



Family Times

Connection Rituals in Marriage

I saw a bumper sticker one time that said “*Marriage: The Number One Cause of Divorce.*” It was a sad commentary on how society views marriage. In a similar tone, renown marriage and family scholar, Bill Doherty, has written that “The biggest threat to good marriages is everyday living.” He continues, “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” (William H. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage* [New York: The Guilford Press, 2003], 125).

Today, as if you haven’t

noticed, life is extremely busy. It certainly isn’t 1950 anymore, when the family can gather around the fireplace and sing songs each night while drinking *Tang*. The world has changed drastically since those days. Now, especially for Latter-day Saints with several kids, to get a night at home with nothing else on the schedule calls for a celebration.

Last year, there was an ice storm in the area, and every school and church activity was cancelled due to terrible road conditions and power outages. I talked to a leader in my stake as he shared how happy he was to have that “free night” with his family that he had not expected. He related to me how his family spent time around the “hearth” sharing stories, catching up, teaching gospel principles, and playing games. As this good man shared this with me, I began to feel tremendously guilty. You see, I am a task master. The first thing I thought of the night of the ice storm was “This would be a great night to go to *Home Depot*, rent a carpet cleaner, and spend the evening cleaning our carpets. Needless to say, our family probably did not have as much fun as my stake colleague and friend. Too many of us see a break in the schedule as an opportunity to

get “one more thing done.” I include myself in that grouping.

Our culture has created a time famine. If we are not dashing like mad out the door to a meeting, or rushing our children to a practice, recital, or game, then we don’t know what to do with ourselves. In fact, some have created things to do just to make it look like we are busy (like cleaning carpets!)

This time-famished culture has taken its toll on marriages. I wish I had a nickel for every couple who has told me in a counseling session, “We’re just not in love anymore.” Well, gee whiz! I wonder why? It’s not hard to detect. These couples have placed their marriages very low on the Totem pole. In such relationships, the marriage gets what ever is left over after busy schedules and the demands of the children have “sucked” the life right out of the marriage.

This need not; in fact, this should not be. President Harold B. Lee 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 express-

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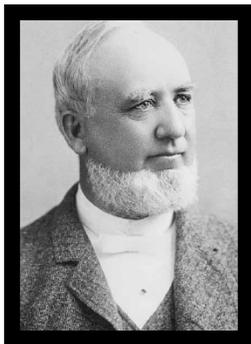
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“We believe that when a man and woman are united as husband and wife, and they love each other, their hearts and feelings are one, that love is as enduring as eternity itself, and that when death overtakes them it will neither extinguish nor cool that love, but that it will brighten and kindle it to a purer flame, and that will endure through eternity” (George Q. Cannon, *Journal of Discourses*, 14:320).



**KEY POINT:
COUPLES DO
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ing our love and showing our affection in countless ways. Women, to be happy, have to be loved and so do men” (Harold B. Lee, Regional Representatives Seminar, 12 December 1970; as cited in *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 241).

Indeed, all couples need to be on constant guard of apathy; we need to be careful that we do not take our spouse for granted. We need to treat each other the way we would a parched lawn—there needs to be plenty of water, fertilizer, and weed pulling. After all, that is exactly how our marriages began! No one ever got engaged, but said under their breath—“We never do anything together, we never talk, we never date, and we only see each other for ten minutes each day. What the heck, let’s get married—that will solve everything!”

Think back on what your engagement was really like. My guess is, you spent tons of time together; you loved being in each others company. Most courting couples in love cannot stand to be apart for longer than 4 minutes. However, many couples who have been married for some time may only see each other for 4 minutes each day. How many golf courses in this country would be in business if they spent 4 minutes each day maintaining the greens and fairways? Not real long!

I believe that couples do not fall out of love; they become disconnected. Do you remember how you connected with each other when you were dating? During courtship? What about engagement? Remember during this phase of your life when you

actually prepared for and anticipated a fun date. In fact, you may have looked forward to a particular date for several weeks. What happens now after 20 plus years of marriage? Many couples do not think of this opportunity until about 6:45 on Friday night. If couples have young children, they may “scratch” the entire evening all together because it is much too late to get a babysitter. Couples who have older kids may venture off to eat somewhere—*Wendy’s* or *McDonalds* are not so crowded on Friday night. So, there they sit, after 20 years of marriage, slamming down *Big Macs* or eating *Frosty’s*, trying to keep the bonfire in their marriage blazing. All it would take is one drop of water to put out the sizzle of a marriage like this.

Remember, before you were married when you tried to *dress in order to impress* each other—not depress each other. Before marriage, especially if you are a woman, you may have spent several hours trying to decide what to wear for a special night on the town. Even men put some thought into what they would wear on such occasions. Back in those days, we even tried to wear matching socks. Now, after several years of marriage, we go to bed with breathe right nose bandages plastered on our face, and a smattering of *Vick’s Vapor Rub* smeared on our nostrils. Now, that’s what I call attractive!

