

Small Steps – Big Gains

A Personal Plan for Growth

By Dick & Sue Boyd

(Excerpted from 1980 January/February *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)

For a minute, picture a 12 or 13 month-old child, attempting those first steps alone. What an adventure for him! His determination - no matter how many times he falls - keeps him coming back for more, and little by little, he begins to master the art of walking. Those baby steps are paramount to his progress.

As we look at this "journey" of ours, we realize we're still taking baby steps - and for sure those steps are significant, too....at least they are for the two of us.

I can remember one very special April 7th and the excited determination the two of us had as we drove away from a retreat house in Dallas. We were incredulous at what we had experienced during that weekend. On Friday night as we were taking the luggage out of the car, Dick said under his breath to me, "It's like we're walking into prison." And I was thinking the same thing, too. Those were very reluctant baby steps that night!

Yet as Saturday and Sunday unfolded, more and more steps were gradually taken with less and less resistance. By Sunday that old reluctance had dissipated and around 7:00 p.m. we were heading down 1-35 "leading our own parade." We were ecstatic with each other, and our blissful determination to keep us #1 - no matter what - was foremost on our minds for a long time after that weekend.

Dialogue...great! Sex...great!! Kids, house, job, life...great! We were taking giant steps and were having a ball. But we all know what follows romance, don't we?

So, here we are riding this crazy roller coaster ride, called "Peaks & Pits." Interesting ride! Sometimes we cruise along in deep flat valleys of disillusionment - silent gaps of time, small hurts buried, lessening of gentle thoughtfulness toward each other...you know the ride.

Then, we hit a peak - and WOW - the view is spectacular again and how great our coupleness seems at those times. Then, darn it, a few days or weeks down the track, we're facing downward again. We don't know about you, but after awhile, it seemed we were spending an awful lot of time in the trenches. Yet we were intrigued by this relationship ride. (It sure was a lot better than the "Merry-Go-Round" we lived on before our weekend!) Even so, we didn't seem to be able to exercise much direction or speed. We knew we wanted more intimacy and wanted the top - but the activities and schedules that we were juggling were overwhelming at times.

Amazing though how things have a way of dropping in your lap. Our ears perked up when, not long ago, we were offered a challenge by a special couple and priest to make our own personal plan for growth - **WRITTEN OUT**. Now, we've always been good at keeping our

calendar full of plans that we had coming up, and I think Sue and I have the indoor record for the number of "lists of things to do around the house." (Doubt if we ever finished even one list.) But this was different. The idea was to make the plan for *us* -our own relationship, and in order to make it successful, it was suggested that we keep it specific, simple, and short-term.

They recommended that we begin by zeroing in on maybe 2 or 3 areas of our life together that we wanted to work on or improve, i.e., sex, dialogue, atmosphere in the home, romance, asking for forgiveness, compliments, prayer, schedules, etc., and also look at perhaps eliminating some of the negative habits we've developed like harsh judgments or criticism.

It's important that what we write down be SPECIFIC. If we say we're going to "work on improving our dialogue"- that's too general. We need to get to the heart of our dialogue and find out where we've gotten casual about it. Some ideas we might consider for our plan regarding dialogue might be:

...Since my letters have gotten rather "I" centered, "this week, I'm going to concentrate on making my letters REAL LOVELETTERS and work on making those descriptions of my feelings come to life."

...or, in selecting our questions, "we decided to dialogue in the area of sex *at least* twice each week for this month."

...or, it seems we've gotten in a rut with late night dialogues, so "we're going to try writing our letters in the evening and getting up a half-hour early for our dialogue for two weeks."

These are just a couple of teasers-to give you the idea. One loophole to keep in mind is not to make a plan that's contingent on someone else - "If you'll do this, I'll do that" - type of thing. Then, we'll fall into the 50-50 trap.

The old K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Sweetheart) technique applies here too. Grandiose plans look great on paper, but seldom materialize. (Remember those baby steps count!) We need to be realistic - can we possibly follow through with what we're planning? If getting up in the morning for dialogue sounds good, and yet if I'm the kind of person, who doesn't have all cylinders operating till 10:00 a.m., probably I won't get past the 4th morning. So, it's important to tailor-make a plan to our relationship and our lifestyle. And starting out with a *simple* plan assures us of a good chance of some success.

Giving ourselves a time frame -short-term - also makes the plan palatable a week or a month might be a good rule of thumb. We can always adjust it, change it, or add to it after our "short-term" is up. Maybe we'll find we're ready for bigger stakes. The idea behind the plan is to give us a boost daily to strive to be *alive* for each other. We don't have to be leaping hurdles - but for our relationship to grow - we can't just be coasting. Getting our plan on paper has its benefits too. Our intentions for each other become tangible and are a gentle reminder. Another way to assure our success is to bounce our plan off another couple - to see if they think it's workable and easily attained. The buddy system works well!

Our experience with these plans has been pretty good. Our track record isn't perfect - but then neither are we. We have seen some real growth in our intimacy with each other and with our children, so I guess we can say it's working well for us. Most of the time we've tried our plan for a month - sometimes only for a week-just depended on our mood.

On our first plan, we decided to work on our dialogue - and in particular the selection of questions. We had fooled around with a lot of surfacy questions and over a period of time, there weren't too many bells going off. So, for a month, we selected ones that made us look into areas we had been avoiding...like sex or how we were spending our money or where were we feeling pressured by each other.

Another item on our first plan was to work on the atmosphere in our home. Our early morning routine of getting everyone up and out the door was becoming a nightmare of confusion and tension in our house. Dick and I barely had a minute to say hello-goodbye - so we decided to treat us and the children - at least once a week for a month - to a 10 minute sit-down breakfast - all 6 of us - without *anybody* saying, "Hurry up!" It took some discipline - maybe a half-hour less sleep to pull it off, but we did it! And once a week wasn't that difficult when we saw how much it did for our family - to say nothing of how great it was for the two of us, messing around in the kitchen before the kids came down. We're really trying to keep that one as a regular part of our routine.

On another plan, we included the area of Prayer. When we were first married, Sue and I, just before we got into bed, used to kneel and say night prayers together. Over the years we kind of let that go by the wayside and decided to try it again. The first few nights it worked well and brought us really close, but we quickly became aware of how often we were going to bed at different times. Maybe one of us would fall asleep on the couch or would want to stay up and watch TV or read....so you guessed it....we made "going to bed together" an item to be listed on our next plan....a small step it seems....but really a big one - because it has affected not only our closeness in talking with God, but our lovemaking as well! (Here's a good one: HDIF when I'm/you're ready to go to bed and you're/I'm not?)

To say the least, our plans for growth have been stimulating. Sure we've slipped up here and there, but those peaks seem to be coming more often these days, and we're confident that we're on the right track. Nothing has been more reassuring - and freeing - that to discover that our holiness comes from our TRYING - not from our arriving. We're human! We haven't failed each other - we only fail when we quit trying.

Our Father loves us so much and has such a stake in our relationship that we can't forget those graces of elevation and healing. So when we find ourselves going down for the 97th time, we can unleash that power between us and discover we're hitting those peaks again and again.

With this new year of 1980, why not give yourselves a fresh start AGAIN - make your own special and personal plan for growth. Our hopes and dreams for you, lovers, are the same that we hope for us - and that is to continue our "ride" and invite the rest of the world to come join us. Happy Trails