priority, but not necessarily where couples spend a high degree of quality time. In fact, research documents that the longer people are married, the less time they spend together.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet, the amount of time couples spend together in face to face interaction is critically important to marital happiness and satisfaction.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Unfortunately, too many ancillary activities keep couples distracted from each other. Today, being hyper-busy is the new status symbol; the social prizes no longer go to the wealthiest, but the busiest. As contemporary couples attempt to “keep all the balls in the air,” connection and intimacy are placed on the sacrificial alter. Marriage expert Michele-Weiner Davis argues that the most significant contributor to the breakdown in marriages today is the *lack of time together*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Since husbands and wives are often pulled in different directions, their marriages can become lost in the shuffle. Subsequently, couples who experience a high degree of stress or lack of time together report lower marital satisfaction.[[5]](#endnote-5) Most couples are not likely to admit that their marriages fall so low in importance. In fact, if they were asked, most adults would contend that their marriage and family are the most important entities in their life.[[6]](#endnote-6) However, where husband and wives actually spend their time may indicate otherwise. What is scheduled and who they are accountable to will take first priority on a couple’s itinerary. For example, husbands and wives will first feel accountable to their daughter’s traveling soccer team; to their son’s elite baseball team; to the PTA; to their professional work schedule, and of course, to their Church calling. After all, what would happen if a father didn’t take his son to the final game of seven-game championship series, nor if a mother who happened to the Young Women’s President simply refused to plan girl’s camp? Unfortunately, marriage gets whatever is left over, which often isn’t much.[[7]](#endnote-7) When couples fail to put their marriage first, they risk the possibility of having significant marriage complications.

Meanwhile, couples who engage in meaningful activities and validate each other in the marriage are most often happy people.[[8]](#endnote-8) Nevertheless, even though they understand the value of time together, many contemporary couples have a difficult time managing their priorities. Face it, most LDS men and women are busy people. Aside from the regular duties that most couples are responsible for, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have the extra weight of Church assignments and callings, more children than their non-LDS cohorts, and additional financial obligations (more children, missions, college). With increasing responsibilities and pressures, Mormon couples could face the consequences sure to follow when their most sacred duties and covenants are neglected.

This paper will explore the time famine that many LDS couples struggle with, common distractors that pull husbands and wives away from each other, and the rituals that can help couples reconnect and build a strong marriage.

**Time Famine**

With pressure and demands coming from all sides, marriage can become somewhat challenging, even for the most optimistic and energetic couples. Happy and successful marriages are not easily created—they take time and effort. Elder Dean L. Larsen once explained, “I repeatedly encounter the illusion today, especially among younger people, that perfect marriages happen simply if the right two people come together. This is untrue. Marriages don’t succeed automatically. Those who build happy, secure, successful marriages pay the price to do so. They work at it constantly.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

If successful marriages take work, time, and effort, what can be said then, of marriages where couples have little time to devote to nurturing the marriage? Such marriages will struggle to thrive in our current time-starved environment. Contemporary marriage and family therapists often hear couples seeking treatment make statements such as:

* “This relationship isn’t working for me anymore.”
* “Our needs are just so different.”
* “We just grew apart.”
* “Everyone else’s marriage is so much better than ours.”
* “He’s not the same person I married.”
* “After the children left home, I realized I had nothing in common with her—we had nothing.”
* “Our relationship has gone stale. There is nothing exciting about being married anymore.”

The Common Denominator

Although there are many possibilities for such declarations, a common denominator points to a “time-starved” marriage. When couples fall in love, they spend inordinate amounts of time together, give each other healthy doses of compliments and praise, and shower each other with physical affection. Time starved couples cease doing the very things that caused them to fall in love initially. Once couples decrease the amount of time they spend together, nurturing is replaced with nagging, and praise is supplanted with pessimism. Simply put, no marriage will survive without nurturing. And without proper nourishment, the marriage will ultimately wither—like a lawn would without sunlight, water or fertilizer. President Spencer W. Kimball explained further,

Love is like a flower, and, like the body, it needs constant feeding. The mortal body would soon be emaciated and die if there were not frequent feedings. The tender flower would wither and die without food and water. And so love, also, cannot be expected to last forever unless it is continually fed with portions of love, the manifestations of esteem and admiration, the expressions of gratitude, and the consideration of unselfishness.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Some faithful marriage partners only have time for each other at the end of the day—when both are completely worn out and exhausted. It is difficult to build a marriage when both husband and wife are running on vapor; nevertheless, most couples continue to buy into the notion that next week will be much better. They tell themselves, “If we can just get through this week, then things will slow down,” only to discover that things never change unless they put some kind of intervention in place.

Several years ago, I interviewed LDS women, asking them about their most significant family challenge. These were active, temple going, covenant keeping Saints. However, they were honest enough to admit that they still had challenges to deal with. One woman said,

*After 46 years of marriage and raising six children, I think hyper-business robs LDS couples of time together. You become like preschoolers who engage in parallel play…. Just going on your personal treadmills, thinking you are doing the Lord’s work, but much too busy to do the most effective work—which is relationships, talking, listening, pondering, and loving. Now, I see the same busy patterns in my own married children’s lives. We are running too fast for our own good*.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Another woman responded:

*My husband thinks that one of the greatest challenges for active Latter-day Saint couples is to learn to grow together, and not separately. We you and your husband are involved in children, church responsibilities, and work, it seems that you are constantly going in different directions. How do you find the time to grow together? How do you make it so that when the children leave home, you and your spouse are not complete strangers? I know several couples who were not able to work through these challenges. Now, as older couples, their marriages are hollow and unfulfilling. They spent the majority of their time on everything else except their marriages*.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Finally, another middle aged woman wrote:

