Continental Drift

You’ve been given a year. It’s called 2008 and it stretches out in front of you like a virgin snowfall, waiting to be explored. Soon there will be trails of footsteps, some bold with far apart prints, others halting, retraced or abruptly changing direction. Some will show groups of footprints all tangled together in varying sizes. The silent stories chronicle times traveled with others, with all the blessings and bothers that entails. They also mark the solitary steps, perhaps with the dimple left by a walking stick, visually changing the rhythm from a two step to a waltz.

A year can feel like a vast expanse in which to cover ground. Or, looking back over your shoulder, last year’s steps can look rather paltry, hardly visible in the shadows and valleys, disappearing beneath the forces of wind, water and time.

Time is an elusive barometer of accomplishment. Kipling beckons us to “Fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run”. Certainly twelve months would afford us an impressive distance indeed, were we in the business of moving off-road vehicles or a pair of LA Gears. But what if we are more interested in transporting a house, or a relationship? How much time does it take to forgive an old grudge, or to launch a dream?

One of my gifts this Christmas was to forego criticism of my husband for a year. Will there be any visible footsteps to show the progress I have made when I turn around next December and survey where I have come? Perhaps it will feel like I have traveled at the speed of continental drift. No doubt it will have been an expensive present, costing me dearly as the plates of my rocky soul build up pressure beneath the surface. But sometimes, after centuries of silence, those land masses shift to create whole new formations, losing old ones beneath the foam. Dare I hope that after 365 days of swallowed comments, there might erupt in me a mountain on whose pinnacle I might stand? Could it be that having never moved a foot I may have gained a thousand?

Lori Odhner
BOOK REVIEW

A Complaint Free World:
by Will Bowen

I was given this book for Christmas and found myself reading snatches of it between the hullabaloo of that first red stocking and the honking horns of New Year’s Eve. It was a quick read, yet I did not want to go too quickly. The challenge, to eradicate words of complaint, gossip and criticism from my daily interactions for 21 days is innocent enough. I had already promised myself that I would rinse all comments to my husband for 365 days. But this book raises the stakes to interactions with all people—could I do it?

Bowen offers free purple bracelets to anyone willing to take on the challenge. Every time you slip, you change which wrist the bracelet is on, and start over. The book includes stories from people who have succeeded, and their experience with the enormity of the shift in patterns. There is a place for taking on a challenge when you have little or no idea what you have signed up for. Like the birth of a child. Can any of us honestly see how far into the distance that venture actually reaches? Ignorance comes in handy here, for the perpetuation of the human race for instance.

Perhaps I should ask for help. You know, the kind of help that black and white cars with cherries on top give when I am driving and need to remember to stay within the speed limit. Or the kind of help that statistics teachers supply when you are tempted to forget to do your homework. My own children are pretty cooperative too, when I let them in on some personal flaw I am working on, and they catch me red handed. “Mom, I thought you were trying not to yell.”

So maybe I will make a button for myself that says “Stop me if I complain.” Chances are pretty good I will always have a witness when I transgress, as complaining to inanimate objects is not as deeply satisfying.

The book identifies four stages in the progression: Unconscious Incompetence, Conscious Incompetence, Conscious Competence and Unconscious Competence. Will claims that the way to begin is to recognize that we are incompetent in regard to complaining. Our lack of awareness makes change less likely. So we begin to notice how frequently words of complaint slip past our lips. Bowen tells of the time he was first explaining the idea to his congregation and he made a complaint disguised as a joke. No one laughed. He noticed—and moved his purple bracelet.

Marriage is a wonderful place to eliminate these corrosive comments. We read that angels always put a positive interpretation on our actions. I have been blessed with a vivid imagination, as evidenced when I come up with reasons I should be irritated or upset. Sometimes I remember to use that same capacity for creative reasoning to give an explanation for someone else’s behavior.

“Maybe she is newly pregnant, and feeling awful.”
“Perhaps they just received a threatening letter about being sued.”
“Maybe their water pipes froze and they are stressed out about living in a house that is under 50 degrees.”
“It’s possible she is a new driver, learning to drive a stick shift.”
“I wonder if they just got a scary diagnosis for their child.”

