

Section 5

Building Healthy Families

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LOVING ANOTHER PERSON AND BUILDING A HEALTHY FAMILY together require prerequisite character skills, insights and understanding. If marriage and family are the settings for optimal moral growth, young people have a need to believe in them as institutions and as something at which they may succeed. This can come through marriage and family education that puts emphasis on character development in terms of achieving basic life goals. Character education and marriage/family resiliency are two sides of the same coin. Their confluent support of one another is highly desirable in preparing students for success in these core and morally important aspects of life.

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Why Marriage?

In virtually every society into which historians or anthropologists have inquired, one finds peoples living together on the basis of kinship ties and having responsibility for raising children. The kinship ties invariably imply restrictions on who has sexual access to whom; the child-care responsibilities invariably imply both economic and non-economic obligations. And in virtually every society, the family is defined by marriage; that is, by a publicly announced contract that makes legitimate the sexual union of a man and a woman.

—James Q. Wilson¹

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MARRIAGE THROUGHOUT HISTORY SHOWS its enduring power. As Wilson points out, marriage fulfills very real economic and social needs. It regulates sexual unions and provides for their results: children. There is much evidence that this regulation and provision is the backbone of a civil and prosperous society.² Furthermore, individuals are deeply drawn to marriage. Marriage holds the promise of answering profound psychological, emotional and physical needs. It appeals to the human need for community and belonging.

Yet marriage in modern times is under siege. It is no longer the accepted road to happiness and fulfillment; nor is it considered the only route to sexual satisfaction or the only context within which to raise children. It is rarely celebrated in the mass media or the entertainment industry. The survival of monogamous, lifelong marriage as an institution is, for the first time in human history, in doubt.

Is Marriage Obsolete?

Marriage rates have been gradually declining in most advanced countries. In the United States, for example, from 1960 to 1998, there was a 41 percent decline in the annual number of marriages per one thousand unmarried women.³ In Japan and many European countries as well, people are putting off marriage for a variety of reasons. Some are postponing it indefinitely. Many factors contribute to the decline of marriage. Notable among them are several significant social and cultural trends: a rise in divorce, increasing acceptance of cohabitation and single parenthood, a widespread disillusionment with marriage, and the changing role of women in society.

Between 1960 and 1998 divorce rates climbed in the United States, more than doubling.⁴ Divorce became a socially acceptable option, almost an inevitability. Marriage researcher John Gottman places the chances a first marriage will end in divorce over the course of forty years at 67 percent.⁵ For the first time in history, more children became separated from one of their parents by parental choice than by death.⁶ There are now so many divorces in America that public schools hesitate to teach that the two-parent family is the desirable norm. They fear to injure the self-esteem of over 50 percent of their students who are not in two-parent families.

In part as a reaction against the high divorce rate, many people choose to cohabit. One quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are living with a partner at the present time, and a full 50 percent have lived with an unmarried partner at some time.⁷ Cohabitation is so prevalent that a recent issue of *Newsweek* depicted the possible "death of marriage" on its cover.⁸

Since such living arrangements are easier to break up than a marriage, some couples believe that living together before marriage is a good way to "test drive" a relationship before fully committing to it and risking the trauma of later divorce. Yet in fact, living together neither helps people prepare for marriage nor does it prevent divorce. As researchers David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead report from their review of recent studies, those who live together before marriage are more likely to divorce after they do marry than those who married without living together first.⁹

There is a strong tendency in modern society toward social acceptance of unwed parenthood as well. One in three babies in the

United States are born to single mothers, and the rate in the African-American population is as high as four out of five. In Europe, the rate in France and the United Kingdom is also one in three, while in Scandinavian countries about half of all children are born to unwed mothers.¹⁰

Disillusionment with Marriage

Disillusionment about the prospects of marital happiness is widespread. Less than half of U.S. high school seniors believe that legal marriage will lead to greater happiness than cohabitation or staying single.¹¹ One young man from Copenhagen put the general European misgivings about marriage succinctly: "Marriage is like Christmas, a fairy tale. I just don't believe in it."¹²

The changing status of women has also brought disillusionment with marriage in its wake—and, where disillusionment already existed, the means to act upon it. Noreen Byrne of the National Women's Council of Ireland pressed for liberalized divorce laws, saying that many women feel that marriage is nothing more than the opportunity to "wash men's socks."¹³ Young Japanese women are postponing marriage because they are disillusioned by the traditional model of the workaholic husband who is gone evenings and weekends and takes no part in childcare or housework. This reluctance to enter into marriage has caused Japan's fertility rate to plunge.¹⁴ While the changing status of women has thrown traditional marriage conventions into question, it has provided few new models for marriage other than negotiation of every issue—a long, tedious and sometimes conflict-ridden process.

Yet in spite of their doubts as to its efficacy and chances for success, marriage remains a highly desired life goal for many people. The vast majority of people marry in their lifetimes and those who divorce remarry—usually within two years.¹⁵ Strong majorities of American young people—83 percent and 73 percent of female and male high school seniors respectively—consider successful marriage and family life to be "extremely important" in their lives.¹⁶ These statistics are particularly poignant since many of these young people have witnessed the dissolution of their own parents' marriages. In spite of widespread doubts about the permanence of marriage and its possibilities for happiness, the attraction of marriage remains strong.

Many unmarried people in their teens and twenties are open to and even eager to learn the competencies that can help them escape the divorce syndrome.¹⁷ This is a hopeful sign, but the reality is that the lifestyles and attitudes of these young people almost preclude them reaching their goal of a happy lifelong marriage after a string of temporary sexual “hookups” and uncommitted relationships.

The Case for Marriage: Evidence from a Divorce Culture

Can a case be made for marriage? Is it a viable—even necessary—human institution? Statistically, a marriage culture is a far healthier, happier and safer place than a divorce culture. Marriage is a stabilizing social influence. Marriage even keeps crime rates down. But most importantly, a good marriage is the best setting within which to raise children. Since children are the key to the future, broken marriages have effects that resound far past the personal pain of the couples involved. Thus Hillary Clinton remarked, “Every society requires a critical mass of families that fit the traditional ideal, both to meet the needs of most children and to serve as a model for other adults who are raising children in difficult settings.”¹⁸

Acknowledging the value of good marriages does not have to be intended to make divorced parents feel guilty; nor does it have to become a diatribe against single parents or stepparents. People in these situations are coping with life’s complexities as best they can, and many are doing so with heroic self-sacrifice. Some have little choice about their situations; their difficulties were beyond the reach of easy or available answers.

It is also important to note that not all marriages are beneficial. Highly conflicted and stress-filled marriages are risk factors for many of the difficulties cited below as well.¹⁹ “Intact” marriages do not guarantee good outcomes. However, it cannot be denied that “good enough” marriages—to borrow a phrase from David Blankenhorn in *Fatherless America*—are statistically some of the best social programs around. They are worth any and all efforts to build and sustain.

Damage to Children

The National Survey of Children, which followed the lives of a group of seven to eleven-year-olds for more than a decade, found that children living with one parent or in stepfamilies were two to three times as likely to have emotional and behavioral problems as children living in two-parent families. They dropped out of high school in higher proportions and are much more likely to abuse alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. Girls are more likely to engage in teen sex and have an unwanted pregnancy. They are more likely to become violent or get in trouble with the law. These findings have been confirmed in study after study. Age, race, socioeconomic status, locale and educational level of the mother have little impact upon these statistics. The predicting factor is a broken family.²⁰

Economically, children in single-parent homes are the poorest of all major demographic groups. Few children who were raised by their married biological parents experience poverty during childhood, but most children in single parent homes do. Experts have coined the phrase "the plunge into poverty" that women and their dependent children undergo after divorce. Forty-six percent of families with children headed by single mothers live below the poverty line, compared with only 8 percent of two-parent families.²¹

Family breakdown also has a negative impact on academic achievement. Rates for students who are forced to repeat a grade or who have been expelled or suspended from school are two times higher in single-parent homes and stepfamilies and three times higher in families headed by women who never married the father of their child. The 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health reported lower grades, poorer health, unsatisfying personal relationships, and even increased accident-proneness and speech defects among children of divorce.²²

Karl Zinsmeister at the American Enterprise Institute is one of many experts who hold that the key to preventing social ills is rebuilding strong families. "There is a mountain of scientific evidence showing that when families disintegrate, children often end up with intellectual, physical and emotional scars that persist for life," he said. "We talk about the drug crisis, the education crisis, and the problem of teen pregnancy and juvenile crime. But all these ills trace back predominantly to one source: broken families."²³

Non-Intact Marriages and Crime

Broken marriages have a bearing on crime rates as well. U.S. Department of Justice statistics show that 70 percent of young people in long-term prisons come from broken homes.²⁴ According to U.S. Census statistics, for each 10 percent increase in fatherless families, there was a 17 percent average increase in violent juvenile crimes.²⁵ Sociologist David Courtwright, who did a study of violence in America, concluded, "When stable family life has been the norm for men and boys, violence and disorder have diminished. That was one important reason why, during the mid-twentieth-century marriage boom, violent death rates showed a sustained decline."²⁶ Other studies have shown that crime rates in general are directly related to the numbers of divorced people, single parents and single people in communities. High marriage rates reduce crime and serve as a protective factor for women and children.²⁷

Where fathers are absent from the home, more boys grow up to be violent—this link between non-intact families and social pathology can be found worldwide.²⁸ Studies in England and Germany have come up with similar conclusions. Researcher Norman Dennis at the University of Newcastle found that family breakdown was the significant factor contributing to the rise in crime in Europe. Because of divorce, he said, "Young men in England and Germany became much more prone to criminality, drug abuse and subcriminal disorder."²⁹

Domestic violence and abuse is far more prevalent among cohabiting couples than among married ones. Some estimates place the chances of a woman being beaten by her cohabiting boyfriend as opposed to a husband as high as nine times greater. Sexual abuse of children by boyfriends of their mothers is also very high.³⁰

Marriage helps channel male aggressiveness into the constructive pursuits of creating, raising, protecting and supporting a family. Males born and raised within the confines of marriage are less violent and crime-prone in society; they also go on to form families of their own, becoming stable society members. Anthropologist Margaret Mead quipped that every society faces the problem of what to do with the men. Socially speaking, the best answer to that dilemma seems to be: Marry them.

Personal Benefits of Marriage

Marriage brings great personal as well as social benefits. Marriage is good for people. In spite of the Hollywood myth that the single, swinging life brings more friends, more fun and more stimulation, married people generally enjoy better health and more happiness than do single or divorced people. An Oxford physician who has studied such health issues concluded that on all counts of physical health, married people do better than the unmarried, separated or divorced.³¹ Married people have fewer diseases, and they often recover more quickly than a person without a supportive partner. When Robert H. Coombs, a behavioral scientist at UCLA, reviewed more than 130 published empirical studies conducted over the past sixty years measuring the effects of marriage and non-marriage on personal well-being, he found that married people live longer on average and tend to be healthier than those who are not married.³² For instance, 90 percent of married women and men live to at least 65 years of age, while those unmarried for any reason—divorce, bereavement or never having been married—had only a 65 to 70 percent chance of living to age 65.³³

Married people develop healthier behavior patterns. They monitor one another's health. It is often the spouse who finds the lump or mole that warrants attention, or who notices a spouse's shortness of breath. The couple may launch a diet or exercise program together as well. Researcher Linda J. Waite reports that married couples drink less alcohol and use fewer drugs.³⁴

Married couples experience greater psychological health, too. They have the lowest rates of severe depression in the population.³⁵ Both married men and women report higher levels of personal happiness than the unmarried.³⁶ They also enjoy their sexual lives together, reporting higher levels of sexual satisfaction than either single people or cohabiting couples. The most rigorous sex survey ever undertaken in the United States, the University of Chicago study, reported that 88 percent of married people experience great physical and emotional pleasure in their sexual lives with their spouses.³⁷

Married couples are also financially healthier than the single or the divorced. They have more than twice as much money, on average, as unmarried people. They save more, work harder and tend to be home and property owners. Among America's millionaires, most have been married to the same woman for all of their adult lives. Many cite the

good character and support of their wives as important factors in their financial success.³⁸

Springboard to Growth

The benefits of lifelong marriage for the individuals involved and its value as a healthy context for raising children are well known. Less often recognized is that marriage is a powerful instrument for personal growth. It is ironic that people sometimes view divorce rather than marriage as a source of personal liberation. In fact, the very opposite is true: marriage is a vehicle of psychological and spiritual liberation second to none. Deeply buried issues of the heart and psyche come to the surface in married life. In the context of a lifelong, total commitment, such issues can be resolved and healed. Marital therapist Harville Hendrix says, "I want couples to know that, in order to obtain maximum psychological and spiritual growth, they need to stay together not for three months or three years or even three decades, but for all of their remaining years."³⁹

Marriage is an accepted, healthy and time-honored way for human beings to attain a sense of wholeness. The security of an unconditionally loving relationship provides an individual with the space to grow and to test new waters, without fear of rejection or disapproval. Psychologist Judith Wallerstein reports that the men she interviewed in her study of happy marriages claimed that they could access their feelings in new and deep ways thanks to the influence of their intimate relationship with their wives: "They felt as if they had recaptured a lost part of themselves. One man said, 'Because of her, I'm sure of how I feel. With her, I feel whole.'"⁴⁰

Despite the stereotype about a wife being kept in her husband's shadow, many modern women find marriage to be a practical and realistic vehicle to greater independence and fulfillment. Social critic Diane Medved asserts that a supportive, loving husband can help a woman to challenge new arenas and take on more responsibilities as the security and stability of their bond gives her the strength and courage to take risks and experiment.⁴¹

Likewise, when a married woman is in contact with her "animus" or more masculine aspect through her deep relationship with her husband, she has more access to and moves about with more ease in the world of men. Linda, a newly married businesswoman in Los Angeles,

says of her husband, Manuel, "It's been like the difference between night and day in my relationships with my male co-workers. I can face them and interact with them confidently because Manny's there, inside my heart, backing me up. No matter what happens or what others say, I know he will support me. I know I can go home to him and be safe and loved."

