

Dialogue: A Time for Us

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We made our Weekend in New York in September, 1970. The Weekend was a startling discovery of how separate we had become. The intimacy of our early days had gone. Unfulfilled expectations had caused division and we were less able to verbalize our hurts. We were both becoming more competitive and judgmental. Each of us was "right." We had forgotten our vow to love one another totally and were living our life by the world's rule of "do your own thing."

Our Weekend showed us an alternative to the way we were living, and provided a "tool," our dialogue, for us to keep growing together. Our Weekend began a journey of self-discovery and of growing up to experience a deeper, more intimate love for one another. We rediscovered our ability to respond to one another. We experienced the joy and closeness that resulted from being more responsive and, also, the pain that resulted from our failures. We began to live our life by a different set of values. We realized that we could create the atmosphere we wanted in our marriage if we were willing to "work" at making love happen, if we were willing to take the responsibility for our low love relationship instead of taking it for granted. We would like to share some of our journey with you.

After the Weekend we were committed to dialoguing every day and committed to spreading Marriage Encounter. We began recruiting and putting on the Weekend in Philadelphia. We were excited about the impact the Marriage Encounter had on our relationship. We were renewed, and *dialogue* was going to change the world! We were faithful to our dialogue, often writing at one o'clock in the morning after a meeting. But we wrote. How soon we forget! The focus of our lives was on spreading the Encounter rather than on discovering what, in us, prevented us from becoming better lovers for one another.

After a year we went on a second team-training weekend to brush up on the concepts of the Weekend, so that we could give better Weekends. We were devastated! The presenting team was so real in sharing their growth in love for one another. We were painfully aware of the shallowness in our life in the year since our Weekend. All our energy had been focused outside of us. In many ways we were taking our marriage for granted again. We had not activated that power of romance in our lives, the power that we had to create positive, warm feelings of specialness in one another. On that Weekend, we told each other we would begin again to focus more on us. For us, being an apostolic couple is a lot easier than making changes in ourselves. We were slowly growing in trust through our daily dialogue, but we were not making many changes. There were few challenges from our community. We were the leaders and it was assumed that we "knew it all." One evening a loving priest-friend bluntly challenged us to look at how we were living our sacrament, about our vulnerability to one another, and our willingness to heal and to be healed. His challenge kept the two of us up talking most of that night. His confrontation was devastating and it was beautiful because we again faced into how shallow our dialogue was.

We do believe that we all need to be encouraged, to be challenged, to be confronted in our ability to love, in our priorities, in our values, in our willingness to change. Our dialogue had focused on lighter topics, often superficial to our relationship, often non-threatening areas. We were avoiding our judgments, attitudes and feelings in areas of concern to us, like sex, job, money, relatives. We dialogued on these areas, but not in any depth or duration. We didn't want to rock the boat too much.

Another time, we went to a Convention at St. John's. We were at a "good place" in our relationship, a little complacent, but we had definitely "grown." We stumbled into the library "by accident" and heard two presentations by a couple and priest that stopped us cold! In telling their story, we realized, again, how far we were from loving one another as they did. Again, we were confronted and challenged to change. We had not loved as fully and unselfishly as that couple and priest had loved. Their courage and vulnerability showed us how fearful and cautious we were with one another. Our dialogue was a nice thing to do rather than the tool that could help us face into issues that were barriers to our ability to love.

On our Weekend, we had heard that feelings aren't right or wrong, they just are, and that we are to accept one another's' feelings as they are shared with us. Somehow, we translated that to mean we had to accept all of each others actions as well as our feelings. A remark you would have heard at our house was "Hey, this is the way I am." So for years, we pushed issues under the table. We didn't want to hurt one another, didn't want to rock the boat, didn't want to have to change. We would wonder why we would be on a complacent plateau for months. Perhaps we would go to a convention or a renewal and hear a presentation that hit home and that following dialogue would reveal areas for our growth. We would have a high level of energy in our relationship for a week or two and then slip into complacency We have come to see that we were ignoring the power God has given us to make things happen, to make love happen.

It is part of the graces available to help us live our sacramental way of life. We realized that we were selling our love relationship short by not caring enough to confront one another. We have begun to face into issues in our dialogue and discussion such as Margi's getting up earlier in the morning, Jim's private attitude when he comes home from work, Margi's not paying the bills on time, Jim's resistance to discuss what's bothering him, Margi's superior attitude towards Jim, Jim's lack of trust of Margi We have shared the feelings many times, over many years. Now we are making changes in our behavior. Confronting these issues has been a source of growth for us. We have experienced the power in us to make changes, and it has given us the courage we need to be more risking, more vulnerable with one another.

Over the years, much of our challenge to grow in our ability to love has come from grace-filled people encouraging us, telling us their story. For us, these people who share similar values of dialogue and relationship are essential for our continued growth. A few years ago, we were in the midst of a hurtful argument. Friends came in, saw our pain and wanted to be involved, to help, to encourage, to cajole, whatever had to be done to help us confront our issue. We said, "No thanks, we'll handle it ourselves." Our pride and independence were strong. It is true that we, as a couple, have to heal one another, but we

were denying the stake they had in us.

