

Expectations in Dating: Part Two

Mar. 20, 2009

(If you haven't already, see [Part One](#).)

I want to really drive this idea home, so I'd like to read a story from – yep, you guessed it – Lauren Winner's *Real Sex*.*

I recently attended a women's retreat where one of the workshops was about singleness. The speaker, whom I'll call Myrtle, encouraged the single women in the audience to think carefully about what type of guy they're looking for. "You want a Prince Charming," Myrtle said, "and Prince Charmings are attracted to modest women. You might attract certain men by sporting skimpy skirts, but you won't attract the kind of man you really want to be with."

It's encouraging to think that mature Christians are more interested in character than cleavage; yet there is something unsettling about this assurance that chastity will be the erotic mystery that will lead Mr. Right (or Miss Right) to our door. Prince Charming can begin to rival God as the object of our attentions. Myrtle ended her talk on this note: "What we single women have to do is no more and no less than faithfully pray that our perfect guy is out there. We don't need to hunt him down, we just need to wait for the Lord to deliver him to us. [Is he a pizza?] We don't need to worry about him. Instead we need to focus on ourselves, becoming the pure, modest woman that our Prince Charming will be on the lookout for. We need to devote ourselves to prayer, humility, and grace. We need to continue becoming godly women, so that when the time is right, we will have those godly characteristics that the godly man we dream about will love."

[And that sounds right doesn't it? I mean, that does sound like what we ought to be doing: focusing on prayer, humility, and grace. But this is the point:] I'm not disputing the desirability of the chaste woman or man. It may well be that one of the benefits of practicing chastity is that you attract friends and admirers that admire chastity. But attracting others is not the goal of chastity. Indeed, if Myrtle is focused on catching the eye of the guy who likes chaste women, she may not be inhabiting chastity at all.

Myrtle seems to be working toward becoming, principally, the kind of woman Prince Charming wants, which incidentally may be the kind of woman God wants. Her priorities, I would suggest, need to flip-flop. We are to become the persons of God, and this may bear the incidental fruit of attracting a great partner. The point of chastity is not that you turn your attention away from other people to make you more attractive to them, but that you turn your attention away from sexual and romantic entanglements with other people, and orient yourself toward God. (129-131, bracketed parentheticals mine)

What does it mean to orient our lives toward God?

Right. It means we align ourselves with God's ways. Why would we do that?

[Silence.]

It's a tough question, I know, but an important one. Why does it matter? Why should we bother? Let me help you put words to what I suspect some of you know in that deep, unspeakable way. God's way is the way it's supposed to be. We talked last week about the physical reality of sex being evidence that God's creational intention for sex is good and right and true; how sexually transmitted diseases evidence the fact that when we misdirect our sex-lives, something isn't right. Look around you. Look around you and you'll see things aren't the way

they're supposed to be. There's so much hurting in the world. There's so much hurting sexually; things are no longer true – or straight – they're bent. Jesus came and he began the process of righting all the wrong and healing all the hurt. Those of us who believe are called to continue the work Christ began until he returns, when everything will be made right at long last! We do this by orienting our lives toward God.

Here's where I get back to why it's important to have standards concerning who you will and will not date. Because purity, sexual purity, is bigger than sets of dos and don'ts, rights and wrongs, standards and judgments; it's about shaping our lives to the themes of the Gospel, themes such as love, mercy, justice, healing, forgiveness; themes such as defending the oppressed and supporting the weak; themes that express God's way. Learning how to do this is a life-long process. Jesus promises in Matthew 6 that if we will orient our lives toward God's Kingdom, everything else will work out. In light of this promise, let me challenge you to commit the rest of your lives invested in communities dedicated to learning what it means to pray and live out, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Marry the man who has oriented his life toward God and journey toward the Kingdom together... for as long as you both shall live.

* Winner, Lauren. *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005.