Marriage and Community

In recognition of the intensely personal side of male-female relationships, the contemporary view of marriage is an essentially private matter between the two people, unrelated to and not answerable to the larger communities and networks to which the couple belongs. This over-correction of past emphases on duty and obligation has lost sight of one of the chief purposes of marriage—as a building block of community.

Traditionally, a person marries into a network of neighbors and relatives linked by duties and obligations. Marriage marks the stage when adults shoulder community responsibilities to provide for children, help kinfolk and care for the elderly. In this cultural milieu, marriage is other-focused from the first. This marriage ethic implies strength and perpetuity. However, when people migrate from their hometown of origin in search of work and new opportunities, they loosen the family's connection to their kin and community. A recent demographic study shows that frequent migrations are associated with increased divorce rates.⁴²

Conversely, community support for marriage presupposes that it will be a lasting and praiseworthy union. When a serious commitment is made before relatives and friends, they feel obliged to support it. However, when the vows are considered negotiable, the larger communities and networks in which the couple participates tend to feel less committed to the marriage as well. As columnist William Raspberry quipped, a son-in-law commands more of a father-in-law's assistance than does a live-in boyfriend. When wedding guests can't help wondering, even as the couple is walking down the aisle, how long the marriage is going to last, their support can only be lukewarm. Diane Sollee, executive director of the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education, said that she stopped giving the usual wedding gifts. She was tired of wondering who was going to get the lovely piece of

china or the crystal vase once the marriage broke up. Instead, she gives couples tickets to marriage education seminars, hoping that they will help the marriage work out.

Ties that Bind

Marriage merges more than two individuals. It also merges two lineages, perpetuating a bloodline and providing a tangible link to all who have gone before and all who will come after. Marriage introduces entirely new networks of support, friendship and relatedness among people who would not even know each other but for a marriage among them. When author and history professor Richard Rubenstein expressed his delight with his Chinese daughter-in-law and grandchildren to an audience of visiting Chinese educators, one of them rose and said, "In the future, our countries will not only be friends—we will be in-laws!" It is hard to hate people to whom one is related by marriage and, via descendants, blood.

The role of marriage in forging bonds of peace and friendship between groups has been recognized for centuries. *Romeo and Juliet* is the story of marital love conquering the hatred of two clans. Alexander the Great consolidated his empire by encouraging marriage between his Greek officers and the vanquished Persians. He knew that marriage was the most effective way to make diverse peoples into one. As men and women of different national, racial and ethnic lineages blend together in marriage, they have powerful potential to reduce interracial and international strife.

"My mother was from Israel and my father was Egyptian," says Barbara, an interior decorator on the west coast. "We all know the problems in the Middle East. But growing up, I never felt those problems. When our families got together for holidays, no one knew terrorism, massacres, or prejudice. We all thought everyone was like us. I was surprised in my later years when I found out they were not!" Sydney, an African-American woman married to a white man, says, "Interracial marriage? Please! I can write the book. Being a black woman married to a white man in America has not been easy. But when I tell you it feels like we have solved the problems of slavery and resentment within the last 100 years in our marriage, I am not joking!" In cases such as these, the old saying "Love conquers all" has come true as people from diverse backgrounds come together in marriage.

Encompassing this kind of power and scope, marriage deserves to reclaim its central role in human affairs. Marriage has transcended all times and cultures. From a village temple outside New Delhi to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, people gather in groups to witness the vows of men and women planning to go on life's journey together. Marriage affirms the timeless, elemental relationship between man and woman and their role as progenitors of the future. It offers enduring and irreplaceable benefits to men, women and children as well as to society. To cheapen marriage and deny its efficacy is to disparage the totality of human experience. To honor marriage and affirm its implications is to elevate human life from atomistic chaos into creative, coherent community.

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Preparing Youth for Marriage

For one human being to love another: That is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks...the work for which all other work is but preparation.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

IN THE PAST, PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE WAS DONE INFORMALLY by family and community life. In the present era, this traditional training is proving inadequate. Too many couples divorce and too many youth lack the confidence to enter into lifelong marriage. "I want to get married but I don't know what it looks like," said one teenage boy.¹ Indeed, some adolescents do not even know still-married adults to consult about how to make marriage last.

Nevertheless, teenagers and young adults are intensely interested in marital success. Psychologist Howard Markman reports they score higher than previous generations in interviews designed to gauge how committed they are to their relationships. "They know marriage is risky, but there's a stronger sense of commitment," he says. "The bad news is, they don't have a clue how to make their relationships work."²

It is ironic to contrast the sizeable investment of time and money young people make in preparing for career and financial success versus the meager investment put into conscious preparation for what is

likely to be more critical to their future satisfaction—marriage. After their engagement, the average couple spends far more time and energy on organizing the one-day wedding ceremony than they do on readying themselves for the marriage itself, which they hope will last for many decades.

As a result, more and more schools are instituting formal classes in marriage preparation. Phyllis Hess, a counselor in Claremore, Oklahoma, decided to take action when she heard a teenager describing the plan for her life: "Go to college, get married, get divorced and then get married again." Hess says, "That spoke volumes to me."³ A 17-year-old girl explains the rationale behind her class. "It's preventative.... They're doing this so we don't get divorced. Finally, society realized it has to do something."⁴

While marriage guidance still holds a stigma for older adults, the younger generation has fewer reservations about learning what research and experience can provide. "I want to find out everything I can," says Dipti, a high school senior. "Love is obviously not enough." Marriage education is romantic, asserts Diane Sollee. What could be more romantic than to say, "Beloved... I want to marry you and I love you so much that I want to learn everything the experts know about what makes marriage succeed or fail so that our love, and our marriage, has a chance to last"?⁵

Marriage Education Programs

Starting in 1999, the state of Florida mandated marriage education for all ninth or tenth grade students. In 1998, judges and lawyers in Oklahoma succeeded in getting a marriage preparation program developed by a divorce lawyer and the American Bar Association into all their high schools. South Dakota adopted statewide a relationships course developed by a high school psychology teacher. Minneapolis high schools now require a one-year program before graduation. Hundreds of other school districts nationwide likewise have adopted marriage preparation courses. Parents have generally applauded these programs. "I've had single moms and dads come back and say, 'This is great. I wish I had known this sooner,'" reports Char Kamper, teacher and curriculum designer.⁶

Elements of Marriage Preparation

Personal Resources for Marriage

- Becoming a good marriage prospect
- Sexual abstinence

Learning about Love

- Love as a decision
- Discerning kinds of love
- Insights about Marriage

Relational Resources

- Learning from parents
- Diversity of friendships
- Communication and conflict resolution skills

Courses in American universities are also popular. A new major, Marriage and Family Studies, is being offered at Philadelphia's Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales, aimed not at counselors but towards students aspiring to be good spouses and parents.⁷ In addition, there is a surge of interest in marriage mentoring for engaged couples.⁸ This represents an effort to reestablish the kind of informal modeling of elder couples to younger couples that the traditional extended family—of parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles—once provided.

Does marriage education work? Scott Gardner at South Dakota State University found that after a one-semester course, students were more likely to reason out arguments than resort to aggressive behavior.⁹ Where cities have instituted the "Community Marriage Policy"—in which judges and clergy agree to conduct marriages only for couples who have received premarital education and counseling—divorce rates have dropped dramatically.¹⁰

There is also a natural synergy between the new marriage education programs and character education. Parents, teachers and others involved with character education find their task is most challenging in the upper grades. This is a time when adolescents no longer uncritically receive guidance from their elders and their attention is more focused on outward success, especially in romance, than on inner virtues. Education in matters of love, however, captures their interest; marriage preparation courses are consistently popular. Character can be promoted in this context as furthering their hopes for lasting marriage.

Personal Resources for Marriage

Young people dramatically increase their chances for future marital success when they develop requisite personal resources such as character, respect and integrity, when they have access to accurate information about love and marriage, and when they develop social competencies for maintaining healthy relationships.

Becoming a Good Marriage Prospect

Young singles looking for a romantic partner are typically attracted to external traits. Physical attractiveness, economic potential and social status are usually high on the list. These are not, however, the qualities that they are likely to value in their spouses after they marry. Happily married couples, when they evaluate each other, tend to emphasize inner qualities: caring, honesty, trust, fidelity, commitment, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the marriage. They value communication skills, companionship and humor.¹¹

In a survey of 300,000 wives, most admitted they chose their husbands based on sex appeal. If they could choose again, 80 percent said they would put communication skills as the first criterion.¹² Good looks, moneymaking potential and social status can change, but the inner qualities of character are foundational for enduring relationships. Of course, they are the same qualities that are valued in any relationship, be it with family members, co-workers or friends. "Love as an act of giving," writes Erich Fromm, "depends on the character development of a person."¹³

The rosy glow of romantic love notwithstanding, young men and women do well to assess the character of a potential marriage partner. What is in his heart? What is her deepest motivation in life? What

values does he hold dear? These are what endure over a lifetime. A potential mate who is selfish, unappreciative, lazy, ill-tempered or dishonest is unlikely to change after the wedding.

Students can get a foretaste of this in marriage preparation courses where they participate in a more serious variation of the childhood game, playing house. Students are paired up in pretend marriages lasting over the course of several class periods.¹⁴ As the make-believe "spouses" have to work as partners to cope with a series of realistic problems involving issues such as money and children, they discover that even a make-believe marriage demands real-world virtues and relational skills—traits that have little to do with attractiveness or charm. Students complain, "My partner doesn't listen," "My partner makes all the decisions and doesn't ask me," "My partner doesn't do much around the house."¹⁵ The exercise helps teenagers better realize the truth in the old saying that "Love is blind; marriage opens your eyes." Sometimes when dating couples that think they are in love enter into this pretend marriage, they discover things about each other that they didn't know and decide to break up.

On the other hand, even such imaginary adversities can reveal a student's deeper beauty. One boy saddled with the assigned difficulties of "widowhood," "low salary" and "six children" had to solve a family vacation challenge. He had his "family" camp out in his backyard, using borrowed equipment and a lot of ingenuity. These are unforgettable lessons for later life. The marriage class "made me think about my relationships with other people more in-depth than I did before," said Loni Estes, a high school senior. "Now, before I would let myself get close to someone, I would want to find out who they are, and their values and beliefs."

Ovid said, "To be loved, be lovable." Teenagers can appreciate that it is unfair to expect a potential spouse to have qualities that they do not have themselves. The paradox is that the best way for a person to attract a fine marriage prospect is to become that kind of person him or herself. Daily efforts to prepare their own characters to be a good and worthy mate are a worthwhile investment. Character traits cultivated through experiences in the child's and sibling's spheres of love can serve adolescents well as they anticipate making the transition into the world of married love. (See Chapters 15 and 16) Among these are integrity, personal development, respect for parents and sexual abstinence. Marriage education guides youth in self-assessments of their character

and provides incentives to work on improving themselves with the goal of successful marriage in mind.