Remember when we first met each other and began to share gifts! That was great, wasn’t it. Men, remember

when you gave your wife a special surprise—maybe it was a special gift that represented your future marriage—or something to celebrate your relationship. Now, after years of marriage, the only surprise that some wives get is if the toilet seat was left up or down! Nice!

Before marriage, remember the hours of talking, discussing, and connecting. You couldn’t believe how much you had in common as you discussed your dreams late into the night. After years of marriage, your lucky if you even see each other, much less talk. And when you do talk, you are either interrupted by the children, or the phone. Or, as in the case of most, while the wife talks and shares her deepest concerns, her husband listens intently for about three minutes, and then passes out on the couch.

Men, remember how submissive you were during engagement? You would do anything to be with your future wife. You would go anywhere. I remember, when my wife and I were engaged, Barry Manilow came to the Marriot Center. Guess what? I went! All my buddies went off to play Racquetball that night, and I went to listen to some macho songs like “Mandy” and “Weekend in New England.” Back in those days, it was “Honey, what ever you want to do?” Today, if my wife wanted me to go to a Barry Manilow concert, I would pay her to not make me go. I would try to convince her that *weed eating* the lawn was really the place I needed to be. Then, I would probably

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“This One’s For You,” Man!

send a few daughters with her just so I wouldn’t have to hear “This One’s For You.” Likewise, I guarantee that my wife would send my son to play racquetball with me. At least she would need to stay home and clip coupons or shave the dog’s legs.

Women, remember how funny you thought your future husbands were back in the days of engagement. You would laugh at just about everything. He thought “this is great— a built in audience for the rest of my life.” Now, I can’t even get a courtesy laugh from my wife. Every now and then, I can make the kids crack up, but the most she can offer is a rolling of the eyes.

Well, my point is that we fell in love through a series of connection rituals: dating each other frequently, talking, either face to face or on the phone for long hours each day, serving each other, helping each other, spending hours of time together, writing notes to each other, having fun times together, eating at our favorite places. Now, what has happened? Some couples rarely spend any time together. Some have completely dropped romance out of their vocabulary. Still, others do not date or court each other. Ironically, these are the same couples who wonder what in the heck happened to their marriages as they are searching the yellow pages for good attorneys.

Bill Doherty explained the phenomenon this way: “We fall in love through rituals of connection and intimacy— courtship rituals like romantic

dinners, long talks, riding bicycles or going skiing, going for walks, exchanging gifts, talking every night on the telephone. We mostly do these rituals alone as a couple; when people are falling in love, their family and friends know to give them some space. We gladly fill our time through rituals of connection and intimacy. We develop a common language and a common experience bank. We go to dinner at our favorite spots, and we try to sit at our favorite tables. We go dancing at our favorite places. And we don’t dance with everybody in the room; we dance mostly with the person we are falling in love with. And then we get married.

“Why do we give up what made us so happy at an earlier phase of our relationship?...

“What do we give up what made us so happy at an earlier phase of our relationship? ...During the courtship... the relationship is figural in our lives— front and center, if you will— and the rest of our lives are the background. When we get married, and particularly after we have children, this reverses. Other things— the children, our work, our hobbies, even our religious involvement— become central or figural and the marriage recedes to the background and only gets our attention when something is wrong. An intentional marriage, unlike an unintentional courtship, is a high achievement because it requires the discipline to keep something connecting when natural energies and passions ebb.

“The only way to take back our marriages from the drift south is to keep paddling

and have a joint navigational plan. Paddling means doing the everyday things to stay connected, to find time for each other, to go on dates, to make a big deal of anniversaries and special occasions, to work hard to reconnect after periods when we have been distracted from each other. Having a joint navigational plan means that you are both committed for keeps, with no exit strategy, and that you both take responsibility to monitor how the marriage is doing, when it needs mid-course corrections, and when it needs help in the form of marriage education or marital therapy. Intentional marriage is about everyday attention and long range planning” (William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World that Pulls Us Apart* [New York: The Guilford Press, 2003], 17-19).

I would like to share one idea today— an idea that will help couples reconnect. What is the ritual in your relationship when husbands, or wives, come home from work? In the field, we call these “greeting rituals.” For couples with young children, a common greeting ritual is what I like to call the injury report or Paul Revere’s last ride— where one spouse warns the other of all of the impending dangers the family is facing: bill collectors, overdue books, broken appliances, and who got in trouble at school on that particular day. It could also become a “navigational report” as to what kids need to be where. Wives are good at mapping out strategic pick up locations



“Real funny, honey. Just really funny!”