*The biggest challenge in our marriage is having enough time to spend together. It seems that there is always something else that needs to be done. Most of our time is spent on unnecessary things like reading the newspaper, answering emails, Facebook and other social networking time killers, shopping, and way too many extracurricular activities for the kids. There is so much to be involved in today that couple time is most often sacrificed.[[13]](#endnote-13)*

Lost Priorities

Marriage requires much more than half-hearted compliance. No marriage will succeed with one foot in, and one foot out. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught couples that “you cannot succeed in love if you keep one foot out on the bank for safety’s sake. The very nature of the endeavor requires that you hold on to each other as tightly as you can and jump in the pool together.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Healthy marriage requires whole-souled devotion, dedication, and commitment—and that is exactly the problem. It seems that few couples today either don’t have the time, or are not able to make the time to give such commitment to their marriages. Marriage expert Michele-Weiner Davis explained:

I’m convinced that the single biggest contributor to the breakdown of relationships today is the fact that couples aren’t spending enough time together. They aren’t making their relationships a number one priority. The relationship gets put on the backburner. Everything else seems more important—careers, children, hobbies, community involvement, and personal pursuits. And when relationships aren’t attended to as they should be, trouble sets in.

People who don’t prioritize their relationships tell me that they often end up fighting during the little time they do have together. They argue about day to day issues; unpaid bills, uncleaned houses, unruly children. And it’s no wonder. It’s difficult to do what needs to be done to keep life moving in a productive direction, let alone try to coordinate your efforts with your partners when you’re under a time crunch. But the truth is, arguing about “who’s doing what around the house,” is really just a symptom of deeper problems—isolation, loneliness and resentment. You argue about the mundane issues when your emotional needs aren’t being met. The [soda] can left in the living room becomes a symbol of a lack of caring for you.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Consequently, contention elevates when marital needs are not met. And thus, the downward spiral begins. The lack of time and nurturing erodes positive communication, bonding time, intimacy, conflict resolution, and meeting each other’s marital needs. A marriage that lacks nurturing and time together will ultimately be suffocated by the demands of work, family, community, and even Church. And when the marriage suffers, the entire family will subsequently be negatively impacted. For instance, molehills can be made into mountains as each member of the family feels emotionally cheated. In a short period of time, parents and children in such time-starved relationships *never* get their emotional cups filled. Ultimately, happiness, family satisfaction, and nurturing become non-existent.

Origins of the Time Famine

So, what is the problem? Why is it that so few couples have little time together? First of all, for whatever reason, many Latter-day Saints have “hyper-scheduled” their lives, and the lives of their children. Some LDS families begin the day with early morning seminary at 5:30 a.m. Sometimes children can come home before they head-off to school for a quick bowl of “Frosted Flakes,” and family scripture study. By 8:15 a.m., the entire house has been emptied and some parents may have a little respite, provided that their children have not forgotten a homework assignment, science fair project, or their lunch money. However, by 3:00 p.m. a tornado of activity begins. One son must be at soccer practice by 3:30, and a daughter has piano lessons at 4:00. Just as the mother drops the daughter off for her lesson, it’s time for the soccer playing son to be picked up. Mom is able to rush home, squealing tires around every corner, and sliding sideways into her driveway, just in time to drop her soccer player off, pick up her gymnastics daughter, and hit the highway as quick as possible. If Mom can hit all of the traffic lights just right, she can drop her little gymnast off for her special balance beam lesson, and be just a few minutes late picking up her promising Julliard musician from piano lessons. On the way home, after picking up all of her children successfully, “Super-Mom,” pulls through the drive-through at the local hamburger joint for a couple of sacks of fast food. The family is able to gather for a few short minutes before the father of the family heads off for a bishopric meeting, and Mom takes their five-year-old to her Ballroom Dance performance. Meanwhile, the rest of the children are home watching *YouTube* videos while doing their homework. Later in the evening, the entire family gathers around the family room for a devotional before bed. At that moment, a frantic mother realizes that she completely forgot about her six-year-old son. After school, he walked across the street for his “Future-Olympian” one-on-one lesson from a special coach who only speaks Finnish, but is the world’s foremost expert in the javelin throw. At least that son has a cell phone, so after a nice dinner with his coach’s family, he’s now calling to be picked up, and its 10:00 p.m. Does this schedule sound remotely familiar? Today’s families are overscheduled, but disconnected. There seems to be too much going on. Consider the following statistics that shed more light on the contemporary time famine:

* A recent study by the Pew Research center reported that 76 percent of Americans feel that family is the most important element in their lives. Half of all families report eating dinner at least a few times a week.
* The University of Michigan reports that since the late 1970s, children have lost twelve hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent decrease in playing and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities. During this same time period, time children spend in structured sports has doubled. Families are also talking together much less than ever before, and family vacations have declined by 28 percent.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the 1980s alone, family vacation time shortened by 14 percent.[[17]](#endnote-17)
* Since 1960, children have lost ten to twelve hours per week of time with their parents.[[18]](#endnote-18) According to Moskowitz-Sweet, the average American family works 160 more hours a year than it did in 1960. [Need Reference—Maybe Levine?]. Moreover, 60 percent of preteens feel distant from their parents. Consequently, many of these young people report high rates of depression, anxiety, delinquency, and substance abuse.[[19]](#endnote-19)
* In the past 20 years, children have lost twelve hours a week in free time, which includes a 25 percent drop in playing and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities. Meanwhile, structured sports time has doubled, and passive spectator leisure (watching others play and perform) has increased from thirty minutes per week to over three hours.[[20]](#endnote-20)
* The Palo Alto Medical Foundation survey found that 85 percent of parents feel over stressed and need balance in their lives.
* In 1950, 12.6 percent of married mothers with children under age seventeen worked for pay; by 1994, 69% did so. Meanwhile, almost 60 percent of mothers with children under the age of one were working.[[21]](#endnote-21)
* In a Gallup Poll several years ago, 41 percent of adult American’s said they had too little time to spend with their families.[[22]](#endnote-22) Likewise, in a *Los Angeles Times* Survey, 57 percent of fathers and 55 percent of mothers reported feeling guilty that they spent too little time as families.[[23]](#endnote-23)
* Many married couples are stressed to their maximum capacity. Nineteen percent of adults report that their job makes them feel older than they are, and seventeen percent claim that their job keeps them awake at night.[[24]](#endnote-24)
* A National Poll of teenagers funded by the Whitehouse found that over 20 percent of American teens rated “not having enough time with parents” as their top concern. Sixty percent of today’s children come home from school to an empty house.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Statistics clearly show a significant time famine that has gradually become worse over the past thirty years. The technology wave that was supposed to make life so much easier has actually complicated it. Marriage is the first bond of society, and if couples cannot find ways to strengthen their marriages in a time-starved culture, families will suffer, and society will bear the brunt of the impact.

**The Silent Marriage Killer: Busyness**

Many men and women seem to always be in a hurry, which is taking its toll on modern marriages. Being “rushed” lowers overall well-being, jeopardizes physical and mental health, and increases stress and anger. Almost 35% of married women report that they always feel rushed, while about 29% of men do.[[26]](#endnote-26) A husband or wife incrementally becomes busier and busier with each passing day. Soon, a couple will realize that haven’t seen each other for an entire week.

Several years ago, a husband reported that he began coming home from work and going directly into his study. His purpose was to check his email (these would be emails he would have received after he closed up his laptop at work, and began his 45 minute commute home). This husband felt that if he could check his email and wrap up the last part of his workday from home, then he could concentrate his efforts on what was most important—his family. Initially, his wife went along with his “plan” because it seemed harmless. After all, she definitely wanted him to be more available to the family, and if he could wrap up a few emails from home, then they surely could enjoy some quality family time. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to predict what the innocent checking of email morphed into. The husband’s quick ten minute wrap-up session soon became twenty minutes, and then an entire hour. Like the frog that slowly boils in the pot of water, within a matter of months, the father was eating dinner in his study and basically working until the late hours of the night. His frustrated wife told him not to bother coming home from his corporate office if he was only going to work at his home office for the duration of the evening.

Not able to kick the habit, the husband began working until after 10:00 p.m. each night in his home office. He rationalized that if his wife would let him, he could get most of his work done from home, and would not need to go into work on Fridays. Of course, taking Friday’s off never happened. Finally, the wife had to confront him and engage in a serious meeting regarding the neglect of his marriage and family. Initially, the husband did not believe that he was spending that much time in his home office. Ultimately, his wife helped him see his mistake and he was able to make some positive changes.

Several years ago in the suburbs of Dallas, an LDS mother and father were killed in a car accident, leaving their five children to be raised by extended family. After the funeral, many fathers and mothers left with a new resolve to savor every family moment together. Fathers began coming home from work a little earlier, and mothers became more involved with their children. Unfortunately, this “effect” only lasted for several months. Soon, the novelty wore off, reality set in, and people were back to their insane schedules. If such a tragedy cannot help enact permanent change in the lives of adults, then only the gospel of Jesus Christ can ensure lasting change.

Satan’s Tactics

For active and faithful Latter-day Saints, one of Satan’s most potent tools is *distraction*. If this father, who sat in his study night after night, isolated from his family, just lifted his head up and looked at the picture of his wife and children on the wall in front of him, he probably would have realized his gross error. However, it took a confrontation from his wife to wake him from his senses! For some individuals, it takes a crisis or catastrophe of great magnitude to get refocused on the proper priorities. For others, even a crisis won’t help.

Most faithful Latter-day Saints are not going to rob a bank, torture an animal, or commit a life-changing transgression. However, each one of us can fall prey to Satan’s lures—especially that of distraction. And if Satan can nudge us just one inch off course, what initially appears harmless, within several months, can pull us ten miles from our intended target. Family scripture study serves as a great example of how this can happen. Perhaps a family who tries to read the scriptures each evening must miss Monday because of their daughter’s dance recital. Perhaps Tuesday does not work because of a husband’s bishopric meeting. Then, Wednesday’s attempt did not pan out because all the teenagers had mutual and raced out the door immediately after dinner. And before the family recognizes it, they haven’t read the scriptures for six-weeks. Satan is the master of distraction!

Several years ago, Sheri Dew wrote about this tendency:

Lucifer works hard to undermine our innate tendency to nurture and care for others. He wants us to become separated from each other. Voice messaging and [texting] are efficient, but they don’t replace a listening ear and a caring heart. If the adversary can cause us to focus more on our differences than our similarities, if he can keep us so busy running from one commitment to another that we no longer have time for each other, he has made great strides towards neutralizing the strength and influence that we have. We need each other. We need each other’s testimonies and strength, each other’s confidence and support, understanding and compassion.

Lucifer would have us so busy—with the details swirling around family, friends, careers, and every soccer league in town—that there’s no time to actually *live* the gospel. No time to fast and pray, to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, to worship in the temple…. Regret is what happens when we figure out too late what was really important.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Pitfalls to Busyness

There are several pitfalls to busyness that are damaging to the marriage relationship.