Actually, I don’t need to be all that creative. I can look to my own experience, as each of those situations has happened to me. Sometimes when I am paying attention I see that criticizing my husband is like poking holes in the canoe that we are both riding in—and the water is cold. Once I called him to criticize him about something of no consequence that simply could not wait—I closed my cell phone and turned the key in the ignition. Nothing. That ornery battery connection was acting up and I realized with embarrassment that I needed to call him back and ask for help. He came of course.

So you might want to take on this personal marathon. If you have tried criticism as a means for improving your relationships, I mean really tried it in all its permeations from biting sarcasm to passive aggressive, and found it to be a less than transforming experience, you might want to change gears and give this one a serious try. Just for kicks. As if your marital life depended on it.

Lori

Listening is one of the great time-savers. Five minutes of listening prevents five hours of fighting and 50 hours of being mad and distant from each other. – Douglas Brown

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR YOUR MARRIAGE TODAY?

We took down the Christmas tree together. It was much more fun than either of us doing it alone.

We read together.

I printed out directions for her to a new place so she wouldn’t get lost.

I hugged her three times a day for a week! It was fun!
Parenting Conference
February 9 - 10

Join us for a wonderful and enriching day of workshops, exhibits to browse through, catered meals, and a fabulous program for children.

The keynote is called “My Favorite Things”, in which nine children and young adults — Hayden Hoffman, Lydia Smith, Jason Asplundh, Alexis Asplundh, Luke Walsh, Ivan Maddock, Katie Pullman, Ayisha Synnrestvedt and Ivy Daum—will articulate what family and good parenting mean to them.

Saturday night we will be treated to the musical escapades and talents of four families who have made singing a way of life. The Genzlingers, Rogers-Petros, Daums and Echols clan will make you laugh and perhaps cry with their magical voices. Sunday we will enjoy a Family Fun Festival, including a magic show, the String and a Prayer Puppet Theater, Briar Bush Nature Center’s animal program, crafts projects, music and snacks.

To register go to caringformarriage.org, or call 215-947-3564 and ask for a booklet.
When spending time with your spouse, both quality and quantity are important. Not only should you be there for your spouse, you should also be there, listening to what they have to say and attending to their needs. Dr John Gottman calls this “turning to each other”. His marriage communication research has shown that couples who chat a lot, even about unimportant things, tend to stay together. In addition, he has discovered that when husbands and wives are responsive to each other, they experience more passion, romance, emotional connection, and enjoy a better sex life.

So how can we spend more time “turning towards” our spouse? Here are some tips that may help:

1. **When your partner makes a bid for your attention, pay attention!**

   Gottman has uncovered in his years of relationship communication research that husbands and wives frequently make “bids” for attention from their spouse. These bids may be verbal: “I am so tired,” or “you won’t believe what happened to me today”, or they may be physical, such as a hug or a facial expression. We make these bids and hope that our spouse will respond and pay attention to us. When we fail to respond to these bids, our spouse may feel unimportant and isolated, but when we do respond, we can find precious opportunities to connect with our spouse and show that we care.

   Think about the different ways your spouse tries to get your attention – if you can’t think of any, then perhaps you need to be paying more attention. Remember, each time a bid is made, it can go one of either two ways: you can connect with your spouse, or you can shrink further away from them. It all depends on your response.

2. **Do chores together**

   Let’s face it: sometimes doing chores together is inefficient. It makes more sense to divide the chores to get through them faster, right? Maybe so, but it also means more time spent apart. Doing the chores together may take a little longer, but it can be much more fun and provides more time for husbands and wives to communicate, share, and connect with each other.

3. **Have a stress-reducing conversation**

   Take a little time at the end of each day to talk with each other. This can be an invaluable time to de-stress a little and share the ups and downs of your life. Share any good news you’ve heard or tell a funny joke you heard that day. Talk about stresses at work, family concerns, or anything that’s been weighing heavily on your mind. Most importantly, listen to your spouse and process everything they share with you.
Be careful to make this a positive conversation that doesn’t increase stress and frustration. This is a time to connect with your spouse and find out what’s going on in their life; don’t use it to criticize your spouse or your relationship.