Integrity

The ability to follow through on the commitment of marriage is rooted in basic integrity. This is a fruit of general character education. When students at Virginia Institute of Technology were asked what they most treasured in a relationship, trust was by far the first choice.¹⁶ Integrity breeds trust.

Having the habit of consulting the conscience when making decisions is a valuable asset to bring to married life.¹⁷ It helps adults meet the constant challenge to set priorities among duties to spouse, child, work and community. Further, integrity figures in loyally living up to the marriage vows, even when the going gets rough.

Integrity also demands the practice of self-discipline. A key attribute of self-discipline is the ability to delay gratification for the sake of long-term goals. What could be more necessary for the mother who must work two jobs to support her family or the husband who will care for his ailing wife into their old age? When teachers ask students to consider the consequences of one spouse's reckless spending, alcohol abuse or infidelity on a family, this also helps them consider the role of self-discipline in married life.¹⁸

Personal Development

Good friends seek each other's company to share their abundance as well as to fill their needs, and so it is in a healthy marriage. The personal stability that spouses bring to their marriage makes it stronger. This is the paradox of each person needing to be a whole individual to be part of a whole union. Psychologist Les Parrott has his relationship education students recite: "If you try to find intimacy with another person before achieving a sense of identity on your own, all your relationships become an attempt to complete yourself."¹⁹ It is better to approach marriage with a certain amount of maturity and independence. This calls for young people prior to marriage to make efforts to develop their personhood. Personal development involves issues of self-respect, interests and talents, solitude, self-knowledge and contentment.

Self-respect and self-worth are, in the words of the PAIRS for PEERS program, the "indispensable foundation" for relationship.²⁰ A deficiency leaves a person vulnerable. To fill the void he may end up trying to gain approval from his partner. This opens the door to self-deception and manipulation. No one can insist on being treated with respect and honor if he does not respect and honor himself. It is valuable for teenagers to understand when problems with friends and family are due to a sagging sense of self worth. Letting them identify their own admirable qualities and competencies, and giving them opportunities to make a positive difference in the lives of others, fosters their growth in this area.

Personal development naturally involves cultivating interests and talents. To avoid the tendency of married couples to fall into a deep boredom with each other, each spouse needs to be interesting and interested, to keep growing as a person and cultivating his or her hobbies and talents. A good time to start is in earlier years.

Perhaps a less-considered area of personal development is learning to use solitude well. Rather than being anti-social, this includes learning how to enjoy one's own company, being able to listen to one's own thoughts, feelings and conscience, and making peace with them. It means taking time to "identify individual goals, interests, friendships and dreams," as the Survival Skills for Healthy Families program advises.²¹ In addition, it means knowing how to refill one's own cup of inner resources, to spiritually rejuvenate.²² By occasionally foregoing the easy pleasures of socializing and entertainment and seeking out a quiet place, perhaps in nature, teenagers learn to face themselves and find renewal within.

Self-knowledge is another aspect of personal development. Natomas High School in Sacramento, California, uses a personality test to help students understand their own temperaments, strengths and weaknesses.²³ The Building Relationships program uses quizzes for self-discovery.²⁴ "My students are recognizing some of their own shortcomings," says a Chicago teacher employing the Partners program.²⁵ Adolescents love to learn about themselves, and this provides objective feedback that helps them to know what to work on, what challenges to expect for themselves in various circumstances, and what to look for in friends and a mate.

Counselors Judd and Mary Landis assert, "The most important characteristic of a marriageable person is the habit of happiness."²⁶

This refers to another invaluable virtue for teenagers to learn: taking responsibility for their attitude in a given situation. Too often young people expect a spouse to fulfill them or that the marriage itself will solve all their problems. Psychiatrist Frank Pittman has quipped, "Marriage isn't supposed to make you happy. It is supposed to make you married.... You have a structure... from which you are free to make yourself happy."²⁷ To a great extent, individuals decide their own happiness, regardless of their mates.

Many marriage education programs help youth at all grade levels cultivate their basic emotional intelligence, the ability to identify and manage their own feelings.²⁸ A key skill is being able to admit their feelings to themselves, especially negative ones, and to know what to constructively do with them. PAIRS for PEERS introduces students to the layers of unpleasant feelings that can be bottled up in their "Emotional Jug" and how to release them without "popping their cork."²⁹

Sexual Abstinence

The attitude and practice of sexual abstinence creates an excellent context for the other primary components of marriage preparation. It allows for the strengthening of character free from the moral compromises of sexual involvements; it allows for personal development free from sexual distractions; and it allows for friendship building free from sexual complications. These in turn tend to reinforce postponing sexual activity. Individuals with integrity, a close relationship with their parents, many good friendships and cultivated talents and interests find abstinence less of a challenge.

At the same time, those who practice abstinence tend to have a more positive view of marriage. Research found that virgins have more favorable attitudes toward marriage than do nonvirgins who had multiple sex partners.³⁰ No doubt both abstinence and pro-marriage attitudes reinforce each other. This reaffirms the affinity that marriage education and abstinence education have for each other. Boston University's *The Art of Loving Well* is a literature-based course that is used for both purposes.³¹ Marriage education sustains the hope of a happy committed relationship, making the choice of saving sexual activity until marriage more viable and attractive. Even where marriage preparation courses do not have an explicit abstinence message, educators report that the very discussion of the demands and rewards of committed rela-

tionships reinforces the concept of abstinence before such relationships.³²

Teenage Marriage: Making It an Option

Over 90 percent of American adults consider teenage marriage to be a disaster in the making.³³ In fact, contemporary high school health textbooks seem to favor unwed teenage parenthood over teenage marriage. The courage, commitment and social support recommended to help young single mothers cope are not considered sufficient to sustain young married couples.

Yet is adolescent marriage so hopeless? Sociologist Maggie Gallagher points out that though these unions are shakier than others, half of marriages among older teenagers currently do survive, as opposed to about 70 percent of those where the bride is at least 23 years old. With character, relationship and marriage education as well as greater community support, adolescents may do well to get an early start on realizing the rewards of marriage and family life.

For single girls who get pregnant, contrary to conventional wisdom, marriage is a desirable route. Research shows marriages to legitimate a pregnancy are on average no less grounded than other marriages. Marriage is also what these girls want, and if they do not marry the father the chances of a wedding are half those of their childless peers.³⁴

Learning about Love

"I was a victim of poetry about marriage," admits Lynn Dixon, who teaches a high school marriage course in Philadelphia. Now divorced, she says she could have used such a program herself. "Love does not [just] flow like a river."³⁵

Natural romantics, adolescents are eager for any insights into love that they can find. Yet love is so commonly misrepresented and misunderstood as to be probably the most significant source of confusion in marriage. Adolescents benefit immeasurably from knowledge about love's true nature, and what is required to sustain and enhance a love that lasts. The important understandings to convey about love have to do with its volitional component and how to distinguish true love (see opposite) from its look-alikes.

Love as a Decision

"While it sounds romantic to 'fall' in love, the truth is that we *decide* who we want to love," asserts the Connections program.³⁶ Marriage education typically seeks to counter the popular myth of "falling in love": that an overwhelming, irresistible feeling that springs up spontaneously between two people leads to true and lasting love between the partners. The challenge is merely to find the right person who arouses this feeling. If problems arise later, the assumption is that it was the wrong person after all and the relationship should end.

This neglects the volitional aspect of loving, as marriage expert Gary Smalley suggests in his book, *Love Is a Decision*. A mature and genuinely loving person is committed to being loving whether or not he or she feels loving at the time.³⁷ It is true that the feeling aspect of love—as a strong state of liking—is beyond control.³⁸ However, the other aspect—as a chosen attitude and behavior—is not, and can influence the other. In other words, the decision to love can encourage the feeling of love.³⁹

Understanding love as involving an act of will brings in the element of choice. This can be a source of freedom and security for adolescents. Teenagers often struggle with fears that certain flaws mean no one can love them or that married love will someday vanish. "If we fall out of love," they wonder, "how can we bring it back?" They can learn it is possible to generate love even when it is not readily flowing. In addition, if it is indeed true that it is not whom they love that counts as much as how they love, then they don't have to be waiting helplessly to bump into the "right one." They can be getting practice and building confidence in becoming loving persons. Finally, the notion of love as an active verb helps teenagers grasp the key difference between maturity and immaturity—the immature focus on being loved; the mature focus on giving love.

Discerning Different Qualities of Love

Infatuation or Self-Centered Love	True Love
Prefers to be receiving	Enjoys giving
Judges the other according to how well they make them feel loved	Judges themselves and how they can give more to the other
Focuses on the other's—and their own—external traits, such as looks, income and status	Cherishes the other most for their good heart and character
Makes the other feel anxious	Makes the other feel secure
Starts up quickly and ends just as quickly	Grows steadily and ends slowly if at all
Separation and time weakens the bond	Separation and time intensifies the bond
Fosters self-absorption within the couple and exclusion of others	Encourages reaching out to others
Relationship has priority over virtue	Virtue is a basis of the relationship
Hinders productivity	Enhances productivity
Quarrels crop up with increasing frequency and severity	Quarrels arise less and less over time, with less intensity
Conflicts poison and can destroy the relationship	Conflicts deepen the partners' mutual understanding and intimacy

Discerning Kinds of Love

One of the most fundamental insights adolescents want to learn is how to distinguish between true love and its precursor or counterfeit: crushes, infatuation, or unhealthy attachments. They can come to recognize that only when the heart's impulse filters through a strong and virtuous character will love prove true and lasting.

Loving Well and other curricula help adolescents reflect on different kinds of love.⁴⁰ Leon and Amy Kass, both University of Chicago professors and husband and wife of 40 years, conduct a college seminar on love and courtship that offers readings from Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, the Old Testament, Jane Austen and other sources to inspire discussion about “noble examples of romance.”⁴¹ “Love must be learned, and learned again and again; there is no end to it,” remarks author Katherine Anne Porter.⁴² Adults can help adolescents by giving them a good map for their explorations.

Insights about Marriage

There are certain objective realities about marriage itself that too few people know. Passing these on can help teenagers better comprehend the marriage commitment in its fullness. They will also more realistically anticipate its many challenges and rewards and not interpret its inevitable ups and downs as evidence that there is something fundamentally wrong with either them, their spouse or the relationship.

One valuable if unromantic piece of information concerns marriage and divorce laws. Martin Luther High School in Philadelphia teaches about this with the aid of a nearby legal office. The public implications of such a private matter as marriage are a revelation to many teenagers. For instance, it is sobering for young men to learn that the law requires them to finance any child they might have for 18 years, even if they choose not to marry or if they would have a divorce.⁴³ Thus youth can better understand how society holds them accountable for the commitment they will make.

It is not commonly recognized that marital relationships pass through several predictable phases—romance, conflict, recommitment and service—before reaching the goal of deep oneness of heart that is so attractive in couples of enduring love. (See Chapter 17) Marriage courses encourage students to reflect on the inevitable seasons of all relationships, including marriage, with such questions as, “How has your relationship with your parents changed as you have matured?” Teenagers can be dismayed by the degree to which even minor issues can generate conflicts in their own relationships and in the marriages they see around them.⁴⁴ When they understand in advance that the initial romantic phase will inevitably give way to a phase of disillusionment and tension, which in turn presents the opportunity to find union on a

deeper level, they can avoid the mistake of giving up when difficulties arise. They can better appreciate the necessity of traits such as patience, resilience and tolerance, and that some pain is a necessary part of the real work of creating the basis for lasting love. They also gain the perspective to better interpret the committed relationships around them. "My parents would have benefited from a program like this," says a 17-year-old son of divorced parents.⁴⁵

Relational Resources

Research has shown that strong relationships with parents, teachers, mentors, elders, siblings, cousins and friends build up a sense of self-worth and meet a young person's needs for love and acceptance. Improving relations with friends and relatives can lessen the appeal of premature romantic or sexual involvements and strengthen chances for marital success. Strong foundations in the sibling's and child's spheres of love—solid friendships, good relationships with parents and teachers, and the insights and social skills that go along with them—are invaluable resources to bring to a marriage.

Learning from Parents

Parents' love and guidance remains an important anchor, even as their son or daughter explores romantic love and prepares for family life. A young person's relationship with his parents helps fortify his identity and value system, to better ground his character. Moreover, it is a lifeline by which the parents can guide him and help him avoid serious mistakes in love.