1. *Busyness corrupts your conversations*.[[28]](#endnote-28) When couples are over-busy, their marriage takes a back-seat to everything else. In order for marriages to thrive, there needs to be a significant amount of meaningful conversation. In fact, there are three levels of communication in marriage: superficial, personal, and validating. Busyness keeps most marital conversations at the superficial level. However, marriages cannot flourish when superficial level of communication is the dominant form of connecting. Within a short period of time, spouses cease to experience bonding moments through their communication; instead, they are merely “swapping” information. Soon, their relationship begins to lack depth and meaning. One busy father of three children expressed that he felt more like an air traffic controller than a husband. He related that the prime activity between him and his wife was juggling schedules and shuttling children in every direction. This father confessed that most of the conversations between him and his wife were spent simply coordinating schedules.[[29]](#endnote-29) Remember, Satan is both clever and subtle. Many couples can fool themselves into thinking they are deeply communicating because they may converse several times a day. Unfortunately, their conversations lack depth, bonding, and purpose, other than to coordinate. There is a significant difference between communicating and coordinating. Eventually, this lack of significant and meaningful conversation will lead to disregarding each other’s needs.

2. *Busyness depletes your love life*.[[30]](#endnote-30) Many couples today have simply spread themselves too thin. Perhaps they begin their days early in the morning, and are still going full steam late at night. The only time they see each other is when they are completely exhausted and worn out.

Consequently, couples who are only together and the end of the day when they have “little left to give,” will discover that they are not renewing their love and recharging their emotional batteries. Les and Leslie Parrott explain: “When you are trying to stretch time beyond its limits, you end up with a zero balance in your love bank. The quality of your love life can’t help but suffer when you are too busy.”[[31]](#endnote-31) The proper expression of love and affection does not come in one large dose—as if from a fire hose. Affection is more akin to a drip system—one drop at a time will eventually fill an entire bucket. Therefore, love is made up of much smaller increments called *deposits*. When couples are too busy, they quit making deposits in each other’s love bank. Instead, they are only able to crank the fire hose up on rare occasions. If anything, the fire hose approach to expressing love leaves more water around the bucket than in it. Couples become more frustrated that fulfilled.

3. *Busyness steals your fun*. There is no doubt about it; busyness is a “fun-sucker.” When couples are preoccupied with keeping all of the balls in the air, they are constantly missing the constant joys in life. Those who are overly busy constantly buy into Satan’s lie that “things will slow down much more next week, and then we can really have fun as a couple.” Moreover, individuals who are too busy either don’t have time to enjoy life, or they are too tired to have fun. Les and Leslie Parrott argue, “If you are exhausted from just trying to keep the hamster wheel in life turning, you’re never going to enjoy the ride.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Husbands, remember how funny you were before you had to deal with a mortgage, taxes, crying babies, work trips, and a busy church responsibility? Wives, remember how spontaneous you were long before there were teenagers schedules to coordinate, Presidency meetings, PTA, and bills to pay? Now is the time to reconnect with a healthy dose of spontaneous fun—the very thing that drew you together in the first place. Couples who *play* together, *stay* together.

4. *Busyness erodes your soul*. Marriage experts, Les and Leslie Parrott have written, “Perhaps the most corrosive by-product of busyness for a couple is the inevitable erosion of their inner resources. If you are busy enough, long enough, you will become spiritually bankrupt. God will feel absent.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Couples who are too busy never seem able to refill their spiritual gas tanks. Instead, they are traveling through their life on nothing more than vapor. Spiritually, these individuals are malnourished and spiritually drained. Without the perspective and good news of the gospel in their lives, couples begin to self-destruct. Soon, arguments over small things intensify, and some will even begin to question if they are married to the right person. The lack of spirituality in relationships can bring a once healthy couple into a downward spiral that leads to crushed disappointments and wrecked dreams.

**Common Distractors for LDS Couples**

There are legitimate reasons why LDS couples are often too busy. There are many distractors that can pull couples apart instead of together. Do you find, as a couple, that you have very little time for each other? When was the last time that you did something fun together as a couple? Do you remember your last date with each other? When was the last time you sent a love note to your spouse, or did something special for them? Do you feel that your children’s schedule dominates your life? Do you have something going every night of the week, and even on weekends? Does your family ever have time to relax or talk, or simply “chill-out”? There are several common distractors that most Latter-day Saint couples must deal with. Although there are many distractions that can drive a wedge between LDS couples, four significant “wedges” will be mentioned in this paper.

Work Time

When compared to the past thirty years, married couples spend less time together now than ever before.[[34]](#endnote-34) Consider also that seventy percent of fathers and mothers feel that they do not have enough time with their children.[[35]](#endnote-35) Why? Although there are many reasons that could be considered, one common reason that prevents couples from spending time together is their work schedules. Long hours at work can negatively impact the children, and drain the marriage as well.

The demands at the office are colliding with marriage and family responsibilities “and placing a tremendous time squeeze on many Americans.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Working men and women spend 14 more hours a week at the office than their cohorts did thirty years ago.[[37]](#endnote-37) Today’s working American man put in an average of 49.4 hours per week on the job while today’s working woman averages 42.4 hours of work per week.[[38]](#endnote-38) In fact, more than one-third of male managers and professionals work more than 50 hours a week.[[39]](#endnote-39) Moreover, there are more women in the labor force than any other time in our Nation’s history. In 1970, only 43% of women were employed. However, in 2008, that number increased to 77 percent of mothers with older children, and 63 percent of women with younger children.[[40]](#endnote-40) Furthermore, for the first time in American history, women now hold the majority of the nation’s jobs. And, of the 15 job categories projected to grow in the next decade, all but two will be primarily occupied by women.[[41]](#endnote-41) According to the Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Study, 56 percent of LDS women between the ages of 24 and 44 are working. However, of married LDS women with children at home, only 23 percent work full time. Another 22 percent work part time.[[42]](#endnote-42) It appears that not as many LDS women are in the workforce when compared to the National average. However, these statistics point to almost half of all LDS women working, which is a huge family life and marriage disrupter.