4. Go for a walk together

There are two major benefits to taking a walk together each day. First, you have a set time with your spouse that is free from distractions, and second, you are both getting some exercise at the same time. You will find that the fresh air and exercise will help you maintain more positive communication and keep a clear mind.

When a couple pays attention to each other and stays connected by sharing their lives with each other, they will enjoy greater passion, romance and a better sex life. When the candle-lit dinners and fireplace embraces happen, couples who are already connected will share the intense love and intimacy that can only be experienced between two who are truly one.

There is a story about a farmer who spent all of his life plowing fields but never planting them. Reading these tips but never implementing them will get you the same results as the farmer who plowed but never planted.
I’m Hungry

If there is one theme in parenting a brood of children that escapes evasion, it is feeding them. I have been known to let them sleep in their clothes and even wear them another day, or skimp on brushing their teeth. I have looked the other way with preteen boys who seem allergic to taking showers. Once we were at a family camp that was experiencing a drought. The decree was that each camper could take only one shower during the week. The teenage girls let up a roar and found ways to wash their hair in a paper cup. My adolescent son was wily, though and sold his allotted shower to the highest bidder.

I confess to have neglected nightly prayers, bedtime stories and trips to the pediatrician. But I cannot get around the need for food. But there are ways to make the recurring task faster. We have, I must admit, been known to have scrambled eggs, French toast and cereal in the same day. My son squealed in approval, “Goodie! We’re having breakfast for dinner!” There are plenty of microwaveable meals that are standards in our house when homemade soup, apple crisp and banana muffins feel impossible to muster.

Marriage is a living entity, and like all living things (save an air fern I once heard of, and snakes that can go a month on a mouse) needs to be fed regularly. A balanced diet of humor, touch, spiritual nourishment, acts of kindness and beauty work best. Starvation diets that limit your intake to lettuce, Diet Pepsi and fat-free chips may keep you vertical for a short time, but you cannot be said to thrive. So too with marriages. No matter how lavishly they are fed for the first few years, lack of nourishment down the road means emotional anemia.

What has amazed me over the years in regard to feeding marriages is not how difficult it is, but how quickly they can revive. There are hundreds of evenings I have seen a group of couples gather for marriage group, with that hollow, slightly impoverished look around the eyes, and a mere half an hour later seen and felt the bounty of affection that minutes ago seemed absent. There are evenings when you will take time for a leisurely stroll, holding hands under a starry sky, a long talk about life and its meaning, and unhurried lovemaking. But there are also days when short bursts of attention can suffice.

One of the ways to survive those lunch-in-ten-minutes days is to have already bought and stored the handy little rice and vegetable pouches, or the sweet pepper and tomato soups in a box. Don’t throw away the ingredients for an all-day potato chowder or a layer by careful layer lasagna. Those days come too.
Here are a score of marital one-minute yummies. Some take a little planning (like having taken the pictures in the first place for the third item below) and others are instant gratification:

- Appreciate your spouse (verbally)
- Sing a song you both love
- Look at those pictures of you in bathing suits
- Hold hands, even if they are sweaty
- Find a beautiful cloud or dogwood
- Smile like you mean it
- Say how much you love your spouse to someone else (may be within earshot)
- Play music that is rich with memories
- Look deeply
- Flirt
- Look at funny You Tubes together
- Give a small gift, as simple as a poem from the internet
- Email
- Tell a joke
- Text message each other
- Pray
- Shun evil (hold your tongue)
- Put a good interpretation on what he or she did
- Hug without patting
- Leave a phone message
- Read the Word together

I have at times wished children could be more like boa constrictors in their penchant for monthly gorging, and weeks of fasting in between. I could rev myself up for the 12-course banquet if it happened only every full moon. But really, the chatting over peanut butter and jelly, surprise cookies in the lunchbox, and dinosaur shaped pancakes smothered in maple syrup are more friendly.