This blog post originally appeared at
<http://reneamac.com/2009/03/20/expectations-in-dating-part-two>

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To Live Is Christ: On Singleness and Waiting

Apr. 9, 2010

We live in the tension between contentment and craving. Whether you are married or single or widowed or divorced; dating, not dating, wanting to date, not wanting to date—for now, forever. If you are wondering about your sexuality or your sex-appeal, your marriage, the strength of your love or your hope. . . And if you can empathize with the faith-struggle of doubt and dashed or delayed dreams (because without empathy we are nothing but the annoying, repetitive clanging of construction in the city streets) . . . Angela Severson has bravely opened a vein to unleash the power that only life-blood has for the healing and cleansing of [telling the truth](#).

This poem is so very well done. I've never seen anything like it. It's holistic and honest and inspiring and right on the money. The single life and the married life illustrate and teach us about life with Christ and the character of God. The story of "This Life" is one that all too often gets marginalized and left untold, or told unwell—But, we're doing better. When both stories are told (and listened to), all lives (and theologies) are enriched.

This Life

We wait, we long for, we pine after, ... we desire, we yearn.
We wait.

I wait

I am thirteen

Puberty explodes like a rash, an epidemic.

My girlfriends hold hands with boys we only months ago

snickered at, turned up our noses at, as though their very essence was a disease. Now the disease appears to be, that my girlfriends can't stop gawking over these same specimen. I decide to play along and choose my crushes. I crush my way through high school, waiting to be asked out. Waiting by locker stalls during break, waiting for a nudge in the hall, a simple "hey," a nod. I wait, standing pressed against the wall, through all the slow songs on Friday nights in the darkened gymnasiums. I wait for an invitation to senior prom. I wait.

Through this waiting, I feel like it is not working, meaning me.

Something is not working with me...my friends acquire boyfriends, hold hands, kiss, and I acquire journals, stashed by my bedside, full of wonderings and waiting.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To be ready and available}

It is July.

I'm twenty-two.

My days of being a serial "crushest" are about to end.

I am standing in a parking lot surrounded by pigeons pecking at croissant crumbs. The aroma of Newman's fish-n-chips deep fat fryers heating up engulfs me. In the slant of the morning sun my current crush tells me, that he has a crush on me.

.....finally! He likes me and I like him. So, this is what it's like to be loved, this is what I've been waiting for... this messy, dizzy, complicated, delicious, heart pounding love. We dance the dating dance for months and then on a quiet unexpected spring day he wants me to be his...asks me to be his, opens the door to the promise of forever and stamps soul-mate on my heart.

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To stay in a place of expectation of}

I am twenty-six.

I am engaged to the same fellow.

I am still waiting.

I've waited through friends getting married, through showers and bridesmaids dresses, through banquets and bouquet tossing, through Martha Stewart Wedding Magazines and honeymoon trip photos. It is now my turn. I am next in line to run from the church doors dodging birdseed and blessings. However, love is delicate, as fragile as the blossoms of spring, opening in trust to the slanting sun and quick to close in the cool of the evening, so too was this promise, one that could not take hold, a love aborted, out of fear and wisdom, full of pain, and awe. Stunned with grief, the love in my heart shrinks, evaporates, dies and God becomes small, cruel and unkind.

Hope aborted.

For what do I wait?

Am I waiting for what I want, or what I need?

For that which I desire, or believe that I deserve?

Am I longing for wisdom? ...opening myself to the God, who loves me into this deep-down empty sorrow...

{Romans Eight}

"In the same way the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."

I am 30 or 32 or somewhere in between.

I have dates that last 10 minutes or 2 years. I avoid answering calls from some and linger hours by the phone waiting for others. In and out of love, infatuation, intrigue...sometimes going through the motions, other times knowing he is.

...I'm into men, I'm tired of men. One day I'm free as a bird and content in my singleness, the next I am desperately

pinning away for every male that crosses my path, searching his finger for a wedding ring. I seize the day, travel over seas, take classes, switch careers, indulging in the delights and rewards of being single and still I wait. I watch my married friends build homes, families and history.