Meanwhile, men are working longer hours, traveling more with their jobs, and spending much more time at the office that many of them initially signed up for. Today, 65% of all fathers work more than 40 hours a week, compared to 36% of working mothers. Furthermore, 25% of working fathers work more than 50 hours per week.[[43]](#endnote-43) Of course, more time at work translates into less time as a couple, and of course, less time as a family.

If couples want to experiences happiness and satisfaction in their relationships, they will need to prioritize their marriage. President Ezra Taft Benson taught the brethren of the priesthood, “Nothing except God himself takes priority over your wife in your life—not work, not recreation, not hobbies…. What does it mean to ‘cleave unto her’? It means to stay close to her, be loyal and faithful to her, to communicate with her, and to express your love for her.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Apathy

President Harold B. Lee once said, “Someone has said that the opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is apathy. And I say to you brethren, the most dangerous thing that can happen between you and your wife or between me and my wife is apathy—not hate, but for them to feel that we are not interested in their affairs, that we are not expressing and showing our affection in countless ways. Women, to be happy, have to be loved and so do men.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Family expert, William Doherty said that the problem with many marriages today is indifference. He said, “We get used to our mate. In marriage, familiarity breeds, not contempt, but taking each other for granted. All relationships lose some degree of newness and freshness over time if we don’t work to put these ingredients back.”[[46]](#endnote-46)

A middle-aged father from Texas wrote:

*There was a time in my marriage that I was traveling extensively, and I certainly wasn’t paying attention to my wife or children. I was extra ornery and seemed to have a bad attitude about everything. Soon, my attitude transferred over to my wife and she began withdrawing from our relationship. Soon, our marriage became stale and boring, and we knew we had to do something about it*.[[47]](#endnote-47)

An LDS wife from Idaho wrote, “Apathy is something that always needs to be kept in check. I feel that when I don’t appreciate or recognize the little things that my husband does, I am letting apathy control the marriage. I need to spend more time looking for the good that he does and pointing it out to him.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Years ago, President Spencer W. Kimball warned couples not to let their marriages become stale and their love grow cold, like old bread, worn-out jokes, or cold gravy.[[49]](#endnote-49) Unfortunately, many couples have done exactly what President Kimball warned them *not* to do. Not only do many couples take each other for granted, but they have simply quit feeding the marriage. All of the activities, talks, and shared time together that cause couples to fall in love simply cease to exist! Just as a garden will not grow without water, sunlight, and fertilizer; marriages will go stale if there is no affection, shared time, talking, and doing things together. President Kimball was specific when he mentioned the vital ingredients of a successful marriage: consideration, kindness, thoughtfulness, concern, expressions of affection, embraces of appreciation, admiration…companionship, confidence, faith, partnership, and a host of others.[[50]](#endnote-50)

However, none of these can happen without the commodity of time. Elder F. Burton Howard stated, “If you want something to last forever, you treat it differently. You shield it and protect it. You never abuse it. You don’t expose it to the elements. You don’t make it common or ordinary. If it ever becomes tarnished, you lovingly polish it until it gleams like new. It becomes special because you have made it so, and it grows more beautiful and precious as time goes by. Eternal marriage is just like that. We need to treat it that way.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

Media Time

Perhaps the most significant distraction in marriages today is media time. It wasn’t too long ago that television or videos could rob a couple of precious time. However, in today’s world, there are media options that could distract us for a lifetime. There are still interruptions of time cause by television on movies. But added distractions would include smart phones, internet surfing, gaming, email, and social networking—just to name a few. One study documented that American men spend 15 hours a week watching television, while women spend almost 17 hours a week in front of the tube.[[52]](#endnote-52) According to a recent Nielsen survey, men between the ages of 18 to 34 are now the biggest users of video games, with 48.2 percent of all American men using a video console each day, averaging over 2 ½ hours daily.[[53]](#endnote-53) A recent study conducted by researchers at Brigham Young University reported that 75 percent of gamer’s spouses wish their spouse would put more time and effort into the marriage.[[54]](#endnote-54) Moreover, 82 percent of gaming occurs between 6 and 11 p.m. Furthermore, 36 percent of those who play online role-playing games are married, and 22 percent have children. [[55]](#endnote-55) Therefore, wives and children are being ignored during prime-time-family-time.

A middle-aged mother from Idaho wrote,

*I hate electronic media, all of it. I feel that so much time is wasted on unimportant facts and information. I will admit that when my husband gets a new computer, I-Pad, I- Phone, or other gadget, I get jealous. I want his time and attention. The truth is that our family only has a few short hours a day together. So, when my husband comes home, I do not like competing with media devices for his time. I want us focusing together on our family; cooking dinner, eating dinner, doing homework, and cleaning up together— with both parents engaged.*[[56]](#endnote-56)

Men are not the only media junkies in the marriage relationships. Contemporary women can spend inordinate amounts of time in media usage. Several years ago in my counseling practice, I saw a distressed husband who didn’t know what to do with his wife. She was involved in on-line gaming and social networking half of the day, and most of each night. Their marriage ultimately ended in divorce.

