

# Foundations

Fall

## What's New with You?

Back in the day, maybe when your grandparents were getting together, marriage was a social norm. Most people got married. It conferred status, might have made you more attractive as a potential employee, and in many cases, marked you as a full-fledged grownup.

### More separation

That meant that spouses were not necessarily best friends. They were partners in a common endeavor that involved setting up a home, having children and raising them, and spending much of their time in their own separate pursuits. In good marriages, those separate pursuits fed a common goal and a family was raised, a safe home established and then in the later years the couple got a chance to enjoy each other's company.

Now the expectations are very different. Marriage is an option, not an expectation. Couples who are marrying most often say that they are marrying their best friend. They still mostly want children and to build a home that is safe and secure, but they need to both be engaged in working at paying jobs to make that happen. The at-home mom (or dad) without outside employment is a rarity.

### Your best friend's inner life

That means that an important job for the contemporary couple is keeping that friendship alive through the busy years of raising a family and earning a living. Building in a time for conversation, beyond "Please get gas for the car" kinds of exchanges. How do you stay in touch



with what your best friend is thinking about, hoping for, dreaming about?

Incorporating something new into your schedule might seem daunting – we are all so busy- but the payoff is great. Think of the people who buy a lottery ticket or give a dollar to a panhandler even though they're on a tight budget. We can do the same with our time!

### Small things often

Here are some suggestions.

- Take time for a hug when you pass each other now and then. It doesn't have to be every time, just occasionally.
- Invite your partner for a walk. Walking is a great way to get talking about things that are not the practical concerns.
- Take a moment for a shared prayer. It could be over a meal, or when you're thinking about something that

concerns you.

- Go out for a cup of coffee, an ice cream – dinner when you're feeling flush.

We would go out to dinner and then say, why don't we do this more often? We'd have such a good time. We'd laugh, people watch, feel so separate from our daily tasks.

### Conversations that count

It's a depressing statistic that most couples have 14 conversations a week, most of them practical ones. Let's up the average of conversations in our marriages, and increase the ones that help us learn more about who our spouse is and what they're thinking about these days. "A good marriage is a long conversation," says Julie Gottman, therapist and wife of John Gottman. Why not make your marriage not only a long conversation but a fascinating one?

# A Soft Start

Dr. John Gottman's research is the basis of so much that we know about how couples can succeed in having a good relationship. One piece of advice he has passed along is that the way an argument starts is a pretty good indication of where it will end. Start by yelling, or start by accusing and chances are you will not be happy about where it ends up.

## Something positive

So the alternate route is to start softly. That means that you can try to think of something positive to say before you register your complaint. For example, you could say, "I know you really work hard and you're good at your job, but if you work all the time, I feel like I don't matter to you." How much easier is that to hear, and how much easier to respond to, than "You're never home! Don't you even care that you're married? Do I mean nothing to you?"



## Make Room for Understanding

Soft starts increase the likelihood of a good resolution immensely. Your partner has a chance to do two things: one is to explain. It could be that there is a special project going on right now, and in a week they won't be so stretched. Or they might apologize and say they didn't

realize how you were feeling. If you start with an attack they most likely will defend themselves. "What do you care how much I work? You're on the phone all the time anyway!"


Finding a way to start softly paves the way to a soft landing.



**FACING AHEAD**



In a relationship and don't know where it's going?  
Use Facing Ahead to find out if you are on the same  
page about your future  
[facingahead.com](http://facingahead.com)



Sure, a walkie-talkie isn't as "cool" as a cell phone, but they're cheaper and you're the only person I need constant access to, my darling. Over!

# The Story I'm Telling Myself is...

Two couples were talking about the early years of their marriage. Here is a version of the first couple's report.

*"When we were first married, we were so poor! We lived in a studio apartment, a third floor walkup. We had spaghetti almost every night. We pretended we were in Italy – we laughed! We had so much fun!"*

The second couple gave the following account.

*"When we were first married, we could barely scrape together enough money to buy a box of spaghetti. He was never ambitious; even then he couldn't make a decent living. We had to live up three flights of stairs – it wore me out to have to climb all those stairs to a hot, stuffy apartment. Apartment! It was barely more than a closet!"*

You see the point. The couples started out their married life in pretty much the identical way, but couple one saw it as the beginning of an adventure, full of romance and fun even if there was no money. Couple two saw only deprivation. They were miserable then and they are miserable now.



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## The Stories we tell

The way we see our history tells a great deal about the quality of our relationships. Couple one had a great marriage from the start. They enjoyed each other and there was no blame cast for their meager circumstances. The second couple may have been having a better time when they were young than they remember now, but they are unhappy with each other now and so they talk about their past as though things were rough right from the start. Their story communicates the disillusion they are feeling about their marriage right now.

## Keep the love alive

To keep the story of your early days the beginning of an adventure story, keep it fresh. Talk about how you can make your dreams stay alive. If you are confined to your house you can't go hiking in Tibet, but you might be able to start planning for a hike once it's safe. Music lovers, maybe you can't fly to New York for a dynamite concert, but there are some pretty good things being streamed that you can listen to.

## Virtual dreams

Our current situation is challenging us to find new ways to frame things – our dreams, among them. Our adventures have to be virtual right now, and our vision is being eclipsed by anxiety. We are learning how to shrink our world to the size of a living room, but not our dreams. What's in your tone of voice, in the openness of your face, in the affection of your touch – that will show that the dreams are still alive and well.