It is summer wedding season again. My cousin is getting married. I congratulate myself that I am actually excited about being there, really o.k with my place in life, o.k. that I don't have a date for this wedding, feeling genuinely happy for the two tying the knot. At the reception, between sipping white wine and sampling stuffed mushrooms, she approaches me...that token distant relative, you know the one...she has known me since birth, and kept up on me through my parents Christmas cards...and she asks "So are you going to be next?" I politely answer that I am not currently dating anyone...and she replies, "Well, what is a pretty girl like you still doing single?" Deep in my heart I have to trust that she means well, but the thoughts in my head and the words about to fly off my tongue feel like dragon fire. I want set blaze to her lovely over-sprayed doo. I smile and shrug, and pop another mushroom in my mouth to choke down my anger and my shame. "Yeah, what is wrong with me?" A moment ago I was confident in my singleness and now I feel other. I feel like a freak of nature, an alien, a misfit. I feel shaken.

{Hebrews 11/12}

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.....They are longing for a better country- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.....Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a

consuming fire.”

I am thirty-six.

I am single.

Singleness seems to be the new “have it all” lifestyle.

I decide to take a break in my day, a little escape from work.

I brew my cup of tea, add a dash of cream and sit back on the sofa with a magazine for some creative inspiration. I flip open into the middle and look down on the page. It is an advice column. The first question I glance at reads {Capital Q, semicolon} “Help, Please! What should I say to people who ask “why are you single?” It’s so rude, I can never think of a response. (yeah, I agree and can’t wait to hear the answer) {Capital A, semicolon} Shake your head, frown and say, “I loathe giving up all the fabulous sex” The answer hits me in the gut. I feel sad, disgusted, disappointed and angry. I’m appalled at the culture in which I live and yet not surprised. What do you expect, Angela...this world is not going to encourage you in your singleness, at least in a moral sense. I’ve read that singleness is on the rise...more people are single now than ever before. I want to think, great, I’m not so different, not so alone, but there is a huge chasm that defines this single lifestyle. The chasm is sexuality. It is one thing to be single and living with someone, single and sleeping with someone, single and sleeping with anyone and a very different state to be single and abstinent.

Abstinent not because it feels good or is pious, but because it honors God. Choosing abstinence out of obedience and respect for the vulnerability of the human body and spirit. I am ashamed to admit that I often hide the truth that I am nearly forty and a virgin. In this culture being a virgin makes me feel small, prude, asexual. Some nights I lay in bed at night aching to be held, longing for sexual intimacy. Gravity pulls my bones toward the earth, my body fills hollow....I lay one hand on my belly and the other over my

breast, not with the intention of arousal, but to be held. It would be easy to deny my sexuality and I have. But tonight I want to acknowledge that my body was designed for sexual intimacy, and although that yearning is not being fulfilled, I am still a sensual creation.

{Psalms 139}

"You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."

{Martin Luther}

"This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness;

not health, but healing;

not being, but becoming;

not rest, but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it.

The process is not yet finished, but it is going on.

This is not the end, but it is the road.

All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

I am thirty-eight.

There are days when I feel content knowing that I am growing in wisdom, I am awaiting the Kingdom. That my singleness is just part of my journey here, it is the color of my life. Our stories all get colored in, mine just happens to be green at the moment.

Perhaps I'll meet someone and get married and then I'll get to add some purple and red, but today it's green. I feel blessed with my greenness, alive and grateful. I love my career. I have rich, beautiful friends, and family.... my daily needs are always met, and still there is this tension. I'm driving home from Eugene, marveling over the spring grass, the baby lambs, the sinking sun...the beauty is intoxicating and warm tears roll down my cheeks. I've just come from holding my new godson. His sweet newborn smell, his fragile breath, his parents (my beloved friends) and his

sisters (my other two god children) all nestled in unison. This is a family. In this moment I am so grateful to be a part of it, but now I must travel north on I-5 towards home, alone. These tears are full of sorrow and joy, so bittersweet. In my heart I hold the hope that I may one day receive the blessing of a family like this earth but I know that this earth in all it's beauty, is broken, so that for which I was made, I may not receive. There are bigger promises, larger hopes...to that I must cling.