Do you spend time watching television when your spouse is home with you? Do you watch television together as a family or couple activity, or is it a separate activity? How many hours a day do you spend on your home computer? Do you find yourself engaged in social networking and other media activities on your phone or computer that takes you away from your spouse? Elder Russell M. Nelson has taught, “If marriage is a prime relationship in life, it deserves prime time.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

Children’s Schedules

Parenthood is stressful, and children are one of the largest drains on their parent’s time. The presence of children in the home increases the time demands for housework more than any other factor. In fact, the more children in the home, and the younger the children are, the less time couples will have together.[[58]](#endnote-58) In a recent study, “spouses with children at home reported spending nearly two hours less per day together than did those without children at home.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Both mothers and fathers are expected to spend more time with their children in nurturing roles when compared to their past predecessors.[[60]](#endnote-60) Latter-day Saint families are most often larger; thus, leaving parents with more people and activities to manage. Fathers and mothers divide the family several nights a week, load the children into different cars, and attempt to cover all the stops: soccer practice, a piano recital, and piano practice—all at the same time. Sometimes, all parents can do to cover all the bases are to divide and conquer. William J. Doherty has explained,

The biggest threat to good marriages is everyday living. That may sound strange to you. What I mean is getting lost in the logistics of everyday life. We spend most of our time at home managing a household, taking care of children, and pursuing solitary activities like watching television or working. The coming of children especially seems to doom personal time for conversation between spouses, and even the time we do have is dominated by logistical talk about schedules and household tasks. At best, we feel like effective co-managers of a family business. At worst, we feel like ships passing in the night. By the time the kids leave home, we may not remember how to be different with each other.[[61]](#endnote-61)

Obviously, it’s 1960 anymore when the family can gather around the fireplace and sing songs each night while drinking *Tang*. The world has changed so drastically since those days. For Latter-day Saints with multiple children, to get a free night at home with nothing on the schedule calls for a celebration!

Often, when parents are not driving their children to and from activities, children still “need” their parents. In fact, children have first claim on their parent’s non-working time.[[62]](#endnote-62) Therefore, free time is rarely spent between husband and wife. Instead, children monopolize most of the life and energy of their parents. Contemporary parents spend much of their parenting time shuttling their children to fun activities, parties, and to their friends’ houses. Once again, free time isn’t directed to the marriage, but towards the children.

An LDS Bishop from Idaho recently shared the following:

*Our children’s time demands and commitments is the single reason we don’t spend enough time together as a couple. This causes trouble in our marriage because when we don’t spend adequate time together, our marriage slips. We probably tend to let our children be too involved. We’ve talked about limiting their activities, but we always come back to the fact that we want them to develop their talents and do things they want to do. Because of my work and church schedule, and our children’s activities, there is never time for myself or my spouse. We both face the same challenges so finding time* *for each other is difficult. Even if we wanted to have a special night every week for a date, it is almost impossible because our children will have a game or activity.[[63]](#endnote-63)*

This busy bishop isn’t much different than most LDS parents. There is a constant desire to spend more couple time, but how? What would need to be sacrificed? What would need to be changed in the family structure? Sometimes adults and children are simply too busy, and some things need to be dropped from the schedule. At other times, couples must choose to forge ahead until the season is over. Nevertheless, couples will need to seek the Lord’s direction for viable solutions.

**The Role of Rituals in Reconnecting**

Recent research documents that couples who spend more time together have more stable marriages when compared to couples caught in the time famine. In the *Survey of Marital Generosity*, spouses who experience high levels of couple time are significantly less likely to divorce. Specifically, wives who reported having couple time less than once a week were four times more likely to report “divorce proneness” when compared to wives who spent at least once a week with their husbands. Meanwhile, husbands who reported spending less than once a week in couple time with their wives were 2.5 times more likely to be “divorce prone” when compared to husbands who had couple time at least once a week.[[64]](#endnote-64) Moreover, the *National Survey of Families and Households* recently reported that the more time husbands and wives spent together in couple time, the less likely they were to divorce. The message is clear: husbands and wives who enjoy high levels of couple time together are more likely to have satisfying and healthy marriages.[[65]](#endnote-65) Wilcox and Dew have concluded that couple time leads to higher quality marital relationships because communication is strengthened, sexual satisfaction increases, and commitment is fortified.[[66]](#endnote-66)

One of the most certain ways to ensure couple time together is to employ rituals in the marriage. Rituals are social interactions that are repeated, coordinated, and significant to both parties in the relationship. It does not matter how often rituals are repeated—it could be nightly, weekly, monthly, or annually. But they are repeated. Rituals also must be coordinated. There must be a time and place for the ritual to occur, and of course, both parties must know when to show up. Mainly, rituals are significant to both husband and wife.[[67]](#endnote-67) For example, a husband could tell a friend, “My wife and I have a great ritual. Every Monday evening after we put the children in bed, we watch *Monday Night Football* together.” However, if that event is not emotionally significant to the wife, then watching football together isn’t a ritual. It’s actually a marriage problem. However,

Other couples may belief that they have rituals in their relationship, but they are actually routines. Like rituals, routines are repeated and coordinated. However, routines lack emotional significance. Therefore, if a couple eats dinner each night in front of the television, while the wife views the program, and the husband reads the newspaper, this couple has established a routine that does very little to strengthen the marriage. However, another couple could watch the exact same television program each week—together. As they view the program, they may scratch each other’s back, hold hands, and discuss the program together in detail. This would be a ritual.

