

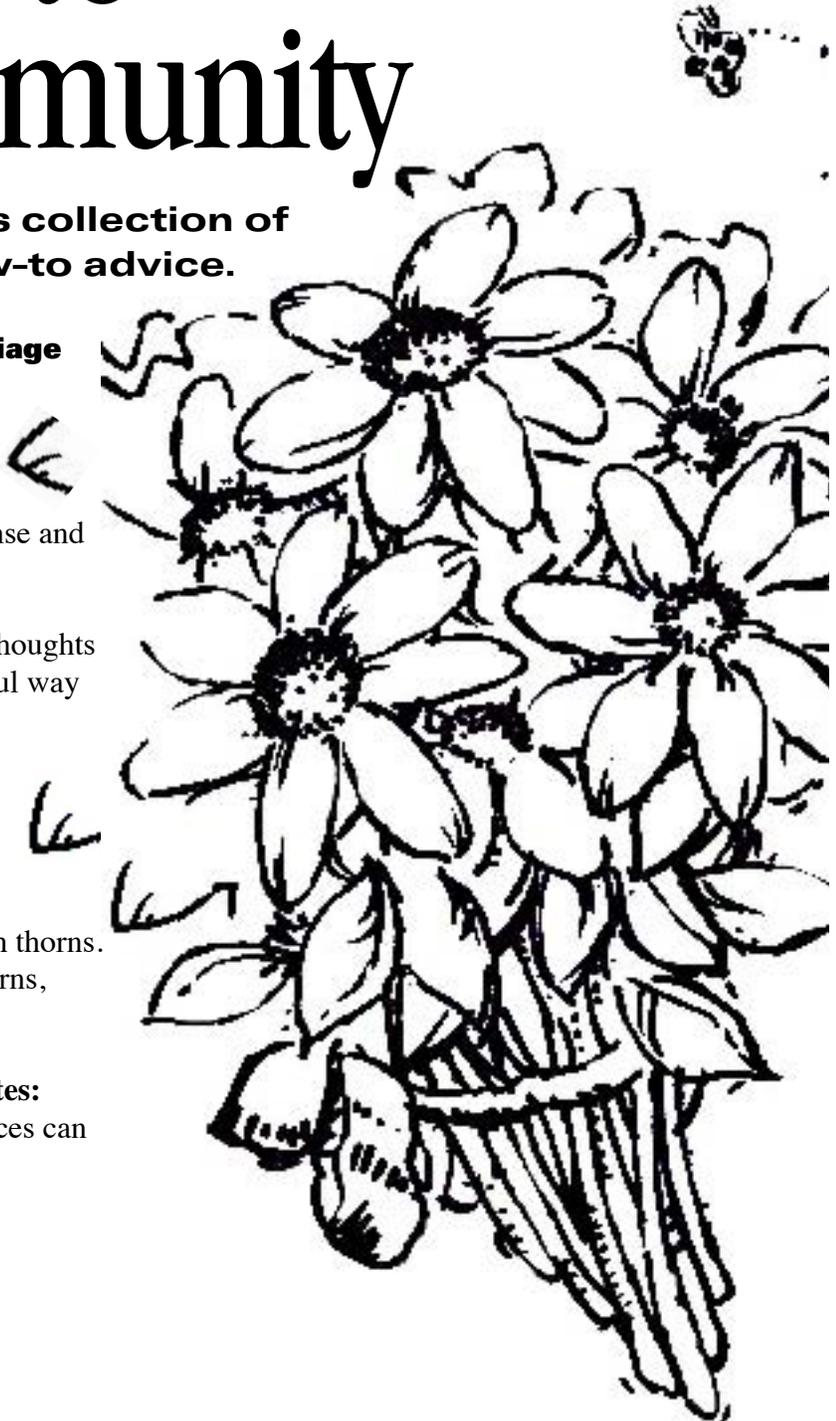


Serve: Give Back to Your Community

Get ready to garden with this collection of tips, plans, and practical how-to advice.