Positive experiences with their opposite-sex parent teach adolescents how they should treat and expect to be treated by the other gender. "I don't know why some of my friends put up with what they put up with from boys," says Yukimi, a high school junior. "My Dad treated my mother and I like we were special, and I expect the same kind of respect from any boy who expects to have a serious relationship with me." Adolescents also learn from observing how their parents relate to one another.

Naturally, parents do not always provide good models. When their parents fall short, young people can compensate by looking elsewhere for parental role models as well as learning from their parents' mis-

takes. Jamie, a student at Iowa State University, reflected about the impact of her parents on her concerns about marriage. She has always felt close to her mother, but her father was an unhappy, brooding man, inclined to take out his anger on the children with emotional and sometimes physical abuse. Realizing that her father could not be her best role model in his present state, Jamie decided to accommodate this need in her life through her church pastor, a happily married man whom she respected and trusted. Throughout her late teens she came to rely on him for guidance and wisdom. Describing him as "my mentor," Jamie still calls him now and then even though she has been away at college for almost two years.

Adolescents who are distant from their parents, especially the opposite-sex parent, are more susceptible to unhealthy obsessions with the opposite sex. Researcher Carole Pistole suggests that teenagers often turn to one another for love when their parental attachment needs are not being met.⁴⁶ The girl starved for her father's attention is particularly vulnerable to the selfish sexual advances of boys. The boy who is longing for the tender comfort of his mother is more tempted into infatuations with girls and to seek comfort sexually. Adolescents who are aware of this may be more alert to their vulnerability, and they can try to improve their connection to their parents or other elders.

Parents are a valuable source of wisdom on matters of love and selecting a potential mate. Adolescent sons and daughters are torn between wanting guidance and asserting their independence, especially in matters as personal as romance. Still, there are ways for teachers and other adults to encourage them to seek their parents' help and approval in selecting someone to date and marry. One simple, non-threatening exercise is to have students ask their parents to list the qualities they see as most desirable in a spouse, and discuss why. "I have to confess; my Mom made more sense than I expected," says Jameel, a middle-school student. "I can see some of the 'hot' girls aren't really so hot." Through such discussions, they may recognize that their parents have objectivity and wisdom in matters of love that they lack.

Diversity of Friendships

If the best marriages are great friendships, it stands to reason that developing qualities of a good friend will help anyone succeed in marriage. Competency in making and keeping friendships includes learn-

ing how to relate harmoniously with many different types of people—older and younger, male and female, from different backgrounds and walks of life. After all, a great variety of people will become permanently a part of their world when they get married. The spouse, in-laws and even their own children will present personality traits and points of view that can be quite challenging.

This is why a popular marriage preparation course at Seattle Pacific University coaches students in negotiating the full spectrum of relationships, “making bad relationships better and good relationships great.” It challenges students to reflect on such issues as:

Of the four qualities that keep friendship going—loyalty, forgiveness, honesty and dedication—which one is most important to you and why?

Relationships fail because of change, neglect or betrayal. As you consider your own failed friendships, what can the cause tell you about finding the “cure”?

When it comes to the practical side of mending a broken relationship...which [possible step] would be most difficult for you to take and why?⁴⁷

Friendships help develop the necessary marriage-building skills that sustain relationships over time. A marriage commands loyalty and sacrifices even if the people within it sometimes do not seem deserving.⁴⁸ Educators can encourage students to stick with teammates or a particular friendship despite how the team member or friend may have disappointed them.

Any relationship demands regular maintenance, some sort of regular shared activities, whether play, work or conversation. These have to be adjusted and renewed as circumstances shift. The skills spouses need to keep their connection to each other⁴⁹—and what parents need to stay current with their older children⁵⁰—are best honed in earlier friendships. Teenagers can also notice the greater depth and resilience of friendships forged within the context of unselfish service to others. If the desirable final phase of marriage involves service to others, it is only wise to orient the young in this direction. Thus, service learning augments marriage preparation, though it is seldom a part of a formal marriage program.

Relating with the Opposite Sex

Just as students benefit from learning how to deal well with a diversity of people, "crossing the gender line"⁵¹ helps them to respect, understand and appreciate members of the opposite sex. Many marital difficulties arise because men and women are so different from one another—in the way they process information, communicate, respond to crises and in other areas. These differences can either grate on each other or complement each other, depending on how men and women respond. Just being aware of these differences helps students to accept as normal certain challenges in the partnership of masculinity and femininity that is marriage.

The insights needed to understand the other gender are best gained in relationships free of the disruptive influence of sexual gamesmanship. Of course, making friends with the opposite sex without sexualizing the relationship is not always easy.⁵² To do this requires knowing how to recognize sexual attraction, cool down the relationship and rechannel the energy away from romance and towards friendship.

Dating is, of course, one component of relating to the other gender. Most marriage programs lead adolescents to reflect upon and develop healthier dating attitudes and practices. However, especially for young or pre-adolescents, engaging in one-on-one dating does not necessarily serve youth's best interests. Getting involved in intense relationships when there is no prospect of commitment serves no healthy purpose. Some have described early dating as training for divorce, since there must be necessarily a series of broken involvements.⁵³ Certainly, dating increases pressure to engage in unnecessary levels of physical intimacy. Research correlates earlier dating with earlier sexual encounters.⁵⁴

Furthermore, the artificiality of dating is a detriment. It discourages natural connections based on shared values and activities. Since on a date people tend to be on their best behavior, it tends to conceal an individual's real character and makes it harder to evaluate a prospective spouse. Dating encourages a starry-eyed view of the other person that invites undue emotional involvement, infatuation and physical intimacy.⁵⁵ This is one reason why the Single Volunteers program in Washington, D.C. has young people meeting while doing community service, "with no make-up on and up to their knees in mud," according to co-founder Dana Kresierer. "It's about who you are, not what you look like or how much money you make." Participants say they make

solid friendships there that sometimes lead to marriage.⁵⁶

Group dating is a noteworthy new trend at universities, where students socialize in unpartnered groups.⁵⁷ Group dating not only avoids the complications of one-on-one dating but offers many practical advantages: less pressure to have to relate to only one person, the sharing of expenses, transportation and responsibility for planning activities, and so on. Many parents appreciate school support in helping them guide their teenagers as to what to wear, planning fun activities for the date, how to recognize when a situation is unsafe and when to leave, and other relevant points.

Also promising is the rising courtship movement, which sets out guidelines such as this one by Karla Griffin, director of a prominent courtship-training and singles service in Denver: "Instead of going out on dates, do things with your friends and family."⁵⁸

In addition, adults can encourage adolescents to spend time with the opposite sex in situations that foster friendships. "I think dates are weird," says Selena, a teenager in New Jersey. "I work on the stage crew at the community theatre and you can meet boys there and it's a lot more natural way to get to know them.... You have something to talk about." In some towns, parents, school personnel and community leaders provide chaperoned, drug- and alcohol-free settings where teenagers and young adults may constructively socialize. The Mountain Pointe High School in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, creates a plethora of supervised activities for teenagers to enjoy on Prom Night as an alternative to the typical circumstances that invite unhealthy behavior.⁵⁹

Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills

"Lack of communication" is the classic relationship killer. The prominent marriage courses all feature training in listening and communication skills.⁶⁰ (See Chapter 21) These techniques reflect and reinforce the character traits that facilitate strong relationships and are often used to rebuild empathy and understanding when the connection has broken down. Through the PAIRS for PEERS program, Chicago teenagers are learning a simple technique for sustaining relationships. This consists of addressing five categories of connection that married couples share regularly, even if only for a few minutes: expressing appreciation, conveying news, constructive complaining and requesting changes, asking questions and sharing hopes. Awareness of these

intimacy-builders helps remove the mystique from what it takes to make and sustain an emotional connection. After the course, a student reported, "I appreciate people more and I don't take them for granted."⁶¹ Closeness is seldom sustained by magic; it has to be intentionally engineered into a relationship.

Learning how to handle tensions skillfully is a great advantage, tested no more vigorously than in marriage. Effective marriage education programs give coaching in the essential points of reducing conflict,⁶² such as defining the issue clearly and sticking to it, and not bringing in old points of dispute that confuse and escalate the conflict. They also provide practice in avoiding such poisonous practices as personal criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. Helping teenagers recognize these behaviors and develop habits that are more constructive is preventive of harmful marital mistakes later. "You have to try and compromise. This told me how to go about it," says an Illinois high school girl about her class.⁶³

Marriage preparation education is an investment that not only bolsters family stability and community well-being; it also fulfills the dreams of all young people for enduring love. "The degree to which adolescents believe in being in love is absolutely extraordinary," says sociologist John Gagnon. The vast majority of American youth want to marry and raise children. And though not every one of them is capable of excelling in business or academics or other areas of life, each has a chance to excel at creating a loving marriage and a beautiful family.⁶⁴ Thomas Langridge, 16, said of his marriage education course, "All students should take a class like this. If they do, they won't just jump into marriage. They'll think about it, know each other better and know what to expect from each other."⁶⁵

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Character and Skills for Resilient Marriages

STRONG MARRIAGES ARE ESSENTIAL IN CREATING THE WARM, stable home environment that is central to children's moral development. They model healthy, harmonious interactions that are necessary for children to attain loving relationships in their own lives. Marriage programs such as Marriage Encounter, Family Wellness, Imago, PAIRS for PEERS, Prepare/Enrich, etc. have done wonders for couples by providing new research-based information with proven principles of relationship-building that make for fulfilling marriages.

Most of these principles and techniques have moral implications. The skills most effective in facilitating relationships are those that also foster character growth and the unselfish habits that enable people to sustain long-lasting and satisfying marital relationships. Thus, just as character education is interconnected with marriage education for youth (see Chapter 20), so it is with marriage enrichment programs for couples. Developing character and the associated relational skills is a life-long endeavor. This is self-evident from the perspective of the Basic Life Goals and the Four Spheres of Love model of moral development through the family. Marriage enhancement efforts thus support the task of character maturation in adult life even as it helps couples deepen their intimacy and develop resiliency in the face of the inevitable challenges that they will encounter.

The Anchors of Commitment and Fidelity

Establishing lifelong intimacy and joy in marriage does not come about serendipitously. It is achieved through the practice of virtues and gaining competency in managing a long-term relationship. "It took me a while to catch on," recalls Josh, 32, a realtor in the Midwest, about his first year of marriage. "After the first few months, I started getting upset when Tamar didn't automatically make me feel as important and do things for me as I wanted and I got pretty demanding. My Dad tipped me off: Nothing is automatic. I've got to give respect and earn respect just like when I started my business."

The foundation of character is primary. Virtues such as forgiveness, respect and self-control help fortify a marriage. Their cultivation strengthens the relationship to stand the test of time and provides the life satisfaction couples earnestly desire. Yet above all else, the fundamental anchors of a marriage are the moral values of commitment and fidelity.

Commitment and fidelity function as both an axis and a compass for marriage. Commitment is like a cornerstone, and fidelity offers ethical boundaries. Girded with these foundational virtues, couples are deeply united and fulfilled. They can enjoy trust, intimacy and freedom because they feel confident of each other's total loyalty and support.

Commitment

A marriage based solely upon changeable, romantic feelings of love is hard put to weather the inevitable storms that are characteristic of all marriages and of life itself. There are times in every marriage when the partners need to persevere through the challenges that arise. Only commitment can see people through the moments when they no longer feel like going on, when disillusionment sets in, when conflicts are hard to resolve.

At the same time, commitment means more than a clenched-teeth determination to endure the marriage no matter what, as people have done in the past. John from Iowa, who is in his sixties, recalls a time when his grandparents did not speak to one another for an entire year. Divorce was then a socially unacceptable option, so couples endured whatever they had to in order to avoid breaking up the marriage—even if it meant complete emotional separation within the same house. No

contemporary couple would dream of enduring such a situation.

Commitment to marriage today means dedication to making it work by seeking the help, skills training, support and mentoring needed for mutual fulfillment. Commitment involves the willingness to do what it takes to maintain a partnership through challenging circumstances and continually work to enrich it in times of normalcy.