So you may want to let go of the ethereal dream get-away to the Caribbean on your twenty-fifth anniversary in lieu of daily tickles. Distance may make the heart grow fonder, but I like holding John’s hand every single day. 

Lori
How Are You Feeling?

Even our most casual and fleeting contacts might begin with a perfunctory “How ya doin’?” It’s a matter of simple politeness to understand what is going on with another person as the starting point for a relationship. Too often the opportunity for mutual understanding just ends with “Fine. And you?” I guess it’s hard to delve into feelings when you are just passing in the hall, and who really wants to know how the person in the next chair over feels before either of you have had your first cup of coffee?

When we start out many of our small group meetings the first item on the agenda is “How are you?” We go around the room letting each person take somewhere between a minute and a half an hour talking about what is going on with them. One reason is that people who are distracted by emotions they have brought with them to the meeting may need to process them a little so that they can be fully present at the meeting.

An more important reason is that all communication begins with a shared connection. If you have been to a place where people speak a foreign language you can realize how vital it is to share a language in order to communicate. Two-way radios can communicate with each other only if they are tuned to the same frequency. Our differences can add spice and interest to life, but it’s what two people have in common that unites them.

This is especially true of feelings. Feelings are like the blood flowing through our arteries and veins. They give life to all our thoughts and actions. They are the colors of our inner world. When two people can share some of the same feelings, it is as if they are on the same frequency—communication can take place.

The ability to share feelings is basic to human happiness. “In the other life there is a most exquisite communication and perception of all the affections and thoughts, so that each person communicates his joy to all, and all to each, so that each one is as it were the center of all” (Secrets of Heaven 549).

We all have an inborn need to have others understand, respect and appreciate our feelings, but Francis of Assisi prayed, “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.” Something magical happens when we put understanding another person ahead of being understood.

The Lord’s teachings for the New Church say, “Love consists in willing what one has to be another's, and in feeling the other's delight as delight within oneself. That is what it is to love. In contrast, to feel one's own delight in another, and not the other's delight within oneself, is not to love; for this is loving self, whereas the first is loving the neighbor” (Divine Love and Wisdom 47).
Love involves feeling someone else’s delight in one’s self. Wanting everyone else to celebrate my success is not loving, but for me to feel someone else’s feeling as if it were mine, that’s love.

Being willing to feel someone else’s love means also being willing to feeling their pain. The words “empathy,” “sympathy,” and “compassion” all come from a root (pathos) that means both “feeling” and “suffering.” They involve feeling with another person or getting into their feelings, particularly their suffering. A Latin word for compassion or mercy is misericordia, meaning “heart misery,” feeling another’s misery in one’s heart. “Compassion (misericordia) has its name from the fact that it delivers people from miseries and from hell; thus it is called compassion in respect to humankind, because they are in such a state of misery, and it is the effect of love toward them all” (Secrets of Heaven 587) “Love is itself turned to compassion and becomes compassion when anyone who is in need of help is regarded from love or charity. So compassion is the effect of love toward the needy and miserable” (Secrets of Heaven 3063).

This is the kind of love that Jesus displayed. “When He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). “When Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14). The Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people” (Exodus 3:7). “I have surely seen” means the Lord is merciful, “for when the Lord sees anyone in misery, or in affliction, He is merciful” (Secrets of Heaven 6851). “I will betroth you to Me ... in mercy and in compassion” (Hosea 2: 19, 20).

Since the Lord looks at everyone compassionately, we must have a similar viewpoint to be close to the Lord. “The Lord has compassion on everybody, loves everyone, and wishes to make everyone eternally happy. A person therefore who lacks the kind of love that leads him to have compassion on others, to love them, and to wish to make them happy, cannot be joined to the Lord because he is not at all like Him (Secrets of Heaven 904.2).