{Hebrews 11}

"none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

{Wait: as defined by Webster's: To look forward expectantly, to hold back expectantly.

To remain neglected or to remain in readiness.}

Today, as I write this, it is hard to wait.

I squirm. I writhe.

My skin crawls. The discomfort is visceral. Anything would feel better than here. The loneliness penetrates and all I see around me is what I don't have. I hike through Forest Park and I see love and families. I see holding hands and holding hearts. I see couples with babies and couples with dogs and couples melting into one another, sharing food, laughter, words and breath. I cry out "God, spare me from this loneliness, this waiting. I want my feelings to change. I feel guilty for not being satisfied with what I have in this moment. My head knows the gospel's truth.

The God of the Universe cares for me, loves me to the core, is for me,...and he has promised me life.

Not this life, but the everlasting kind.

The one without pain and suffering, hungering and squirming. A promise that is more than I can conceive, contain, or deserve. His grace covers the reality that my heart, at this moment, does not feel any better with this knowledge. I feel

small and fragile, achy, and tired. Right now I am marred then I shall be perfect, right now I am broken, then I shall be fixed. I cry out for redemption.

{Deuteronomy 31}

“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

What is it that I wait for? For what do I long? Is it Connection? Wholeness? Safety? Love?

I wait with myself, with my family, my friends,
I wait with my neighbor, the clerk at the grocery store, the lady next to me on the bus.

I wait with those across the country, across the sea, across the world, in places I know nothing of, filled with people waiting...

They wait for things that I have. They wait for warm food in their bellies and water on their lips, they wait to see their sick child healed, or the miracle of their bodies restored, they wait for a soft place to lay down at night, and the demon voices in their heads be stilled. The wait for the terror to stop and the monsters slain. We all wait.

We wait for hope, for freedom, for comfort

We wait for love.

Deep, deep love that will never fail. A love that will fill us.

We wait for Christ.

{Romans 8}

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angel nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Angela Severson

<http://www.imagodeiwomen.com/2010/03/this-life.html>

This blog post originally appeared at
<http://reneamac.com/2010/04/09/to-live-is-christ/>

Hail the Conquering Graduates!

June 10, 2009

I was asked to put together a few resources for the high school grads at church. I thought I'd share the wealth with the World Wide Web.

Below you'll find helpful and hopefully meaningful resources to guide you as you embark on adulthood. I especially recommend the two blogs. The most valuable resource of all, though, is people. Get involved in your own way on campus and in a local church. But don't just hang out with people your own age—that'll make you boring. Be sure to introduce yourself to your professors and tell them thank you (will likely turn that B+ into an A). I've been teaching and learning from college students for a really long time. So I know quite a bit about college stuff; and a decent amount about life stuff too—you can always ask me anything. The whole world is before you; but you never have to face it, with all its joys and hardships, alone.

Many congratulations and blessings.

Renea

Bookmark This

GoCollege.com

Here you'll find really good tips for getting the most out of the really (sometimes really, really) expensive education you're getting. Classroom lectures, writing assignments, and even exams can be a lot different in college than they were in high school. The tips on this website can help make the transition smoother.

Biblos.com

Biblos.com is this great website I've only recently discovered. It's a one-stop-shop for all your bible study tools including concordances, commentaries, maps, pictures, devotions, and of course the Bible itself in several different translations and languages.

EveryStudent.com

I'm really pumped about this website. It's a place where no question about God or life is out of bounds. When your friends have questions about God and Christianity, or when you have questions yourself, this website can help. In college you'll do a lot of exploring, discovering, and learning about yourself: what you think about God, Christianity, the way the world is, the way it should be. This website is designed to guide you on that journey. Be sure to check out Life Issues, which touches on topics such as sex, beauty, racism, and shame.