Sometimes weathering the storm is the best solution. Such was the case for Ellen, a 34-year-old mother, and her husband Jack. Ellen had suffered a series of illnesses after the birth of her daughter. Jack was supposed to inherit his father's chemical company, but had been pushed out by the partners. He felt overwhelmed; he was unable to pay the doctor's bills, he had trouble finding another job, and he complained bitterly of his wife's sour personality. They faced bankruptcy and lost their home, hitting "rock bottom." Ellen felt she had to endure the pressures these setbacks caused to their marriage for the sake of her daughter, even though she was tempted to divorce. By the end of the following year, however, their fortunes had changed considerably. Not only was their economic situation better, their marriage was, too. Commenting to a friend at her daughter's fifth birthday party, Ellen said, "I am so glad I didn't give up on Jack or our family. It was a very dark time and we are just beginning to believe in each other again, but at least we're still a team."¹

Commitment also means refusing to indulge in escapism. Those who have escape hatches ready and available are less likely to do the work and apply the will necessary to get through difficult periods. There are many subtle ways to escape in marriage, from preoccupation with work or children to indulgence in endless television watching or other hobbies to avoid facing difficult emotions or subjects. Escaping is a survival tactic that temporarily may keep the peace but is unlikely to lead to fulfillment as a couple. Commitment requires that couples have the courage to face their difficulties consistently and creatively.

Consistency, dependability and trustworthiness build emotional safety and allow the relationship to thrive. It also provides the context to begin fully appreciating another person, a process that takes place over time. In fact, many couples feel that one lifetime is hardly enough to explore all the possibilities of loving another person. At the same time, it is long-term commitment that discloses what character and talents there are to admire. James, the 68-year-old husband of 70-year-old Lorna, said after fifty years of marriage: "She has so many fine qualities, I have even come to love her faults."

Fidelity

Marriage experts find that the two major relational fears people experience in intimate relationships are fear of abandonment and the fear of loss of autonomy. Once a partner has the safety net of the other's fidelity, he or she will slowly shed the fear of abandonment. A partner who is assured of his or her partner's faithfulness will be less dependent and clinging; hence, the other partner will feel more freedom and have a greater sense of autonomy. Fidelity assuages fear and gives the partners in the marriage a sense of security that comes from each spouse's unconditional support. It is essential to a happy and trusting marriage.

Most people agree that infidelity is destructive to a marriage.² Although some marriages can survive infidelity, it threatens conjugal resiliency to its very depths. One therapist who specializes in cases of infidelity describes in his patients a "volcano of pain" when they discover their spouse's cheating.

Infidelity usually involves deception of the spouse. A husband named Lewis described his affair, "I invented so many stories to explain my whereabouts; it was amazing that I was able to keep them straight. My secretary covered for me dozens of times. When my wife called, she'd tell her I was out of the office for an appointment, in a meeting that couldn't be interrupted, or unexpectedly tied up." Lewis wove a web of lies that compounded the pain his adultery had caused. The marriage counselors who treated Lewis and his wife said that spouses suffer as much from the feeling of being lied to and duped as they do from the sexual betrayal itself. "How can I ever trust him (her) again?" is the most frequently asked question they hear in such cases.³

Loving relationships depend on trust. Fulfillment and personal growth in marriage require the safety that mutual trust engenders. Partners reveal their innermost thoughts, fears and dreams to one another, and thus the risks of rejection and ridicule are felt most profoundly. Childhood fears, adolescent rejections, anxiety about attractiveness, aging, and one's own masculine or feminine adequacy all come to the fore in one way or another via the intimacy of marriage. Only if the marriage bed is inviolate can two vulnerable beings meet and become as one. Educator Catherine M. Wallace affirms that, "Intimacy arises only as fidelity is established and only to the extent that fidelity is realized. Intimacy is not possible except between two people who have a profound faith in one another. Sexual fidelity is a practice intrin-

sic to the happiness of a happy marriage.... [It] is a growing, living thing that interacts with and reorganizes all the other ingredients of the marriage."⁴

Healthy Attitudes for Lasting Relationships

Internally, there are certain attitudes that make for peace and growth between couples. Chief among them are acceptance, continual giving, and focus on a higher purpose. These particular dispositions strengthen a marriage by reducing self-centeredness and promoting altruistic, other-centered living.

Acceptance

Steven Wolin, author of *Resilient Marriages*, studied why some marriages failed and others bounced back from every conflict and adversity. Among his factors of resiliency, he listed the virtue of acceptance.⁵

The play *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* describes the attitude of many people going into marriage. Yet, there are many things about a spouse that cannot be altered. Their essential personality is not going to change, and neither is their sense of humor. Their lifelong tastes and predilections will probably continue as is, along with many personal habits. This is not to say that in areas of serious fault such as alcoholism, drug addiction, the use of violence, infidelity and other serious breaches of the marital contract a partner should not speak up and strongly request change. It means that, barring such serious difficulties, marital partners learn to accept, encourage and support each other's growth.

Spouses who have a particular strength can help their partners develop this strength themselves. A spouse proficient in social skills for example, can patiently encourage a timid partner to relate to people more confidently. Partners learn to appreciate the other's good qualities and overlook imperfections or their different way of doing things. Transformed through acceptance, Margarita, a wife from Europe, shared her views on an Internet website for couples:

The biggest change in our marriage came when... I put into practice the principle of acceptance. I began to see my husband in a new light. I saw and accepted him for who he

was—not someone I thought he should be.... To my amazement, I found a new spark ignited between my husband and me.... In return, I am receiving the love I so desperately longed for from him. We're just falling in love all over again, only this time it's better because we know it's for real.⁶

The fact that the husband likes to watch football and the wife wants nothing more than to sit in silence and sew is not a serious difficulty, but it can certainly lead to friction. The couple can pursue their hobbies in different rooms and come together again later, refreshed. Or the husband can learn to watch with the volume down while the wife learns to sew in less than perfect silence. Or they can decide to skip their habitual hobbies and go out and do something new they both find pleasurable. Wolin said resilient couples come to accept and enjoy each other in spite of their differences. They say to one another, "We're different. We've always been different. We'll always be different. Let's dance."⁷

Paradoxically, once husbands and wives do not feel pressured to change and feel accepted as they are, they are often less resistant to making the effort to change in ways which will please their spouses. Genuine acceptance, of course, cannot harbor this ulterior motive. Change is an unexpected bonus of giving unconditional love.

Continual Giving

A marriage may be thought of as a garden that needs constant tending. Gary Smalley offers another analogy. He advises couples to think of giving to the relationship as an investment in a "marital bank account."⁸ A kind word or deed, a favor or service, a sympathetic ear or sincere sharing of personal thoughts and feelings—these are deposits. A harsh word or inconsiderate deed, a criticism or attack, neglect, and putting up barriers to intimacy are withdrawals. Like a real bank account, if the emotional reserves of the marriage are continually drawn upon without being replenished, the couple's love will go bankrupt. John Gottman recommends five deposits for every one withdrawal, or a ratio of five positive interactions to one negative one.⁹

Giving tends to beget more giving, and the returning of the favors. "When my wife Cathy is feeling neglected, when she wants us to get closer, and even when she is mad at me, she takes the initiative to give to me," says Robert, a writer and husband of 18 years. "Cathy will make

a special meal, offer me a massage, or rent a video I'd like. Now I notice: what she is giving is maybe what she'd appreciate getting from me. And it sure is easier to give back." Cathy confides, "When I'm feeling distant from Robert about something and don't feel like giving, I do it anyway and that helps me somehow warm up to him. I feel closer to him and it's easier to give some more." This habit of generosity is helpful in sustaining and reviving love.

In her study of good marriages, Judith Wallerstein found that the happy couples "were not envious of what they gave to the other. They did not dole out kindness with the expectation of immediate reimbursement. They did not weigh their gifts or keep records. Supporting and encouraging the other was a given. They accepted this major task not only as fair but as necessary to make the marriage succeed."¹⁰

One husband in a successful marriage commented, "I know many people who are divorcing, and I've noticed...that people expect more from their partner than they're willing to give themselves."¹¹ True love, it was noted, is to act with a warm heart for the benefit of the other. (See Chapter 4) Love is easy when the exchange is mutual, but it requires maturity and character strength to deal with the periods in a relationship when one partner has to "carry" the other when there is no emotional return. Honing the art of loving when the benefit is not immediately felt is a valuable individual goal for the sake of the partnership. It can spark the process where both become happily engaged in a circle of giving and receiving—the never-ending circle of a successful and fulfilling marriage.

A Higher Focus

"Love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction," penned author Antoine de Saint-Exupery.¹² If the couple honors some ideal higher than their own pleasure in one another, they will be more resilient in the face of obstacles and difficulties. This ideal can be many things—the welfare of the children, religious faith, inner growth, or public service. A veteran of a thirty-year marriage, Bo Lozoff says, "I can be just as corrupt and wretched as anybody else. But the context—our shared belief in the search for truth—has always pulled us through."¹³

A focus on something beyond themselves helps smooth partners' exchanges and avoid friction. Pat and Eric, a couple from Philadelphia,

were having guests over for dinner. They were quarreling over everything before the dinner guests arrived—the placement of the chairs, the color of the candles, whether the guests' coats should be hung up in the closet or put on the master bed. Of course, when the guests came to the door, the bickering ceased, and the couple made their best efforts to be polite to everyone and to each other. The evening turned out splendidly. Everyone had a good time. When the guests had gone home, Pat and Eric turned to one another and asked, "What were we fighting about?" Neither of them could remember, and with a shrug, they let it go. Because they had taken their focus off themselves and extended it to others—their guests—the couple found that their differences had evaporated.

Whether it is taking a neighborhood youngster under their wing or giving their time to a charitable organization, public service is the secret of many strong couples. Such an overarching cause can help them transcend temporary tensions and help them see each other in an admirable light. Tricia from Georgia recounts her parents' happy marriage of over fifty years:

I always had this sense that their marriage was greater than the sum of its parts, more than just two individuals together. One time when they really believed in a presidential candidate, I hardly saw them in the weeks before the election. They were out canvassing and going to meetings, working hard for what they believed in. They often talked over the dinner table about society and politics. Whenever a crisis came up, they talked over their standards, their beliefs, how they thought it should be handled. They had ideals and they tried to live up to them. Their love was, as the old saying goes, "bigger than both of them."

Relational Skills

Good communication is basic in any cooperative endeavor, and working on communication skills is a cornerstone of most marriage enrichment programs. However, studies demonstrate that only 7 percent of communication is words. The rest comes through more subtly, through tone of voice, body language and the invisible but perceptible qualities of one's character. As Smalley observes, "When... courage,

persistence, gratefulness, calmness, gentleness and unselfish love are... in a person's character, it is easier to receive his or her words."¹⁴

Nevertheless, communicating well is an art, and communication skills that build upon the foundation of good character are supportive of lasting marriage. There are proven techniques to improve one's ability to listen to one's partner. There are poisonous tactics to be avoided, as well as the common "communication traps"—those phrases and ways of speaking that multiply rather than solve problems. Couples also benefit from learning to choose the best time to discuss a sensitive topic and how to separate an issue from its emotional freight.

Identifying Relationship Poisons

John Gottman has identified the most virulent relationship poisons that come through during times of conflict. These threaten the very survival of the marriage if allowed to spread. He calls them "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse": criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.¹⁵ Any relationship displays these negative characteristics occasionally, but the danger comes when they take up permanent residency in a marriage.

These destructive tactics do not necessarily follow one another in exact order, although one certainly leads to another. They do feed on and encourage one another: for instance, criticism leads to contempt, which leads the other partner to display defensiveness and/or stonewalling. Complaint is reasonable when it targets a specific behavior or lack of one. But criticism is character assassination—laying on blame and making global judgments about the person, often using sarcasm, sneering, mockery and disgust. Understandably, the partner reacts with defensiveness. Defensiveness, in essence, denies that the problem lies with the accused party and tries to shift the blame back onto the other. Eventually, one partner may shut down and begin to stonewall. He or she will avoid the conflict altogether by physically getting out of the situation or by acting impervious to what the other spouse is saying. Unfortunately, stonewalling only drives the other partner into more virulent attacks, thinking the message of criticism and contempt is simply not getting through.

The antidote to these poisons is learning how to speak clearly and listen attentively, and communicate both with manner and words in a respectful, fair and constructive way.

Attention to the Message

Quite often what is left unsaid, or the attitude with which words are spoken, either prolongs peace or provokes strife.¹⁶ For instance, Amanda and Harold, married over 10 years, had the following exchange:

Amanda: I just say one little thing and you fly off the handle. All I said was could you please move the stuff out of the way of the staircase.

Harold: You said could you *please* move the *stuff* out of the way of the staircase!?! You were impatient and mad. The phone was ringing, I'm expecting an important call, the kids were all over the place and I just got home. I meant to move it; I just haven't had time.

Amanda: Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Please move it when you get a chance.

In this case, Harold accurately noted the emotional subtext beneath Amanda's words that amounted to an accusatory attitude on her part. Amanda admitted to this and, when apprised of Harold's stressed situation, became amicable instead of criticizing him.