Review — Guiding Principles for Marriage

- **Seek the light:** More truth will be found in the light than the darkness.
- **Notice your feelings:** If we dwell on tense and angry feelings, those feelings will grow.
- **Speak from peace:** Thinking peaceful thoughts prepares us to share ourselves in a helpful way and move our relationships forward.
- **Weed your own garden:** We are responsible for changing ourselves rather than our partners.
- **Manage expectations:** Roses come with thorns. Rather than waste time resenting the thorns, enjoy the rose.
- **When your soul speaks, take great notes:** Focusing on good feelings and experiences can increase their power in our lives.



Giving to one another and to the community

When our gardens are productive, it's good to share the fruits of our labor with others. Just as you might share your tomatoes and zucchini with neighbors or gather a bouquet to cheer up a friend, so too should you work as a couple to contribute to your community. Our marriages are strengthened by serving one another and those around us. Sharing our time and resources can make our world blossom.

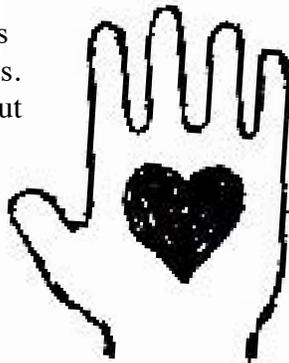
1. Serve your spouse

*What do we live for,
if not to make life less difficult
for each other?*

—George Eliot

We live in a world where individual wants and needs take center stage. Many people are more concerned about “me” and “my rights” or “what makes me happy” than they are about their spouse and their marriage. Good marriages involve service and sacrifice. In healthy marriages, one often gives up something that might have been a personal desire for the good of the marriage.

Serving involves being much less concerned about what we can get out of a relationship than what we can give to it. In fact, relationship expert C. Terry Warner believes that constant concern about oneself is a great burden, whereas self-forgetfulness is freedom in relationships. Nowhere does this play out more frequently than in marriage relationships.



Consider these stories:

Story 1: Gary's Wake-up Call

Gary Smalley, author and marital therapist, recounts that he realized early in his marriage that it was not all that he hoped it would be. He found that disagreements and conflicts between he and his wife were increasing. It was around that time that he attended a seminar where he heard a message that changed his life. The main point of the message was this: if you are irritated by your spouse and many things in your marriage relationship, maybe it's because you are fundamentally self-centered and primarily looking out for your own interests (Smalley, “For me, it was a ‘living-death’ certificate,” *Homes of Honor*, Fall 1997, pp. 1-2).

Smalley took that message as a wake-up call, as an invitation to dramatically alter his attitude and actions. He changed his heart towards his wife and his marriage. He began to focus on serving his wife and sacrificing for their marriage. It made all the difference in the world.

Story 2: Robertson & Muriel McQuilkin

In the early 1980s, Robertson McQuilkin was the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in South Carolina. He was in his fifties and at the pinnacle of his career. It was about that time that he began to notice his wife's memory slipping in little ways. It was not long afterward that Muriel was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

A few years after Muriel's diagnosis, Robertson decided that she needed his full-time care and that he could no longer serve as president of the college. About that decision he wrote: “When the time came, the decision was firm. It took no great calculation. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised, 42 years before, ‘in sickness and in health...till

death do us part'? This was no grim duty to which I was stoically resigned, however. It was only fair. She had, after all, cared for me almost four decades with marvelous devotion; now it was my turn" (McQuilkin, "Living by Vows," Christianity Today, 8 Oct. 1990, p. 40).

Robertson decided to serve his wife rather than himself.

Being willing to serve your spouse in ways big and small will improve your marriage. The research of Scott Stanley and Howard Markman indicates that people who were the most comfortable with the idea of serving their spouse and sacrificing for their marriage were also generally the happiest, most dedicated, and sharing marriage partners.

Reflection:

Take a few minutes to respond to these questions:

- Do you get satisfaction from doing things for your partner, even if it means you miss out on something you want for yourself?
- Think about the last time you put your self-interest aside for the good of your spouse or your marriage. What was this like?
- What are some of the things your spouse does to serve you and bless your life?
- What are some of the things your spouse does for you that you have begun to take for granted (e.g., making a meal, cleaning the bathroom, fixing something that is broken around the house, adjusting work schedules to take a sick child to the doctor, listening attentively while you share your feelings about an important issue)?
- Ask your spouse to share one specific way that you can give to him or her and then make an effort to give that service.