The purpose of rituals is to help couples connect and strengthen emotional bonds. Individuals fall in love with each other through rituals of intimacy and connection. When most couples commenced dating each other seriously, their time together most likely consisted of romantic dinners, long talks, bike rides, skiing, dancing, going for walks, exchanging gifts, and talking on the phone for hours.[[68]](#endnote-68) Most often, the very rituals that bring couples together are discontinued shortly after the marriage. Since a large proportion of LDS couples marry while they are still in college, or even while working full time, it doesn’t take long for school and work to invade their couple time and negate their romantic rituals. Soon after, babies come, along with work and church demands. Within a matter of a few short years, some good, healthy LDS couples began to feel that marriage isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. They become overwhelmed with time demands, responsibilities, and perhaps even guilt. Before long, their marriages become stale and stagnant. Couples need rituals to restore the meaning in their marriage; they need connection rituals.

Connection rituals in marriage create opportunities for couples to share time and attention together. Examples of connection rituals in marriage include good-byes in the morning, greetings in the evening, phone conversations during the day, texting each other, eating together, expressing love to each other, working in the yard together, doing home improvements together, and eating at a favorite restaurant together. William J. Doherty argued that “Connection rituals are at the base of the pyramid of marriage, right above commitment.”[[69]](#endnote-69) For marriages to thrive, connection rituals must be employed. The most significant connection rituals to heal and strengthen a marriage include greeting rituals, talk rituals, and dating rituals.

Greeting Rituals

Healthy greeting rituals occur in a marriage when the couple meets for the first time in the morning, when one spouse has been away on a trip, or when another spouse walks through the front door after a long day at work. Believe it or not, many spouses can walk through the front door of their homes without anyone in their family taking notice. One husband reported that he would walk into his home in the evening, walk into his bedroom, change his clothes, and read the newspaper before his wife even spoke to him. Some couples get into bad habits of coordinating when they see each other for the first time. A wife will say to her husband, “Hurry and change clothes so we can get to the choir recital,” or a husband will say to a wife after a long day, “Your pizza is in the fridge.” One man reported that when he walked into his home at the end of the long day, his wife would routinely respond, “Did you close the garage door?”[[70]](#endnote-70) Another man reported that when he walked in to his home after a long day, his wife said, “What’s that smell?” Wow, isn’t it great to be home! Instead of these poor greeting responses, couples should discuss their greeting rituals.

If LDS couples do not have a strong, noticeable greeting ritual, they need to create one. Every child needs to see their parents display some public affection, even if it grosses them out a little. Let there be no question in the lives of LDS children that their parents are madly in love. Greeting rituals include a hug, a kiss, and a verbal expression of love, a family phrase, or anything else that is significant to both spouses. Husbands and wives need to be more excited than the family dog when a spouse walks into the home after a long day away.

Talk Rituals

William J. Doherty argued that if “a married couple with children has fifteen minutes of uninterrupted, nonlogistical, nonproblem-solving talk every day, I would put them in the top five percent of married couples in the land. It’s an extraordinary achievement.”[[71]](#endnote-71) When couples are dating, especially during their engagement, it is common to talk to each other until late into the night. However, after marriage, the time crunch is activated. There are many facets of life that compete with quality marriage time, including media, work, school, and even hobbies. Often, the only time couples can connect is at 11:30 p.m. when both are exhausted.

Couples must ritualize their time together if they are to preserve the quality of their marriages. One couple shared a significant talk ritual in their marriage. After dinner each night, their children would clean up the kitchen (this is sounding great already!), while the husband and wife slipped off to the family living room. There, they would drink their favorite beverage together and discuss their day.[[72]](#endnote-72) Superficial talk was not allowed! They disciplined themselves to talk on a more personal level, sharing their opinions, beliefs, and ideas about a myriad of topics. It was also a time to validate each other and share compliments and praise.

William J. Doherty reported that one of his finest investments was his hot tub. Fourteen years ago, they purchased the Jacuzzi and placed it out on their deck, underneath the stars. At about 10:00 p.m. each evening, they venture out to their tub, listen to jazz music, and talk about anything other than bills, report cards, and soccer tournaments.[[73]](#endnote-73) In order for couples to strengthen their marriages, they must find the time to talk to renew and strengthen their emotional bonds.

Dating Rituals

Brigham Young said, “Life is best enjoyed when time periods are evenly divided between labour, sleep and recreation… All people should spend one-third of their time in recreation which is rebuilding, voluntary activity—never idleness.”[[74]](#endnote-74) Couples would do well to follow Brigham Young’s counsel and spend more time in wholesome recreation. Dating is a form of recreation that renews emotional bonds and can heal the time starved marriage. Dating is what brings couples together initially, and steady dating can advance the relationship to engagement and marriage. It is unfortunate that so many married couples discontinue dating after they are married. This is a sure-fire way to kill the flame in any marriage. Some couples argue that they would like to date, but with several small children, babysitters are too expensive. To those couples, consider that babysitting in not an expense, but an investment. Besides, babysitters are much cheaper than divorces. Sometimes husbands make the mistake of assuming that dates must be elaborate and expensive. Most women would say that they are simply happy to get out of the house, and they would be more than excited just to go to a park, or walk around the block a few times.

Husbands should initiate dating in the marriage relationship. This isn’t to say that wives cannot plan dates, but the husband is responsible to ensure that this part of the marriage remains strong and consistent. Husbands and wives should hold a couples meeting each week to coordinate schedules, talk about finances, solve problems, plan gospel training in the home, and discuss their weekly date. Furthermore, couples should also try to break out of the mold of going to dinner and a movie on each date.

Elder Richard J. Scott recently spoke to students on the BYU campus regarding their dating relationships. He mentioned that attending movies on dates is “stupid” idea for couples who are trying to get to know each other.[[75]](#endnote-75) The same could be said about married couples who are trying to strengthen their marriage relationship. What good is it for couples to sit for two hours in a movie theatre where they cannot talk or even see each other? One of the most significant purposes for a “date night” would be to open communication channels and restore emotional connection.