A non-accusatory attitude is an important part of good communication. Cultivating a habit of appreciation—and expressing it often—prevents the harboring of accusatory and critical thoughts that may slip out in casual dialogue or explode during an argument. If necessary, a spouse can keep a running list of the other's good points to keep positive and appreciative feelings flowing. Expressing kind words to and about the spouse helps reinforce good feelings.

Lara, a 32-year-old dental technician, was complaining about her husband over the phone to a friend. The more Lara discussed his faults, the angrier and more hurt she became. As her feelings spiraled downward and she piled criticism upon criticism, the friend said mildly, "Is he really all that bad?" Lara stopped and thought; then she said slowly, "No, he isn't. In fact, there are a lot of things I appreciate about him." The friend suggested she name several, and Lara quietly counted off a handful of qualities she loved about him. Her mood changed. "I'm actually a pretty lucky girl," she commented as she signed off to make dinner for him.

Avoiding Communication Traps

The classic marital advice given by experts is to use “I” rather than “you” messages when communicating with a mate, especially about sensitive areas. Targeting the specific behavior without drawing conclusions about the overall character of the person is the idea. The speaker casts the message in terms of how it affects the person speaking. Saying, “I get nervous when the monthly bills start to pile up. I wish you would pay them promptly,” is far less provocative and far more effective than saying, “You never pay the bills on time. I have to worry about everything!” “You” messages all too frequently turn into accusations, whereas “I” messages share useful information about how the behavior affects the partner. Such expressions invite the listener to access his or her concern for the spouse and to evaluate his or her behavior in light of this.

“Always” and “never” are provocative words and of little use in communication. Regardless of the issue, the person who consistently hears that he or she “always” or “never” does something is bound to be defensive about such global statements. Much energy and time is wasted disproving this exaggeration—“I don’t always do that!” Meanwhile, the issue at hand is lost. By the same token, it is constructive to attempt to solve one issue at a time and avoid dredging up past grievances or unrelated topics.

Sometimes one partner will bring up past complaints in order to gain more points, to “win.” Yet the cost of winning a battle could be high when it perpetuates a conflict that hinders harmony and intimacy. By thrashing out the issue with the goal of resolving it, partners can achieve a “win-win” outcome.

Reflective Listening

A structured dialogue is perhaps the most widespread and relied-upon marital communication tool available in both therapy and couples courses. It helps to heighten emotional safety by controlling explosive reactions and minimizing the chance for bad listening habits to interfere with communication. Thus it codifies into practice the self-restraint, patience, honesty, fairness, generosity and prudence that characterize loving and constructive exchanges.¹⁷

This method allows only one partner to speak at a time. Some couples use an actual piece of floor tile to literally “give the other the

floor." The spouse who does not have the floor listens carefully, focusing his or her attention on what is said and paraphrasing it back accurately. This is known as "reflective listening." After the listener has "reflected" what the other has said accurately, the speaker affirms, clarifies, and then goes on to elaborate more. This technique requires the listening spouse to concentrate to make sure he or she understands. It helps the speaking spouse feel truly heard, and often helps him or her get in touch with deeper thoughts and feelings. Here Alex and Toni try the technique, with Toni as the speaker:

Toni: I feel hurt and humiliated when you question my disciplining the children right in front of them. I think it undercuts my authority and makes me look foolish.

Alex: You feel hurt and humiliated when I argue with you in front of the girls and it undercuts your authority. And it makes you look foolish. Is that right? Is there more?

Toni: Yes. It makes me want to defend myself and attack you. I don't want to do that. Especially in front of the children. I want to feel we are together on this, on the same team.

Alex: You don't like that it makes you want to defend yourself and attack me. You want to feel I am your ally, on the same team, raising our children. Right?

Toni: Yes, that's right. I'm glad you understand how I feel.

Once Toni is finished, Alex takes his turn to respond, with his wife reflecting it back. Of course, spouses with good relationships do not often need to converse in this artificial style. Still, this kind of communication is a highly effective technique to use when discussing emotionally sensitive issues, even for couples who consider themselves close.

Reflective listening trains couples in listening to one another from the other person's perspective. Often, people assume they understand what others are saying when they do not. Because spouses are very familiar with each other, they easily "tune out" important details. They tend to listen to the other person's points selectively—solely what they want to hear—often reacting only to the statements that reinforce their own viewpoint. They also tend to be preoccupied with preparing their reply. This kind of listening prevents the other person from feeling fully

understood, validated and cared about. As a result, he or she may expend a lot of energy in counterproductive efforts—nagging, shouting, and arguing—in an effort to be heard. Reflective listening begins with considering the other's perspective first. Characterized by empathy, a natural monitoring of nonverbal cues, and by the strong desire for understanding and cooperation, reflective listening helps resolve issues on a deep emotional level.

Practicing Good Timing

Good timing when discussing potentially volatile issues exercises the virtues of wisdom and patience. It requires considerable emotional poise to postpone a potentially conflictual discussion to a more fortuitous time. Kevin and Lisa found themselves discussing Lisa's parents in the middle of peak hour traffic, with their children in the back seat of the car. In-laws are often a touchy issue, and as Kevin's remarks grew more irritable, Lisa said, "This is a sensitive topic with a lot of potential for a big argument. There's an awful lot of traffic too. I suggest we talk about it tonight, when circumstances are better." Kevin agreed, and a fight was avoided. If tempers are beginning to flare, asking for a cooling off period is helpful, to give one or both spouses the opportunity to regain emotional control. It also communicates that the spouse does want to resolve the issue, but under circumstances more conducive to a good outcome.

Depersonalizing the Issues

Depersonalizing difficult issues also prevents quarrels from escalating. It requires self-control to suspend an initial defensive reaction, and insight to see into the deeper underlying issues. Gender differences often play a large role in marital difficulties, for example. Men and women are very different in their emotional and physical makeup. Harmonizing masculinity and femininity is one of the joys of marriage, yet also a source of considerable friction.

Spouses can learn to recognize that not all angry words or sneering looks are actually directed at them. Sometimes they are merely projections of the partner's negative self-talk and inner struggles. Before marriage, the spouse may have had bitter experiences—betrayal, ridicule and loneliness—that continue to affect him or her. The intimacy and expectations of the marriage relationship can awaken those old but

vivid feelings and thoughts. The spouse may appear as a mirror in which the other's own unlovable feelings or disturbing memories are reflected back.

This has nothing to do with the spouse; it has more to do with the internal world of the other person. "When I remembered how the men in her family had put her down all the time," recalls Kenton, about his wife, Grace, "I realized that when she raged she wasn't really yelling at me. She was yelling at her Dad and brothers. I just needed to reassure her of my love and respect, not defend myself." If a spouse has the maturity of character to see the other's spiteful words as stemming from inner hurts rather than as a personal attack, the spouse avoids an emotional reaction and even respond with compassion.

Many couples are unprepared for the extent of the conflict they find in their marriage and think it is a reflection on the quality of their relationship. However, both happily and unhappily married couples experience conflict. The difference between happy couples and unhappy ones is that in happy couples, negative feelings and conflicts do not overpower the basic affection they have for one another. Such couples have built enough meaning, friendship and enjoyment into their marriage that negative exchanges do not overly detract from it. More importantly, they have cultivated the character to anchor their partnership and weather its inevitable storms. They have learned the art of maintaining intimacy and affection that deepens over a lifetime.

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Parenting with Love and Authority

BECOMING A PARENT MEANS ENTERING A WHOLE NEW REALM of caring and responsibility. Earlier phases of life, having taught their lessons of love, are foundational for success in this important endeavor. Yet parenting presents its unique challenges, and parenting in modern times is especially daunting. Children have access to media information—both good and bad—in ways their parents couldn't even dream of. Both parents often work, leaving them little time to devote to their children. What is more, society is just beginning to recover from more than thirty years of questioning its most basic values, leaving parents to wonder which direction is best for their children.

Clearly, parents stand in the position of the primary moral educators, yet schools and the community can support parents in giving proper guidance to their children. The most effective parents, teachers and community leaders recognize this and do their best to support and supplement one another. Parents are helped by the efforts of good teachers and community mentors, and in turn the school and community gain from well-reared children.

Teachers and parents benefit from a strong mutual support system. In the past, parental support for teacher authority was so solid that it was common for a child who had been disciplined at school to be disciplined again at home. The parents did not even need to know what the child had done. "If the teacher says you did something wrong, you must

have done something wrong," was the parents' philosophy. Nowadays, the parent is more likely to call the school and demand an explanation, sometimes putting teachers and administrators on the defensive and fearful of possible litigation. This lack of support takes its toll. Older teachers comment on the marked difficulties in discipline they face due to students' changed attitudes toward authority, most of which derive from the home.

Parental Authority

Society has swung like a pendulum on issues of authority. People rightly reacted to the authoritarianism that produced well-behaved yet insecure youngsters whose preoccupation with protecting themselves from punishment stymied their growth in love for others. Yet permissive, child-centered parents who rejected authoritarianism contributed unwittingly to wanton behavior in their offspring.

A balanced approach to authority pairs high levels of compassion and care with an equally high degree of firmness. Psychologist Diane Baumrind calls this "authoritative parenting." She found that children of authoritative parents are the most well-adjusted and well-behaved. Children raised in an authoritarian manner—which is characterized by high levels of strictness and low levels of warmth and supportiveness—are also well-behaved, but they tend to be so out of self-protectiveness rather than moral conviction. Children of permissive parents—high in warmth and supportiveness but low in control—fare the worst of all, engaging in the most negative behaviors and showing the least social adjustment.¹

When children catch the message, "*Because we love you, you must do as we say,*" they are already deeply assured of the parent's love and regard for their ultimate well-being. Out of this understanding, there is a greater sense of willingness to respect and comply with their parents' directives.

Parenting as Partnership

The two sides of authoritative parenting—high levels of both warm supportiveness and fairly strict control—are seemingly embodied in the parenting partnership of a mother and father. The often-heroic efforts of single parents notwithstanding, the father and mother team is best

suiting to provide this balance of warmth and strictness. A partnership allows the parents to integrate the complementary dimensions of parental love—the “soft” maternal side and the “hard” paternal side.

Mothers tend to provide comforting, nurturing love. Maternal affection seems to be given without condition, for who the children are rather than for what they do. “He’ll always be my baby,” a mother may say, even on her son’s wedding day, and that’s more than enough reason for her to adore him. A mother’s arms are comforting and healing; she will tend to be less strict and more forgiving. A mother’s instincts are to protect her child, urging the child to be careful rather than to explore too much and experiment with independence.

A father’s love, on the other hand, tends to be more challenging. Paternal affection looks more conditional, since it may be withheld until the son or daughter meets certain expectations. Fathers are inclined to be stricter, but they also encourage a child to take more risks and to try more things. A child about to climb a tall tree may hear his or her mother’s caution, “Oh, don’t! Be careful!” while the father says, “Go ahead and see if you can do it. Just stay on the thicker branches.”

Of course, mothers and fathers slip in and out of these two kinds of love, and circumstances sometimes force one parent to try to give both kinds. Generally, however, paternal and maternal love balance each other well and provide enriching contrast. The cooperative and loving interplay between a mother and a father enhances their parenting. With both kinds of love, a child has a safe haven from which to venture out and achieve. This is why fostering and sustaining a good marriage—strengthening the parenting partnership—is part and parcel of the parenting task.

Love—The Basis of Legitimate Authority

As leaders of their family, parents necessarily have to have a healthy sense of their own authority. On the one hand, power and authority over anything is usually granted to its originator. The author of a book, for instance, is the one who knows best what the book’s purpose is, how it can be utilized, interpreted, etc. As the “authors” of a child, parents have a natural authority.

On the other hand, as the anti-authoritarian voices of the 1960s and 1970s pointed out, authority is sometimes abused. They served as a reminder that genuine and trustworthy authority belongs to those

who care about their charges and willingly sacrifice for their sake. In any project, business or school, authentic leaders earn their authority through care, investment and sacrifice. The same is true of the child-rearing enterprise. Parents best wield authority on a foundation of deep, demonstrated love for the child. Otherwise, the child will have trouble receiving the parents' directives.

"Without a strong, healthy love-bond with his parents," observes psychologist Ross Campbell, "a child reacts to parental guidance with anger, resentment, and hostility."² Power used without an appropriate amount of love can produce a person who eventually resents all authority. To such a child, authority is linked with exploitation. A child who knows she is deeply loved, on the other hand, will readily accept her parents' directions, identify with them and make their values her own. Furthermore, a positive relationship with parents predisposes a child to respect legitimate social institutions and civil laws and the just authority they represent. Thus, good parenting extrapolates into society.