Recently, we were in a very strained time in our relationship. Our dialogue was regular, but full of hurt feelings and separate camps. We were full of superiorities and competition and unfilled expectations and not listening to one another. All the old attitudes resurfaced abundantly at one time. We were so alienated that we would not hold hands going to receive the Eucharist. A caring couple noticed our non-verbal proclamation and called us the next day with persistent concern for us, for our relationship. It hurt our pride to know someone had seen us at our worst. It also filled us with gratitude that they cared enough to call again to check on our process of healing.

There is a special priest who never hangs up the phone without saying with great sincerity, "Have a good dialogue." What encouragement he gives us! We know that he cares, and that is what we are all about: caring for one another and for the sacramental way of life we are all trying to live. We are special, extraordinary, power-filled people living our vocations in this secular world.

So why is it more of us aren't more involved with one another asking, "Hey, how is your relationship?" Why aren't we sharing our better questions or areas of dialogue that have been especially challenging, or how we are romancing one another? Why aren't we encouraging one another to face into issues that are keeping us from becoming more intimate with one another?

Could it be that we are too comfortable? Or that we are wary of confrontation because we ourselves might have to change? Or could it be that we don't really believe that God's Plan for us is to learn to love one another as he loves us, without condition? Or don't we believe that we can be a sign to one another?

Could it be that we don't want to get that involved with other people? How about your sharing group? Is it a warm cozy group that encourages complacency, or is it a vibrant group of people who shares and teases and pushes one another towards a greater ability to love. We would like you to think about the sign you are being to others. Who are you calling to a fuller life by the example of how you love one another?

What about your dialogue? Have you made a conscious, mature, couple decision to make your daily love letters an important part of your life? Or is one of you dragging the other along? And if you haven't dialogued lately, has that been a well thought-out couple decision, or a decision based on hurt, or pride, or default, or unwillingness to confront the issue?

For us, dialogue has become more than the tool of communication we learned on our Weekend. Our love letters are a barometer of where we are as individuals and as a love relationship. Sometimes they are humdrum, sometimes exciting, sometimes they "dump" a lot, sometimes they are full of hurt, disillusionment, or great hope and tenderness. The time we make to write and dialogue is the daily reminder of how we are trying to balance our lives, not allowing self, children, jobs, or apostolic work to take so much of our energy that we take one another for granted again. Our love letters have helped to remind us of our dependence on romance to keep the spice in our marriage. For us, romance is the

little things that we do for and with one another that remind us of how special we are. We have begun to have twice-a-month Monday night dinners at home, just the two of us, with a special menu and candlelight. We are buying each other flowers more often, and are experiencing the lightness and fun of a few minutes of dancing to a favorite song playing on the radio.

Because we are staying tuned-in to one another in our love letters, we are conscious of the need for discussion in specific areas such as how our attitudes towards our parents effect our attitudes towards one another.

The short prayer at the beginning of each love letter reminds us that our Father cares about us and our marriage. We believe He wants us to have the excitement and romance that we recaptured on our Weekend. We also know that God is with us whether we are in a "Good Friday" time or an "Easter Sunday" time in our relationship. So often, we live our sacrament as if we were a secular marriage. In reality, the graces of our sacrament are there for the asking. Our love letters help us to focus on these realities. Without our daily love letters, we believe that we would slip back into a singles lifestyle. Our dialogue is allowing us to know one another intimately each day, and it is through this knowledge that we have the opportunity to minister to one another. Through our love letters, we can activate the graces of our sacrament so our spouse can feel our love surrounding him or her. Our openness to one another lets us be open to God's grace working within us. Some people reading this article will not be dialoguing, or dialogue may be a hassle right now. We invite you to sit down with your lover and discuss what you want for your love relationship and the concept of writing daily love letters. We would like you to come to a prayerful couple decision about dialogue. If your decision is to write your love letters again, then realize that the initial motivation to find the right time and the right attitude will come from within the two of you. You are both accountable for what you create in your dialogue.

DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

- How do our love letters help me to minister to you? HDIFAT?
- What have I recently discovered about myself? HDIFAT?
- What have I recently discovered about you? HDIFAT?
- What have I recently discovered about us? HDIFAT?
- Do I see myself as a power-filled person? HDIFAT?
- Do I see you as a power-filled person? HDIFAT?
- How am I living a married singles life style? HDIFAT? (Use this question for at least five days in a row)
- In what areas do I feel superior to you? How does this superiority affect our relationship? HDIAFAT?
- When am I most competitive with you? HDIFTYAT? (How do I feel telling you about this?)
- What do I expect of you as a Lover? HDIFAT? Or HDIFTYAT?
- What do I expect of you as Parent? HDIFAT?
- What do I expect of you as Provider? HDIFAT? (Provider could be financial, spiritual, or physical)