# Exercise

Asking "I wonder" questions elevates the conversation and the mood in a marriage. So much of our discussion is practical, like "Could you pick up milk on the way home?" Below are some examples of "I wonder" conversation ideas. These are starter questions: you might come up with lots more and better ones.

Would you rather take a vacation that's an unknown adventure or go back to a well-loved spot?

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Do we have friends that we would like to introduce to each other? Could we do it by Skype?

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Do you have something fun you'd like to learn? Or something we could learn together?

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What's your favorite kind of game? Board game? Cards? Video?

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How about puzzles do you like crosswords? Jigsaw? Mazes? Anagrams?

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Did you have a nickname when you were a kid? Did you like it?

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Describe your ideal home. Would it be a condo? House? Cabin? What could you see from the window?

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If we started a business together what would it be? What would we name it?

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What favorite book of yours would you like to see made into a movie? Who would star in it?

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What's your favorite snack food? Has it always been your favorite?

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Your marriage is a  
lifelong journey to get to  
know each other better.



# Three Communication Tools

We all have had the experience of misunderstanding our partner's message, or the intent behind the message. Your partner says, "You certainly seem hungry tonight." You think, he means I'm gaining weight. Or you say, "Great job cutting the hedge," and he hears the addition of "now that you finally got around to it."

What is said and what is heard often does not match up. Here are three tools that can help close the gap.

*Love Languages:* Gary Chapman's book has sold millions of copies and has been translated into many languages, and his thesis is very simple. He believes that there are five primary love languages and each of us has one by which we hear we are loved most clearly. They are **acts of service, words of affirmation, gifts, physical touch, and quality time**. If your spouse buys you a gift when you'd rather they spent time with you, then you can't hear that they are trying to say, "I love you." There's a quiz online. Take it and find out your love language and your spouse's. [www.5lovelanguages.com](http://www.5lovelanguages.com)

*Introversia and extraversion:* there is a personality assessment called the Meyers-Briggs personality test. Its great strength in helping people communicate lies in the difference between introverts and extraverts. Introverts like to think in order to talk, while extraverts like to talk in order to think. When you need time to process what your spouse just said and they keep on talking, it can be frustrating. On the other hand, if you're throwing out ideas and your spouse treats them like they are the final word,



Try to notice the next time your partner reaches out to connect with you, and try to respond positively.

that's also frustrating. Learning to understand and respect conversational styles can smooth over many potential roadblocks in marital communication. You can learn about these differences and more at [www.16personalities.com](http://www.16personalities.com)

*Bids:* When your partner speaks to you and you don't respond, that (again, according to Dr. John Gottman) is a bid that your partner has made and you dropped the ball by not responding. He claims that we all miss many opportunities to connect because we don't pick up on one another's bids. Cellphones and other screens are responsible for a lot of the distraction, but these days, stress and anxiety are things that cloud our minds and make us less likely to respond. Try to notice the next time your partner reaches out to connect with you, and try to respond positively. You'll be surprised how they light up when you do. See Dr. Gottman explain it here [www.facebook.com/GottmanInstitute/videos](http://www.facebook.com/GottmanInstitute/videos)



# Spirituality

Recently the Sunday gospel reading was about Jesus raising Lazarus from the tomb. You may remember the story. Jesus was visiting with his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Then he went off to preach in another town. Lazarus then got very sick, and his sisters sent for Jesus to come and heal him. But Jesus did not get there in time, and when he arrived Lazarus was already dead. Martha has a conversation with Jesus, but it seems like it is Mary's tears that move Jesus to action. He has men roll the stones away from the tomb and let Lazarus free, then he instructs them to take the burial cloths off him. "Untie him and let him go," Jesus says.

## Loosing the Bonds

One of our tasks in marriage, as each other's best friend, is to loose the ties of pain and suffering. Just as Jesus has the friends of Lazarus take off the strips of cloth that covered him from head to toe, so we are meant to take off the layers of pain that encrust each of us. There is a great likelihood that your spouse is suffering in this current world – loss of a relative, friend, job. You may be able to help by allowing them to talk through the pain such a loss inflicts.

## Pain Around Us

Then there is the global anxiety all of us are feeling. Will we ever feel safe out in public again? Will our local businesses return? Will schools be able to recoup from all the lost time, never mind the lost transitions of step up days and graduations? Never in our lifetimes has there been a period of such uncertainty.

## We Grieve the Life we Knew

Grief is a process that ties a person up and tires them out while they get used to the world without the people, routines, employment that they were accustomed to. Sometimes all it takes is the reassurance that we will give them the time they need to grieve. Sometimes they need us to listen, or to tell them of our love for them. Because this situation affects us

all but may affect us differently, we need to tread carefully to know how we can "untie" them.

## Sometimes it may be you

It is very likely that you also are in pain, you too are tied up. And in addition to all the psychic pain, you might be in physical pain. It is so helpful if you can tell your spouse what they can do for you. What actions can they take to help you be released from those bonds?

## What's the Message?

As with all the New Testament stories, the story of Lazarus is meant to help us live out our lives today. They are not just accounts of things that happened two thousand years ago. Those of us who are Christians today should be able to find something in them to lead us forward and live the lives that Jesus hoped we would lead. Isn't it possible that Jesus was teaching us how to be the best kind of friend in this pandemic when he told Lazarus' friends, "Untie him and let him go"?



# Foundations

A NEWSLETTER FOR MARRIED COUPLES

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