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on city maps, complete with GPS coordinates, weather reports, and road hazards. So, when I walk in from work, it is common to hear things like “Callie threw up at school,” or “_____ got detention,” or “Did you remember to pick up Bethany at the High School,” or “I thought you were going to stop at Wal-Mart to pick up the _____.”

The new greeting this month is when I walk in, my wife greets me romantically with “What is that smell?” I know it’s just a coincidence. I think there is a dead mouse in one of our walls. However, why my wife chooses to say that each time I walk in the door is a mystery.

To often we greet co-worker, neighbors, and church members warmer than our own spouses—the very person we hope to spend eternity with.

Bill Doherty, after experiencing years of such greeting rituals wrote the following: “Leah and I realized that [our] greeting routine was not working anymore [it was an injury report], and we decided to take a radical step: to intentionally say, ‘Hi honey. How are you? With a hug and kiss. Pretty radical, huh? Like people who are in love. You heard it here first, and I’ve taken out a patent on it. You’ll have to pay us 50 cents every time you do it.’”

Bill then shared the following experience in his book, *Take Back Your Marriage*: “I once asked a couple I was seeing in therapy about

their greeting ritual. Karen was usually home first and working in the kitchen. The four children and the golden retriever were somewhere else in the house. This is what would happen: The husband, Ron, walks in, greeted first by the dog with a big, enthusiastic show of affection. Dogs are great ritualists. They are consistent, they are loving, and they are excited to see you. You can actually chart the number of hours you’ve been gone, and correlate that with the energy of their greeting ritual. So, Ron walks in the door, is greeted by the golden retriever, and next by the kids, with hugs all around for children numbers one, two, three, and four. And then he goes to the bedroom and changes clothes. Karen remains in the kitchen. Sometime over the next 20 minutes Ron wanders into the kitchen and the first words uttered by one or the other are something like, ‘Jesse has a concert tonight, so we have to hurry up dinner.’ [Paul Revere’s Ride].

“I asked Karen and Ron how they greeted each other when they were newlyweds. With sheepish grins, they recounted that it was ‘Hi honey, how are you? Followed by huggy, kissy, and ‘How was your day?’ I asked them if they remembered when that had changed. Not a clue. Most of us are clueless about the decline in our marital rituals. Rituals erode just as gradually as the Mississippi wears at the shoreline” (William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World that*

Pulls Us Apart [New York: The Guilford Press, 2003], 128).

Now, I don’t want to tell you what you need to do here. Every greeting ritual should be decided between a couple. However, that is just the point—decide to do something. If you have been married for a while, there is a chance that your greeting ritual has faded somewhat. Not that greeting rituals will make or break a marriage, but it certainly is a start to giving high priority to the marriage. One of the most critical needs for men in marriage is to feel needed. A man will not feel needed when he walks into his home from work and his wife appears not to care one lick that he is even home. Moreover, a wife, whose prime need is to feel cherished—that she is number one in her man’s life—will not feel valued whatsoever when he husband walks into the home and begins to check email, read the newspaper, or watch TV. The point here is that we need to connect in some way.

Speaking of dogs, one couple decided that they were not going to let their dog outshine them on the greeting ritual. So, now, when the husband comes home from work, the couple runs toward each other, squeals in delight [this personally, would scare me], raises their hands in the air [like they just won a game show contest], then embrace and kiss each other. Hey, if that works, I will be the first to say, “do it.”

I have quoted heavily today from Bill Doherty’s book, *Take Your Marriage Back*. It is a great book, and I recommend it to every couple. Now, I would like to conclude by mentioning a “departing” ritual. Some of you may remember Elder Hugh B. Brown who served as an apostle and member

of the First Presidency for many years. It was perhaps Elder Brown’s service to his wife and hers to him that impresses me the most about Elder Brown. In fact, when Elder Brown was called to be an apostle, he said in his inaugural talk in General Conference, “I 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” [*An Abundant Life*, ix].

The Brown’s daughter, Mary, related the following about their relationship. “Up until mother’s stroke they’d go through a ritual daily.... He’d kiss her good-bye and then they would walk to the front porch together. Daddy would go down three steps, and then return and ask, ‘Did I kiss you good-bye?’ Mother would answer, ‘Why no, you didn’t.’ Dad would kiss her again.

“As he walked to the car, Mother would run into the dining room, where she would blow kisses to him from the window. While daddy was backing the car out of the drive, Mother would run back to the porch where she would wave a handkerchief until he drove out of sight. Just before the car turned the corner, daddy would blink the brake lights three times, his code for ‘I love you’ (*Church News*, 26 October 1974, 5).

Connection rituals fan the flames of marriage. If your marriage has gone a little stale, implement some rituals that will help you restore your connection to each other.