

Long Distance Love

By Philip Baldwin

Several years ago my partner and I lived about three hours apart in driving distance from each other. Some of my friends would regularly ask me, 'How is your marriage doing?' or 'Aren't you finding married life difficult?' or 'When do you get to spend time with your spouse?' (The answers I gave my friends are at the end of the article.) In different circumstances, I might have found questions like those to be nosy or prying, but at the time, they showed how much the people who were close to me cared about me.

I had moved to a city of about 100 000 because the best job offer I had was there, and my wife stayed at her teaching position at the university where we had met. You might never even consider living apart from your spouse, and wonder how we managed, especially since it encompassed the whole time that we were still officially newly-weds, and another year after that.

Such a long-distance living arrangement certainly wasn't ideal, since one of us had to make a 460 km round trip to visit with the other. But there were advantages: we definitely looked forward to our time together, and we

used it first and foremost to enjoy each other's company, regardless of any of the routine or unexpected intrusions that are always part of everyday life. We had our weekly time together and our separate work lives, which we shared with each other as much as we could.

This kind of marriage certainly isn't for everyone, and the concern that people expressed to me is partly a measure of how hard most couples find it to maintain such a relationship. When do you find time to 'just talk'? What about the chores that inevitably need doing? My partner and I are blessed with a number of similar interests and complementary abilities that make our lives work smoothly, together and apart.

We both like to cook and to garden (at the time she had a rural property just over an acre in size). I am happy washing dishes and doing laundry, while she is handy with a hammer or chain saw! Neither one of us is a stickler for neatness, and we both accepted the condition of the other's living space when we 'visited'. But none of this really explains the reasons why our relationship worked. To do that, I have to refer you to the box on the facing page.

I can't take the credit for these suggestions. They come from a worthwhile book entitled, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.¹ The book is based on Gottman's research and observations of the habits of married couples. He has identified seven principles that guide couples on the path toward a harmonious and long-lasting relationship. But even more important (for my spouse and me) is what Gottman



calls 'The Magic Five Hours'. His follow-up studies of couples whose marriages continued to improve after visiting his Seattle clinic showed a clear pattern of small changes—rather than a dramatic overhaul—in their lives. These small changes are distilled in the activities that make up The Magic Five Hours, the amount

of time he suggests a couple will benefit from devoting to their marriage each week.

Gottman writes: 'As you can see, the amount of time involved in incorporating

these changes into your relationship is quite minimal. Yet these five hours (a week) will help enormously in keeping your marriage on track'.² He makes a most startling claim: that working briefly on your marriage every day will do more for your health and longevity than working out in a health club!

One of the things I like most about this book is the unwaveringly positive approach the authors take toward improving marriage relationships. Based on their findings that happy marriages are founded on a deep friendship, which includes mutual respect and enjoyment of each other's company, they emphasise the 'you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar' approach to a relationship. In practice, this means several things.

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The Magic Five Hours

Partings: Make sure before you say good-bye at the beginning of your day (or good-night at the end of it) that you have learned one thing that will happen in your partner's life that day—from lunch with the boss to a doctor's appointment to a scheduled phone call with an old friend.

Time: 2 minutes a day x 5 working days = 10 minutes

Reunions: Be sure to have a stress-reducing conversation at the end of the working day.

Time: 20 minutes a day x 5 working days = 100 minutes

Express Admiration and Appreciation: Find at least one way, every day, to communicate genuine affection and appreciation toward your spouse.

Time: 5 minutes a day x 7 days = 35 minutes

Affection: Kiss, hold, grab, touch each other during the time you are together. Make sure to kiss each other before going to sleep. Think of that kiss as a way to let go of any minor irritations or resentments that have built up over the day. In other words, lace your kiss with forgiveness and tenderness for your partner.

Time: 5 minutes a day x 7 days = 35 minutes

Weekly Date: This can be a relaxing, low-pressure way to stay connected. Ask each other questions that let you update your connection with each other, or work out a marital issue, or finish an argument you had that week. Think of questions to ask your spouse (like 'Are you still thinking about redecorating the bedroom?' or 'Where should we take our next vacation?' or 'How are you feeling about your boss these days?')

Time: once a week = 120 minutes

Grand Total = 300 minutes
5 hours per week

Emotionally intelligent couples:

- keep up-to-date with each other's thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, goals and struggles;
- express their admiration, fondness, and respect for each other;
- speak and act in sympathetic, affectionate, and encouraging ways that let their partners know that they are valued;
- let their spouses influence their decision making by taking their opinions and feelings into account.

'But how did this apply to your own marriage?' you may ask. 'How were you able to accomplish these things when you spent six days of the week so far apart?' At the time we used the telephone as our life-line to each other. Our 30–45 minute conversations on the phone each evening covered several items that make up

The Magic Five Hours. We covered *Partings* by making sure that we learned something about the other's coming day, especially when would be the best time to call tomorrow! We included *Reunions* by asking (and being sympathetic listeners to) how the day went for each other. We also used this time to *Express Admiration and Appreciation*—and *Affection*—for each other. This sometimes got mushy and was especially fun, partly because it felt quite unusual for us to talk this way over the phone. It came to be another way of fanning the flames of romance so that we really looked forward to spending our day off together!

Perhaps you think that this approach might be hopelessly optimistic, unrealistic, even blindly misguided. For us, as Christians, the whole orientation of the book made a lot of sense. The New Testament is full

of admonitions to encourage one another, to love one another, to bear each other's burdens. These are among the main goals of a marriage. Gottman has given us a practical way to live this important facet of Christian faith in our marriage.

Answers: Fine. No. Every week.

Notes

¹ J M Gottman & N Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1999.

² *ibid.*, p. 261.



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