Key Point: Serving and sacrificing for your spouse in healthy ways strengthens your marriage.

Service and sacrifice are the highest expressions of dedicated, loving action because it asks you to show by your actions that you really mean it when you say you are committed.

—Scott Stanley

2. Find a common purpose

We are two vines curved to one another...twined into one stem – too like and near to discern the changes of our growing.

—Walter Benton

Marriage gives us the chance to work with our spouse to bring important aims and ideals to life.

Couples in healthy marriages have goals and ideals that give their marriages purpose and meaning. A good marriage can be built on the pursuit of any number of worthy goals such as: 1.) raising responsible children, 2.) being actively involved in the community, school, or church, 3.) caring for the environment, or 4.) developing shared talents and using them in the service of others.

Some people call a statement of common purpose a mission statement. For example, one couple's mission statement is to "share their love of Native American art."

Consider the following story recounted in Fowers' book, *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*:

Story 3: Wendy and Al

Wendy and Al had been married for twenty years. They felt their relationship had become hollow and meaningless. They sought counsel with Fowers as their last resort before filing for divorce. They did not believe they should stay married unless they could develop an emotionally closer relationship. Fowers began working with them to improve their communication skills. They also resolved some important issues in their past and improved their parenting skills. But Wendy and Al did not seem to be developing the deep intimacy and open communication they wanted.

After several months of counseling, they told Fowers that they had decided to start a business marketing Native American art together. This was an area where they both had a strong interest and a desire to share this artwork. It also seemed to represent a renewed commitment to one another.

A few weeks after they announced that they were starting a business together, they began thanking Fowers for his help and telling him that they thought they were finished with therapy. This came as somewhat of a surprise to Fowers since it did not seem to him that they had ever really met their original goal of deeper emotional intimacy. Fowers honored their feeling that they were done with therapy, he summarized what they had accomplished, and he wished them well.

It became clear to Fowers that Wendy and Al had “found another way besides deepening intimacy to have a good marriage. They found that their joint participation in a project gave their marriage a deeper and more lasting meaning than emotional intimacy could by itself” (pg. 46). Their marriage gained a new dimension when they decided to work together toward a common goal.

It was through his work with Wendy and Al that Fowers learned that although therapy helped some, “their connection to each other was made far stronger by their passionate pursuit of a common interest” (pg. 47). He also understood that “being able to communicate in an open and positive manner is very valuable, but having something worthwhile to communicate about is at least as important” (pg. 47).

Reflection:

- Do you feel that you and your spouse are a team?
- When do you most feel that the two of you are a team?
- What type of projects or causes do you and your spouse participate in together?
- What specific projects would you like to pursue together this coming week (and thereafter) that would foster a greater sense of unity in your marriage? Do these things.

Key Points:

- Marriage can be a partnership that provides belonging, meaning, and purpose through the pursuit of shared goals.
- Pursuing a meaningful shared mission or goal as a couple is central to a good marriage.
- Marriages are strengthened by finding common projects and causes.



3. Serve others together

Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.

— Antoine De Saint-Exupery

Research indicates that people who live meaningful lives are those who serve. They may work to protect the environment, raise good children, improve education, or comfort those who are burdened. There are as many ways to serve as there are different people!

Martin Seligman, author of the book *Authentic Happiness*, says that the good life consists of identifying our strengths and using those strengths in the service of others.

Every individual has been blessed with some strengths and every married couple has some shared strengths. Using your individual and shared strengths to serve others will encourage your marriage to blossom.

Consider these stories:

Story 4: David & Karin Gill

David and Karin Gill had always been passionate about helping young people be successful and productive citizens. And with five children of their own, they had plenty of hands on experience. After 40 years of marriage and a career spent selling machine parts, David and Karin decided to continue serving young people together.

They volunteered to be missionaries for their church. Their responsibility was to establish a ministry for young single adults in Stuttgart, Germany. The Gill's spent 18 months in Germany, at their own expense, working with young adults. Although they greatly enjoyed meeting and teaching these young adults, they

found a hidden blessing in their service. Their own marriage grew stronger as they worked together to serve the youth of Stuttgart.