Building Up a Child's Foundations

Caring deeply about their children is not a problem for most parents. As Theodore Reik expressed poetically, "Romance fails us—and so do friendships—but the relationship of mother and child remains indelible and indestructible—the strongest bond upon this earth."³ Even so, this profound connection requires continual investment to keep it strong. As new parents can testify, parental love deepens as they care for the child. The first feedings, first bath, the first time the crying child is successfully comforted all augment a bond that is fast on its way to becoming unbreakable. As the son or daughter grows in independence and will, the parents' investment and commitment must grow likewise.

Psychologist Steven Stosny asserts that the fact that children emerge from the womb expecting to be well taken care of shows empirical evidence for the existence of the heart—the part of each person that is inherently good, true, just and worthy. However, unless this sense of worth is nurtured by the love of parents, it may remain dormant. "We learn how valuable and worthy of love we are almost exclusively through interactions with attachment figures, especially parents and children," he observes.⁴ M. Scott Peck agrees, "When children have learned through the love of their parents to feel valuable, then it is

almost impossible to destroy their spirit."⁵

Awakened by the selfless devotion of the parents, the son or daughter's heart learns its worth and naturally sees others as being similarly worthy. He or she will then behave in a manner that is just and kind toward others when out in society.

Parental investment thus builds up a child's foundations in two ways: first, it cultivates the parent-child bond, which opens up the child's sphere of love. (See Chapter 15) This bond serves to enhance moral and cognitive development. Second, it fosters a sense of inherent value and worthiness—and, by extension—the value and worthiness of others. Attachment to parents and sense of self-worth are both healthy expressions of the child's budding heart and essential foundations for moral growth.

Consistent and Continuous Giving

Although parents invest in their children to build up these foundations of a moral self, they may not necessarily see immediate results from their efforts. They give and give, and then forget what they have given and give still more. This is why parental love is the very definition of the unconditional. Yet even though fathers and mothers cannot anticipate how their children will turn out, their continual caring is the surest lifeline for even the most incorrigible child.

Jan Smith of Stamford, Connecticut, learned to deal with the emotional turbulence of her rebellious teenage daughter by applying unswerving love. Her daughter's rebelliousness culminated late one night when the police called Jan to tell her that she had to come to the police station to pick up her daughter, who was arrested for drunk driving. Mother and daughter did not speak until the next afternoon. Jan broke the tension by giving the girl a small gift-wrapped box. The teenager nonchalantly opened it and found a small piece of a rock. "Cute, Mom. What's this for?" she said, and then she noticed a card inside. It read, "This rock is more than 200 million years old. That's how long it will take before I give up on you." She responded by giving her mother a big hug.⁶

Parental Modeling

The most powerful teaching is by example.⁷ Children are more likely to do as a parent does than what a parent says. According to psy-

chologist Joseph Pearce, the greater part of the child's mind-brain structure is imprinted with the character and example of significant people in their lives. Only about 5 percent is available to respond to words and instruction.⁸ Thus the expression, "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying."

Of course, parents are children's first and most significant role models. Children closely observe their parents' interactions with each other, other family members, friends and neighbors. From this they learn how to treat other people. Likewise, families with parental conflict and unresolved anger tend to have children who are more aggressive.⁹ Parents teach respect through modeling respect, caring through modeling caring, responsibility through modeling responsibility.

Consider the moral lessons modeled by Claire and Warren as they help their daughter Jenna grasp the intricacies of a weaving kit project. Warren is calm and a natural teacher but knows nothing of weaving; Claire knows the craft but her character tends to be high-strung and impatient. When the mother's tension begins to mount, the father distracts them both with humor and asks Jenna to show what she has learned. After the short break, Claire resumes the lesson. In this way they model to the daughter how a husband and wife cooperate to build on their strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses. In addition, she has experienced her parents' loving devotion to her. The next day in school, Jenna spontaneously volunteers to help a boy in a lower grade with his reading, using many of the same patterns of speech and behavior that her parents used with her.

Imitation can be the sincerest form of flattery when parents hear children dealing with people politely and well in imitation of their own good manners. They are considerably less flattered when they hear their child use a harsh tone of voice on a pet or younger sibling in imitation of the parents' own impatient utterings. Parents are "on display"—including all the contradictions in their own attitudes and behavior. For example, when the phone rings, instructing the child to tell whoever is calling that the parent is not home sets an example of untruthfulness. Going through the express check-out line posted "10 Items or Less" with fifteen items in the grocery cart sends a powerful unspoken message about cheating. In the end, a virtuous example is the most effective character education.

Rules and Expectations

The power of example, of course, does not mean parents have no need to impart firm ideas of right and wrong as well as appropriate limits. Moral instruction is one of the greatest investments a parent makes in a child. It is like planting a seed that bears fruit later in life. While a young person may not seem to appreciate or absorb moral instruction, in fact, parents may be assured that a significant amount is sinking in, even if the child does not let on. By explicitly passing on rules and morality, the parent informs the child's conscience—the cognitive aspect of morality—which will eventually serve as a portable parent. The conscience will set off some alarm bells when basic values are being transgressed.

"It was funny," admits Xavier, a 19-year-old student at a mid-western college. "I'd roll my eyes when my Dad talked about drinking when I was younger. I didn't mess around with it much anyway when I was in high school. But in my first year at college, alcohol was like *everywhere*. Suddenly I had to take a look at what I was going to do and not do and what I would say to my Dad. I ended up deciding to pretty much draw the line he used to say I should." Strict limits provide parameters in youth's moral universe.

Some limits take the form of rules. Once a rule is made, it has an authority of its own. "The rule in this house is..." carries a great deal of weight. Children and teenagers actually appreciate rules. Rules help them know what is expected and keep them from spinning off into chaos. If children are accustomed to obeying rules when young, they are more apt to observe guidelines as teenagers in more sensitive areas such as drug use and sexual experience.

Children want and need moral guidance from their parents; adolescents are often crying out for it.¹⁰ If rules and expectations are laid down in the home, children feel more protected. They also have a good excuse when facing down peer pressure: "My Mom and Dad freak if I'm out after nine o'clock. That's their rule. I know it's a drag, but that's the way they are. They'll kill me if I don't come home." The parents can be the "bad guys" and let the child keep his or her cool image.

When setting up rules and expectations, it is necessary for parents to agree on both standards and enforcement. This may require extensive private discussion. It also may mean that one parent may support the other in front of the children even if he or she disagrees with how the other parent is handling a situation. Children, even the nicest ones,

can be manipulative, and even very young children learn that if they can divide their parents, they can conquer them.

Taking Time to Parent

Caring for children takes large amounts of time and energy—precious commodities for modern working parents. This led to the notion of “quality time,” which was widely embraced by family theorists and parents alike. Only a small amount of parental investment is necessary per day, they thought, as long as it is high quality. Yet others believe that “quality time” is a myth. One mother, a successful lawyer, had a rude awakening one day when doing the family grocery shopping with her children, a task the babysitter usually did. They was sliding on their knees down aisles, screaming, asking for everything and creating an embarrassing disturbance. The cashier said, “Oh, so *you’re* the mother,” as if the children’s terrible behavior were well known at the store. She realized, “Babysitters don’t raise children; parents do,” and she immediately decided to cut back on her career to have more time at home with her children.¹¹

Parents serve their children best by being with them in a relaxed state and giving them the gift of their full presence and attention. Doris, a mother in Pittsburgh, stated that she raised three children in the public school system, and they were all drug and alcohol-free by the time they graduated. A younger friend asked her for advice about whether or not she should home-school. She wanted to protect her children from negative peer influences, but bewailed the amount of time it would take. Doris replied, “You have to take a lot of time with them anyway. I had to detox my kids every day from all the negative peer influences, explaining over and over again why they can’t do what their friends are doing and to give them the strength to keep resisting.” The older mother had worked for years at a low-paying, part-time job just so that she could be home when her children returned from school.

Most youth problems in the United States occur between the hours of three in the afternoon and six o’clock at night—unsupervised hours when the children are out of school but the parents are not yet home from work. These are the times when children tend to experiment with undesirable behaviors.

Talking to Children about Sensitive Matters

Talking to young people about drugs, sex and violence is never easy. But physician Victor Strasburger reassures parents, "What you say isn't nearly as important as the fact that you are willing to discuss the subject in the first place. That... makes it far more likely that your child will come to you with questions in the future."¹² The following are guidelines about discussing sensitive matters:

- *Initiate discussion early.*

Early discussions have the effect of immunizing youth against hazards.¹³ Even kindergarteners see their parents take pills and this can begin an education about use and abuse of drugs. When parents initiate the discussion, as they might about brushing teeth or bicycle safety, they establish their position as the primary source of guidance and understanding about these matters. They also indicate their approachability, so that children come to them in the future with their concerns.

Topics should be discussed in an age-appropriate manner. When Nick's 4-year-old son asked him, "Where did I come from?" Nick explained that he came from his mother's belly. When his 8-year-old daughter asked the same question, Nick wanted to be truthful yet protect his daughter's natural modesty. He said, "Your mother and I truly wanted a child. Our desire and love grew so strong that eventually a tiny seed was planted in Mommy's belly. It grew, and after nine months a beautiful little girl was born." She was very satisfied with this answer, which fit with her stage of cognitive and emotional development.

- *Give honest answers.*

Parents need to answer all inquiries to the best of their knowledge, and when stumped, offer to find out the answer. "My Dad used his connections with the police department to get me in to see the jail," recalls Kyle, now in college. "It definitely left me thinking long and hard about the pressures to join a gang."

When speaking to adolescents about sexual matters, using correct terms helps to remove the unhealthy mystique from the topic.

Part of honesty is dealing with questions of the parents' own experiences with the forbidden behavior. Personal confessions are unwarranted and only burden and distract children, but parental sharing about how they thought and felt in their youth can comfort a child and enhance parents' credibility.

· *Help children think.*

To help the young resist unhealthy influences, it is helpful to invite them to practice explaining their views and reasoning out a responsible response. Saying, "I'd like to know what you think about that situation," and "What do you think should happen now?"—and respectfully listening to their replies—not only helps parents know how to guide their children; it also encourages the child to craft his or her moral code and articulate it to others.¹⁴

· *Show unconditional support.*

Educator Patty Stark recommends giving the message, "Let's put together a game plan to help you manage the pressure and come through this a winner. We believe in you, and we will be with you every step of the way."¹⁵ At the same time, they need to know that whenever they feel uncomfortable or scared—regardless of where they are, who they're with or what time it is—they can call their parents to get them, without facing an interrogation.

Parents must sometimes make hard choices, like Doris did, in order to devote time and effort into their children's well-being. Schools and communities can help matters by offering quality after-school programs that both attract and protect youth. Yet even organized after-school activities sometimes cut unduly into the family's time together. William Doherty, director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota, works to organize parents to "take back family life from overscheduled family hyperactivity and the consumer

culture."¹⁶ Even though enrolling the child in several different sports, lessons and extracurricular activities seems to enrich the child's life experience, some families find themselves on the run constantly to keep up with their schedules, with no time for relaxed or thoughtful interaction—something which is ultimately more valuable for the child.

Turning Off the TV

One way to allow for more healthy family interaction is to turn off that thief of family time, the television. A Nielsen study in 1996 indicated that the average child in the United States spent thirty-five hours per week viewing television as opposed to thirty-five *minutes* of meaningful conversation with his or her parents.¹⁷ Turning off the TV frees up hours to read to or with children, converse with them, play games, put on plays, bake with them—a whole host of things that build relationship, teach skills and at the same time encourage more brain activity and creative thinking. This will also shield them from being overly influenced by programs and commercials that rarely reflect parental values, glorify consumerism and materialism, and desensitize children to violence.¹⁸

While families may want to watch some TV, it is appropriate to carefully regulate viewing. Program viewing is best scheduled ahead of time, with family members agreeing not to turn the TV on at random throughout the day. Watching the television is regarded as a privilege, not a right, and permission is required. Like other appliances in the household, it is natural for the television to be left off most of the time.

Parents and children benefit when they watch worthwhile programs together. If objectionable content comes on, it is a chance to explain why it is unacceptable and even discuss the commercial reasons why TV producers show such content. This is imparting "media literacy."