Probe.org

Curious about Genesis and evolution? Need help answering the tough questions your friends have about Christianity? Whether you want to learn more about your friend's religion, are struggling with questions like – Why do bad things happen to good people? – or you need a credible source for the paper you're writing, Probe.org is an excellent resource that can help you think through some really tough topics.

Blogs

[Living Spirituality](#)

Living Spirituality offers helpful, encouraging, and even sometimes convicting devotionals. It also provides a weekly discussion about real life stuff. These discussions are helpful as we try to live like Jesus in our everyday lives.

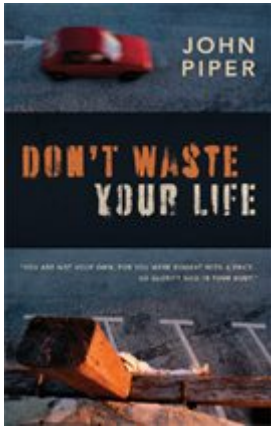
[Surviving College Life](#)

Surviving College Life is a really cool blog that's incredibly comprehensive. Not only will it be helpful as you prepare to arrive on campus. This will be something you'll find useful throughout your college years as you move from dorms to apartments, friendships to romances, and from major to major. The above link is a list of all the posts divided by topic. So whether you're looking for time management tips, study aids, roommate advice, financial aid resources, or fitness facts, *Surviving College Life* can help give you a heads up and point you in a good direction.

Book Buzz

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Romans 12:2

This brief list of books includes stuff I read in college that was really important to my Christian walk, as well as a few books I wish I had read in college. They're books I hope you will find helpful as you journey with Jesus and strive to think christianly. (Don't worry; they're not just "smart people" books. Most of these are very easy to read.)

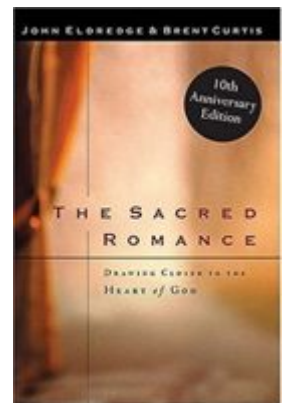


Don't Waste Your Life

–John Piper

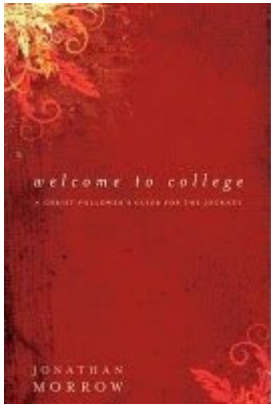
When Christ gave us real life, he gave our lives meaning and purpose. *Don't Waste Your Life* is about living on purpose a life passionate for God and people.

The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God



–Brent Curtis & John Eldredge

This is not a girly book; don't let the title fool you. *The Sacred Romance* was a really important book for me when I was in college. It helped me understand the big picture of the Bible: the story of God and the story of my own life. It helped me understand the difference between living by the rules and living spiritually.

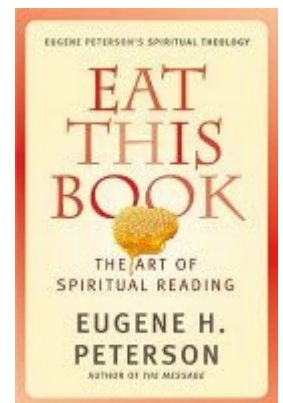


Welcome to College: A Christ-follower's Guide for the Journey

–Jonathan Morrow

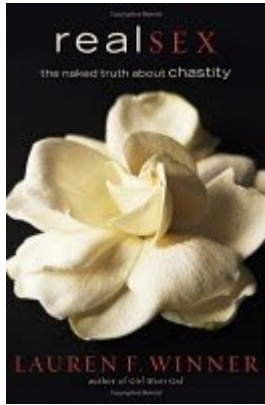
Welcome to College includes chapters on the problem of evil and suffering, Christology, ethics and much more. You will also find a broad collection of practical topics: health, sex and dating, finances, Internet use, alcohol. This book provides unique and much-needed help for navigating the head-spinning newness of college life.

Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading



–Eugene Peterson

This is a really helpful book about how to read and interpret and understand the Bible, how to let the Scriptures nourish and feed us, how to live the Scriptures as they are the Living Words of God.

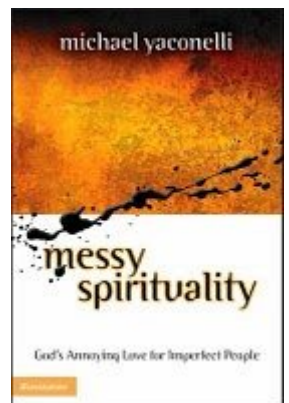


Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity

–Lauren F. Winner

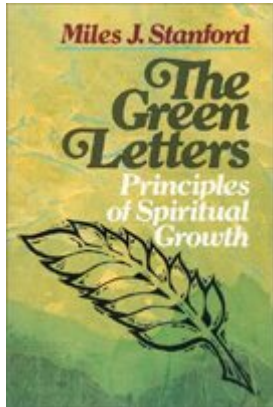
Winner talks about sex in a realistic way. She sorts through the confusing messages we hear about sex from both the world and the church, and helps us think about sex and romantic love within the big picture of God's story. Real Sex provides biblical and practical guidance for unmarried Christians who desire to honor God with their sexuality and dating relationships.

Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People



– Mike Yaconelli

This small book says big things about what being a Christian looks like. It reminds us that we're all human in need of God's grace; that there's no such thing as the ideal Christian—there's no one-size-fits-all pattern of spirituality.

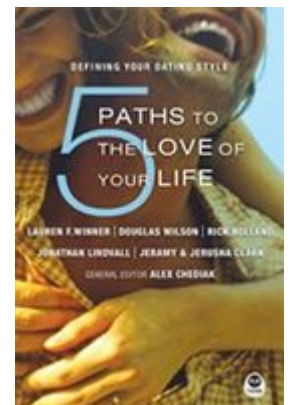


The Green Letters

–Miles J. Stanford

The Green Letters is about spiritual growth. It's one of those books you can pick and choose what you want to read by scanning over the Table of Contents; that is, the chapters don't necessarily have to be read in order. This book will challenge you to live less selfishly, or we could say, less as a self-follower and more as a Christ-follower.

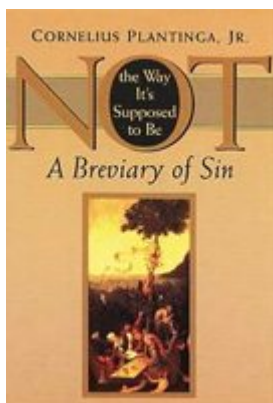
5 Paths to the Love of Your Life: Defining Your Dating Style



–Alex Chediak

There are basically five different approaches to romantic love from the Christian perspective. This book gives you an overview of these five views, their advantages and disadvantages, and the logic and Scripture behind them. So you can decide for yourself which path you relate to most, which enables you to be intentional about biblical, christianly

romance.



Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin

–Cornelius Plantinga Jr.

What is sin? What are the effects of sin? How do we think and talk about sin (if at all)? How do we deal with sin? These are some of the questions discussed in this small, but impactful book on sin. You'd think a book all about sin would be depressing, but Plantinga understands that sin is only the distortion of something originally good; and that though things aren't the way they're supposed to be now, they will be one day soon when Christ returns.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2009/06/10/hail-the-conquering-graduates/

Your Board of Directors

At a conference several years ago I was given a thought-provoking challenge, to identify the people on the board of directors of my life: whose voices do I listen to? Whose counsel do I follow? Whose values do I respond to?