Of their missionary experiences, the Gill's said, "Being of help to others was the part that was most rewarding to us. But through that process, we grew to love each other even more. Serving together changes a couple. You cannot come away from such service without having changed your own life. It was a joy to come home and report to our own family the success we had. We did not make this decision on the spur of the moment. We spent a lot of time preparing and planning for it. And although our mission had come to an end, we gained much that we will take with us into the future."

Story 5: Elizabeth's Friends

We know a couple that wanted to find a way to serve in their neighborhood. As they introduced themselves to their neighbors they found that the woman who lived just across the alley from them was an immigrant widow in her 80's named Elizabeth. When the couple first met her they felt an instant love for her.

Since all Elizabeth's family lived far away, the couple committed to each other to provide the support and friendship Elizabeth needed.

Every week during the summer they mowed her lawn. When they baked treats that Elizabeth liked, they took some to her. Every weekend they checked to see if she needed any odd jobs done—fixing a light, repairing a kitchen drain, or painting a room. Almost every weekend there was some little job that Elizabeth needed done and could not do herself.

Often when the couple went out for dinner they invited Elizabeth to go along. Sometimes they had burgers and sometimes something more elegant. But Elizabeth was always delighted to be a part of the outings.

In fact, Elizabeth would invite the couple over for elaborate dinners from time to time. She regularly shared her baked goods with her new friends. They celebrated holidays together that she might otherwise have spent alone. She adopted their family as if they were her own.

Over the course of years the friendship grew. Elizabeth had both the practical help she needed and the friendship she longed for.

At first the couple thought of their efforts as a way to serve. Over time the couple's relationship with Elizabeth became an

important part of their lives. They loved to hear her tell stories. They recorded her words of wisdom. They learned recipes from her. They were amazed by her breadth of knowledge and enthusiasm for life. They enjoyed her friendship.

After six years of friendship, Elizabeth became ill. She was found to have an advanced case of cancer. She died within a month of the diagnosis. Before she died she gave a lovely chair that she had upholstered herself to the couple. The chair sits proudly in their home. And their love for Elizabeth continues to bless their lives and marriage.

There are many ways couples can be of service to others. Here are some ideas. Take a few minutes to add your own ideas to the list.

Care for a widowed neighbor	Volunteer as greeters for religious firesides, concerts, programs, etc.
Do yard work for a neighbor or someone else	Bake something for a neighbor and hand deliver it to them
Care for the children of a young mom while she runs errands	Visit a children's hospital and volunteer to read stories to the children
Visit neighbors	Volunteer to raise funds for a children's hospital or other worthy cause
Take a friend or neighbor out to dinner	Work with your church or local community to collect children's blankets, hats, socks, etc. to donate to your local children's hospital
Have a friend or neighbor over for dinner	Volunteer with the United Way, the American Heart Association, etc.
Swap baby-sitting (with another couple with children)	Volunteer on a 4-H project (Master Gardeners, planning a 4-H fun run, etc.)
Adopt a college student for the semester	Work in the church nursery
Take part in a group service project (locally or abroad)	Visit an elderly person or someone who is alone
Volunteer to help with an annual school event (e.g., bake sale, rummage sale, senior dinner, family night out, etc.)	Send an uplifting note to someone (monthly or just occasionally)
Sponsor a youth event for a church activity	Take your neighbor's trash out to the curb
Give a smile	Give a hug to someone at church
Listen to someone	

Reflection:

- Do you and your spouse have a way that you are making the world a better place?
- Do you feel drawn to some way of serving?
- Identify at least one way that you and your spouse can serve together and then do it.

Key Point: Choosing to serve together makes our lives better and our marriages stronger.

Each of us can work toward a bountiful harvest

Additional lessons will provide many more ideas for developing a healthy marriage garden. You may find many more ways to build toward the garden of your dreams in these lessons.

Concluding reflection:

For this week, what will you do to serve your spouse and those around you? List one thing you would like to do for each. Make a specific plan and rehearse it in your mind, that is, pre-live the experience.

For example, you may decide to wash your spouse's car, make your spouse's favorite meal, or do any small job around the house that your spouse usually does. You may also consider joining a service-oriented community or church group or you may decide to work with your spouse to make someone else's life better in another way. Picture specific things you will do. Imagine the likely response. Prepare yourself to handle any difficulties. In your mind, practice carrying out your plan several times.

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