Regulating the television is an area where schools can specifically support parents. Not only can they sponsor times for families to do without TV and award students who do, schools also help indirectly by promoting reading programs like "Book It!" where the local Pizza Hut offers free pizzas to children who read a certain amount within a month.

Family Meals and Rituals

Family meals are a valuable opportunity for parents to share with their children. A study by the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center showed that teenagers who ate at least five meals a week with their families were at lower risk for bad behavior, did better in school, were better socialized and enjoyed better relationships with peers than teenagers who did not eat together with their families on a regular basis.¹⁹

Alysson, a medical transcriptionist in the Northwest, takes a few moments to light candles at dinner and plan conversation. She thinks beforehand of positive topics to introduce, stories she wants to tell, and questions she wants to ask. She asks her two children, 10 and 13, and her husband, "What was the best thing that happened today?" and "What was the worst thing?" to draw out deeper responses than "It was okay," when she asks them how their day went.

Bedtime, suppertime, movie nights, religious observances, and holidays are some of the occasions for family rituals that provide stability amid the hectic pace of modern life. Small children especially will get upset if rituals are interrupted. A bedtime ritual of bath, story, lullaby and kiss will comfort a child immeasurably, and is well worth the time. Studies confirm that bedtime is a chance for strong parent-child bonding, even for teenagers.²⁰ Many remember their parents' nightly routine for the rest of their lives. Annabelle, a middle-aged woman from West Virginia, says, "My mother would always pull the blanket up under my chin, smooth it down, and kiss me on the lips. She'd say, "Goodnight, angel!" and then kiss me again on the forehead. I would not let her vary or abandon this routine until I was 18 and off to college."

The soothing power of routine and ritual tends to have a cumulative effect, taking on more power and significance as time goes by. When a ritual is missed, all the family members feel a loss. Family rituals around holidays create and sustain family bonds and a sense of belonging and continuity in a changeable world. "That first Hanukkah after Mama died was awful," recalls Rachel, an accountant on the West coast. "But my brothers and sister and I gathered anyway at my house and we tried to do everything the same way as if Mama and Papa were there. We did it mainly for the kids. In the end, though, it was the only way we adults were able to get through the holiday."

The Family with a Purpose

Stephen Covey suggests that creating a statement of the family ideal or mission together is a valuable family-building activity.²¹ A mission statement is a declaration of the family's vision and its values. It can be as elaborate as a page-long essay or as simple as "The Jacksons keep their word, care about people and get the job done." Since it is arrived at by consensus, creating such a statement of the family ideal may require a lot of time and reflection by all members of the family. Once written, the statement of the family ideal can be prominently displayed—on the wall, on the refrigerator, or even on tee shirts—as a reference to keep the family on course. Some families make a weekly ritual of reading their family ideal and renewing their pledge to fulfill it.

Many family mission statements include a clause about how the family will serve neighbors or contribute to their community or the nation. The Singh family of Reno, Nevada mentions their "Pennies with a Purpose" collection, which is earmarked for a needy Indian child they sponsor. Such altruism boosts family pride. Although it seems paradoxical, the family that belongs to benevolent organizations, hosts guests, helps out neighbors and volunteers for community causes finds that the bonds with one another are strengthened by the time and energy they give to others outside of the home.

Family Meetings

Family meetings are also a good way to build family togetherness through focusing family members' attention on planning trips, chores, service projects or addressing issues that have come up. With a snack or treat added, some stimulating questions and some laughs, family meetings can be wonderful and memorable times of sharing as well as learning how to treat each other fairly and respectfully.

Family meetings are most successful when they occur at regular times, are only about an hour long, and acknowledge the rights of everyone to contribute, even the youngest member of the family. The

rule can be established that each person is allowed to have his or her say with the respectful attention of the others and without criticism or teasing. While the parents' decisions on important issues are final, recognition of the children's contributions and suggestions affirm that they are a valued and vital part of the family team.

Parenting with Compassion

Regardless of what they do and the time they take to do it, if parents demonstrate care and compassion for their children, almost anything they do will turn out all right, according to Stosny.²² Compassion is an expression of love that means literally to feel strongly with someone, and includes a willingness to share his or her difficulties. A father or mother's compassion for his or her children means patience and understanding of their developmental limitations, a benevolent outlook on the child, and relying on support and encouragement rather than shame or harsh punishment to awaken the heart and conscience and reestablish good behavior.

A compassionate parent looks beneath the bad behavior of a child to the motivating factors. An otherwise angelic child can become a veritable monster when deprived of a nap. A hungry child can be cranky and rude. Going deeper, a child who has just lost a ball game or been ridiculed by peers may be too ashamed to tell his or her parents, but his or her behavior that evening may be hard to put up with. Harsh punishment and unrealistic demands only layer hurt on top of hurt without addressing the underlying emotional need.

Educator and author Jane Nelsen was out hiking with her family and some friends. Their 10-year-old son became tired and started complaining that his backpack was rubbing his back raw. His father, a former Marine, urged his son to "Be a man" and stand up to the pain. The boy tried to obey his father, but after a while he couldn't go on. Jane knew it had probably hurt and angered her son that his father had not taken his situation seriously. She asked his father to stop, and together the parents jerry-rigged some padding for the boy's back that protected the sore spot. He made the rest of the journey without incident or complaint, supported by the empathy of his parents. Through compassion and understanding, they had reached into their son's world, helped him through the difficult feelings, and administered the care and support he needed to accomplish the climb.²³

Parental Sacrifice

As any father or mother well knows, attending to children's needs often comes at a personal cost—the sacrifice of the parent's interests, plans and desires. Most parents recognize that on the deepest level it is a joy to make sacrifices on behalf of their children. Nevertheless, being a good parent means putting up with the mess of an art project on the kitchen table. It means answering the fiftieth question in a row while trying to prepare dinner. It means resisting the impulse to resort to “Because I said so, that’s why!” when confronted with a defiant 15-year-old demanding to know why she is not allowed to stay out late when *everyone* else in school does it. It means forgoing that new car to pay for a son or daughter’s college expenses. More than any other activity in life, parenting means self-sacrifice. David Elkind, a child psychologist at Tufts University, said, “If it is to be done well, child-rearing requires, more than most activities of life, a good deal of de-centering from one’s own needs and perspectives.”²⁴

It’s the Heart that Counts

There are times and circumstances when fathers and mothers are simply too busy to give much time to family activities or companionship with their children. Struggling to make ends meet, coping with a chronic illness, being called out of town for long periods in the military service or on business—these may keep a family apart. Once again, the important thing is that the sons and daughters know that their parents’ hearts are with them even when their physical presence is not. Then the children will be better able to honor and appreciate the sacrifices their parents are making.

Kwi Soh Young, a teenager from Seattle, affirmed that although she and her siblings endured prolonged separations from her father due to the demands of his work as a public defender, their suffering was ameliorated by his actions and attitude. She said, “I always knew he was thinking of us, no matter where he was. He would make sure to call us from the office or when away on trips. He even sent cassette tapes sometimes telling us about what he was doing and seeing, and he’d sing us a bedtime or birthday song. We knew he was thinking of us and missed us, that he was concerned about us all the time, so we didn’t feel deprived.” The basic relationship of heart was intact even if the father’s responsibilities took him away from home.

The Parent as Hero

Only a dad with a tired face,
Coming home from the daily race,
Bringing home little of gold or fame
To show how well he has played the game;
But glad in his heart that his own rejoice
To see him come and to hear his voice...

Only a dad, but he gives his all
To smooth the way for his children small,
Doing with courage stern and grim
The deeds that his father did for him.
This is the line that for him I pen:
Only a dad, but the best of men.

—From "Only a Dad" by Edward Guest²⁵

Character-Building Responsibilities

Another aspect of parenting is educating children to shoulder responsibility, with the objective of raising them to be productive and sacrificial adults themselves. This requires the judicious use of chores and a little adversity.

Household Chores

Chores and household duties help produce resilient children who will grow up to be responsible, self-respecting adults. A loving and wise parent requires that the child reciprocate for all the parents do for him or her. When parents ask children to contribute their fair share to the family, it inculcates the values of reciprocity and responsibility.

One Harvard study that followed the lives of almost 500 boys well into middle age showed that the children who did chores turned out to be healthier, happier, more productive and more satisfied in personal relationships than those who had no home or yard responsibilities in their younger years.²⁶ Even very small children can do simple chores

such as placing the napkins on the table or corralling stray shoes into a neat line. Older children can take on more ambitious responsibilities.

Assigning children chores is perfect for the family in which both parents work, since the parents do not have time to do all the household tasks. When children pitch in, the parents have more time to spend with the children as they work together, engage in meaningful conversation, and share experiences and views. Boys and girls working side by side with their fathers and mothers absorb practical skills, feel a sense of companionship and worth, and inherit the traditions of generations before them. Thus the value of chores is not only measured in work done, but in the way they build bonds and character.

Codifying and writing down the chores for display multiplies the chances of children fulfilling them. Parents can note when they are done with a check mark or sticker, and reward the children periodically. Jarmo and Anita, parents of three in the Appalachian Mountains region, got their children interested in chores by assigning them "pet points" for each chore done with a cheerful attitude. The children had been begging to have a dog, and the parents held a family meeting to discuss the possibility with them. They outlined all the responsibilities involved in caring for a pet and declared firmly that neither parent would have time to fulfill them. If the children wanted a dog, they would have to take care of it, and prove beforehand that they would take this responsibility seriously. Therefore, they would have to earn 500 "pet points" each by performing regular chores, at a point each, for some time. The promise of a dog provided the youngsters with the incentive to learn self-discipline and perseverance, and the couple hoped the habit of responsibility would be engrained enough, as the points accumulated on the chart, that they would be ready to care for a pet.

The Uses of Adversity

Psychologist John Rosemond recommends that parents give children all of what they need, but a small—very small—amount of what they merely want.²⁷ Giving a frugal allowance, limiting TV and video game hours, limiting treats and entertainments, and enforcing rules and responsibilities in the end benefit a child enormously. "Sweet are the uses of adversity," said Shakespeare. Indeed, the child who faces no challenges, who has every path cleared, who always wins and never loses and always gets his or her way, is unprepared for life as an adult.

What Price for a Man's Character?

Captains Courageous is the story of a spoiled boy's character being built by adversity. Harvey Cheyne, the son of a very rich man, was spoiled, pettish, weak, unhealthy and disrespectful to his elders. He believed that he could buy his way in or out of any situation. When Harvey was swept off the deck of an ocean liner by a wave, a fishing trawler and her salty crew picked him up. His bribes and entreaties availed him nothing with the sailors. He was expected to obey, conform and help in the rigorous work. In his first encounter with captain Disko Troop, Harvey was punched in the face for his incessant whining and complaining.

Disko and his crew were fair, honest, tough, hard working and well schooled in the difficult codes of the sea. At their none-too-gentle hands, Harvey received the education of his life: "I worked like a horse and I ate like a hog and I slept like a dead man," he said. He learned sacrifice, gratitude and obedience; he learned of the fellowship of shared dangers and hard work. At the end of the novel, he spoke of how much he owed the captain, who in essence made him into a man of character.

For all of his millions, Harvey's father could not repay Disko for what he had done. What price can be paid for a man's character? It can only be bought with love that dares to demand that a young person earn respect by showing respect and by stretching himself to the limits to be useful to the people around him.²⁸

This type of education is particularly necessary in developed societies where many hardships of the past no longer exist. In prior times, life was so difficult for adults and children alike that children had to form good character traits or suffer massive defeat in life. They had to work hard, they had to help out; often they were key to the family's income. They had to "make do and do without"—an exercise in creativity that produced the special joy that comes from self-reliance. A wise grandfather wrote a letter to his grandchildren:

We tried so hard to make things better for our kids that we made them worse. For my grandchildren, I'd like better: I hope you learn to make your own bed and mow the lawn and wash the car. And I really hope nobody gives you a brand new car when you are sixteen. I hope you get a black eye fighting for something you believe in. I hope you have to share a bedroom with your younger brother. And... when he wants to crawl under the covers with you because he's scared, I hope you let him. These things I wish for you—tough times and disappointment, hard work and happiness.²⁹

Parenting is among the most demanding tasks on earth. To accept the children as they are and yet challenge them to be better, to set rules and give responsibility yet show compassion when they are in difficulty, to give continuously and yet create opportunities for the children to give in return—these are not easy to balance. Ultimately it the parents' heart of sacrificial investment and love that both guides them to maintain the right balance—and which wins their children's natural respect for their parents' legitimate authority.