Behind most conflict and unhappiness in relationships is a feeling of disconnectedness and loneliness. When the other person seems apathetic towards our pain, we feel anger, fear, shame and resentment. On the other hand, when we feel understood and connected to each other, it is relatively easy to solve problems and enjoy being with the other person. Compassion is “a source of all kinds of good things” in our spiritual life (Secrets of Heaven 387), while “hatred and lack of compassion produce every kind of bad thing” (Secrets of Heaven 364).

The ability to feel what another feels is especially important in the marriage relationship. In fact, we could say that it is the marriage relationship. “A person who has true married love, loves what the other thinks and what the other wills, and so also loves to think in the same way and to will the same things as the other does, consequently
to be united to the other and become as one human being” (Secrets of Heaven 10169).

The Writings for the New Church describe three stages of marriage, which show a progression towards genuine empathy (Secrets of Heaven 4145.3):

Stage 1. Each is attracted to the other and accommodates to the other and they have common interests.

Stage 2. Their minds are connected so that each wills as the other and enjoys doing things to please the other.

Stage 3. They become one so that each believes as the other believes and feels moved by the good that moves the other. Then the Lord flows into the affections of both of them as if they were one affection.

In order to reach the highest level of marriage we need to practice the highest level of empathy.

Empathy is not a confusion about whose feelings they are. It doesn’t mean getting our own anger stirred up by someone else’s anger, or having someone else’s sadness remind us of our own reasons to be sad. In feeling empathy we are clear that these are the other person’s feelings, and we are feeling them as if they were our own. Carl Rogers says that to feel empathy is “to perceive the internal frame of reference of another...as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition.”

What makes us human is not any love or wisdom that is inherent in us, but our ability to feel the Lord’s love as if it were our own and to think in line with His wisdom as if it were our own. “We should do good things because they belong to God and come from God, and we should do them as if on our own, but we should believe that the Lord does these things in us and through us” (True Christianity 3). “From sense and perception we cannot know otherwise than that life is in us; and yet we should acknowledge that the good and true matters of love and faith which we think, will, speak, and act, are not from us but are from the Lord” (Apocalypse Explained 1138.2). “To think and to will from God is the essential human principle” (Divine Providence 293). The goal is to feel the Lord’s life as if it were our own yet always recognize that it is the Lord’s.

You can practice showing empathy in your relationships any time, and the more you practice it, the easier it will become. When the other person makes a statement (especially one that shows some feeling or might have strong feelings hidden within), respond with, “So you’re saying ‘I...’” and state in your own words what the other has said as if you were that person. By saying it in the first person (“I”) you will strengthen the feeling of empathy. Here is an example:

Tom: “Dinner’s not ready yet, is it?”

Nancy: “Are you saying ‘I’m really hungry, and I’m frustrated that the food’s not ready when I am’?”

One way to deepen the empathy is to put a name on the feelings the other person has, as Nancy did (“I’m frustrated”). At times empathy comes naturally, but often it will only come if you make a conscious effort in that direction. It may seem artificial at first, but if you practice it regularly, “all kinds of good things” will come to your relationship because of it.
The Time is Now

If you are ever going to love me, love me now, while I can know
The sweet and tender feelings which from true affection flow.
Love me now
While I am living.
Do not wait until I’m gone
And then have it chiseled in marble,
Sweet words on ice-cold stone
If you have tender thoughts of me, please tell me now.

—Unknown

QUOTABLES

What love we’ve given, we’ll have for all eternity. What love we fail to give will be lost for all eternity.
—Leo Buscaglia

There is no surprise more magical than the surprise of being loved; it is God’s finger on your shoulder.
—Charles Morgan

And God will wipe away every tear from their eye.
—Revelation 7

God has not been trying to experiment on my faith and love in order to find out their quality. He knows it already. It was I who didn’t
—C. S. Lewis

Conjugal love comes to those who look to the Lord and love the truths of His church, and do the good things it teaches.
—Conjugal Love 458

Conjugal love has the quality of each wanting to be the other’s completely and reciprocally.
—Heavenly Secrets 2731

COUPLES GALLERY III

Becky & Jordan Cooper

Kim & Grant Smith

Judy & Leon Rhodes