It would be well for couples who are trying to renew their relationships to engage in some of the activities they once did when they were engaged. Go putt-putt golfing, or bowling, or riding go-carts. Perhaps there are more cultural activities that both spouses enjoy, such as visiting an art museum, or attending a musical concert. The point is that there are many activities couples can engage in besides dinner and a movie. Recent research documents that “couples who engage in novel activities that are fun, active or otherwise arousing—from hiking to dancing to travel to … games—enjoy higher levels of relationship quality.”[[76]](#endnote-76)

Moreover, couples who often date each other are able to restore romance in their relationships. This can lead to high levels of sexual satisfaction in the marriage.[[77]](#endnote-77) Moreover, frequent dating restores commitment in the relationship. Family scholars Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew report that “partners who put one another first, who steer clear of other romantic opportunities, and who cultivate a strong sense of ‘we-ness’ or togetherness are markedly happier than are less committed couples.”[[78]](#endnote-78) Finally, one of the most significant threats to the strongest of marriages is the time famine and stress. Couples who regularly date are able to de-stress their lives and escape the concerns the real life presents.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland shared the following experience. Several years ago, in speaking to Church Educators, he related how difficult and stressful life was for he and his wife Patricia, while they were graduate students at Yale. At the time, Elder Holland was serving in the Stake Presidency, was directing the institute program, was a full time student, was married, and had a couple of children. Meanwhile, Patricia was the Relief Society President, wife, mother, and watched other people’s children to make ends meet. However, this powerful couple decided that no matter what, every Friday night would be there night together. Elder Holland reflected,

But on that one night for a few hours we would be together. We would step off the merry-go-round. We would take a deep breath or two and remind ourselves how much we loved each other, why we were doing all of this in the first place, and that surely there must be a light at the end of the tunnel somewhere.

I do not remember those dates ever amounting to much. I literally cannot remember ever going to dinner, but we must have. We certainly must have at least gotten a pizza occasionally. I just don’t remember it. What I do remember is walking in the Yale-New Haven Arboretum, which was just across the street from our student housing. I remember long walks there holding hands and dreaming dreams of what life might be like when things were less demanding. Down at the end of the street was a Dairy Queen where we would occasionally end up for a cone or, on really good nights, a root beer float….[[79]](#endnote-79)

Elder Holland further stated that both he and Patricia needed those nights just to give them a sense of sanity and direction. It was a time to reconnect and celebrate what mattered most in their marriage. Those Friday Night dates were something the Holland’s both looked forward to, and the time they spent together was renewing and healing. Elder Holland then concluded, “A drugstore psychologist once said that people need three things to be emotionally healthy: someone to love, significant things to do, and something pleasant to look forward to.” He then challenged the men, “Brethren, make sure your wife has something pleasant, something genuinely fun, to look forward to regularly.”[[80]](#endnote-80)

Elder Joe J. Christensen urged couples to keep their courtships alive by doing things together—just husband and wife. “As important as it is to be with the children as a family, you need regular weekly time alone together. Scheduling it will let your children know that you feel that your marriage is so important that you need to nurture it.”[[81]](#endnote-81)

Renown marriage scholar, John Gottman, discovered that couples who devoted five extra hours a week to their marriage gleaned tremendous benefits—especially when compared to couples who did not spend extra time to strengthen their marriage. During these “Magic Five Hours,” as Gottman labeled them, couples concentrated on four things: 1) before leaving for the day, learning one thing that will happen in your spouse’s life that day, 2) engage in a stress-reducing conversation at the close of the day, 3) do something daily to communicate genuine affection and appreciation to each other, 4) demonstrate physical affection during the day, and 5) have a weekly date together. Although these activities require a minimum time investment, the dividends will make a significant difference in each spouse’s life.[[82]](#endnote-82)

**Conclusion**

Every couple needs to insert rituals in their marriage to ensure quality time together. There are other rituals to consider, such as love rituals, special occasion rituals, and even community rituals that can strengthen a marriage. There are several other rituals that will help couples take their marriages back and set a course in place that will strengthen their marriage:[[83]](#endnote-83)

* Establish a set time every day to talk
* Create a greeting ritual that marks the moment and has meaning for both husband and wife.
* If you no longer go to bed together on a regular basis, then start again.
* Write love notes to your spouse.
* Start dating again.
* Spend more quiet time together without the television.
* If there is a television in your bedroom, get rid of it.
* Express a kind word of compliment to your spouse. Be specific.

Years ago, Elder Hugh B. Brown served in the First Presidency, was an Apostle, and served in many other church capacities. Perhaps, however, it was his service to his wife that was most impressive. In his first address after being called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Brown paid this tribute to his wife: “If would be ungrateful if I did not acknowledge that Zina Card Brown, my beloved wife, is more responsible for my being here today than I.”[[84]](#endnote-84)

Elder Brown’s daughter, Mary Firmage, shared a ritual that she observed between her parents for years. Mary related that every day of their marriage, Elder Brown would kiss his wife, Zina, goodbye before he would leave for work. The couple would then walk to the front porch together, Elder Brown would walk down about three steps, turn back towards Zina, and ask, “Did I kiss you goodbye?” Zina would respond with, “Why, no, you didn’t.” Then Elder Brown would kiss her again.

Then, as he would walk to the car, Zina would run into the dining room where she would blow kisses to her husband through the window. Then, as Elder Brown was backing the car out of the driveway, Zina would run back to the front porch where their ritual began and she would wave a handkerchief until Elder Brown drove out of sight. However, just before the car turned the corner at the end of the street, Elder Brown would blink the brake lights three times, his code for “I love you.”[[85]](#endnote-85)

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