The speaker pointed out that some people ought to be kicked

off our board-like parents, if their voices of shame and criticism still control and restrict us. So should voices of much of the media, especially TV. And we can replace them with wiser, more godly voices who can offer us direction and perspective. There was a discussion of categories of potential board members. They don't have to be alive, and we don't have to personally know them, either.

The Lord Jesus, of course, needs to be the #1 board member. If we're married, our spouse should be on our board. The Apostle Paul is a good board member. Peter and James are good too, as is Solomon. So are some of the church fathers and Christian writers like C.S. Lewis. Or a pastor, and not necessarily our own. (I have a friend in a distant city who has adopted my pastor as hers, and listens to every audio recording my church puts online.) Mentors are great board members, and so are wise and trusted friends.

A few weeks ago, John Townsend, one of the co-authors of [the Boundaries series](#), was at my church. I love what he writes and listen to him on the radio show "New Life Live" whenever possible. I had a chance to talk to him briefly, so I told him about my board of directors. "John," I said, "Several years ago I installed you as a permanent member of my board. Other people have come and gone, but you're always there. I really appreciate your wisdom and godly perspective, and you have equipped me to respond to various life challenges. Just wanted you to know how you've blessed me even though we've never met."

(To my delighted surprise, he lit up and asked if he could hug me!)

Who's on your board? Who can you kick off to the glory of God? (Hint: magazines that make you unhappy with how God made you as you compare yourself to the celebrities and models inside, certain internet sites, particular TV shows. . .)

Who can you put on your board? Let's hear it.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/your_board_of_directors
in July 2009.

What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo [blog post](#) about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."

- "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
- "At least he's in heaven now."
- "At least you have two other children."
- "At least that's one less mouth you'll have to feed."
- "At least it didn't have to go through the pain of birth."
- "At least you've had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis."

Don't attempt to minimize the other person's pain.

- "Cancer isn't really a problem." (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
- "It's okay, you can have other children."

Don't try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.

- "I guess God knew you weren't ready to be parents yet."
- "Now you'll find out who your friends are."
- "This baby must have just not been meant to be."
- "There must have been something wrong with the baby."
- "Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great works."
- "Cancer is really a blessing."
- "Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong."

Don't blame the other person:

- "If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed."
- "Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in."
- "You are not praying hard enough."
- "Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?"
- "Oh, you're not going to let this get you down, are you?"
(Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

Don't compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else's problem:

- "It's not as bad as that time I. . ."
- "My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast."

Don't use the word "should":

- "You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you."

Don't use clichés and platitudes:

- "Look on the bright side."
- "He's in a better place."
- "She's an angel now." (NO! People and angels are two

different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)

- “He’s with the Lord.”

Don’t instruct the person:

- “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
- “Remember that God is in control.”
- “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

What TO say:

- “I love you.”
- “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

What TO do:

- A wordless hug.
- A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
- Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/ on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

Procrastination: Conquering

the Time Killer – A Christian Cure

Steve Cable considers the causes of procrastination from a biblical perspective. Understanding why we procrastinate is an important step in developing a Christ-centered cure for our ailment. Don't wait until it's too late. Stop procrastinating today!

How many of us would drop twenty dollar bills out of our car window as we drive down the highway or smash Rolex watches with a hammer as a means of relaxation? Yet, many of us consistently waste the most valuable resource available to us—our time. Benjamin Franklin put it this way: “Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time; for that’s the stuff life is made of.”^{1} From a biblical perspective, Paul admonishes us: “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16).^{2} Looking at this statement in the original language, Paul commands us to *redeem* our time; that is, take time which is part of a fallen, sinful world system and convert it into something good and eternal through using it wisely for God’s purposes.

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will admit to feeling uncomfortable with our time stewardship. We want to use our time wisely, but when we look back on the last week, month, or year, we feel some remorse over the amount of time we wasted. A big reason that many of us are uncomfortable with how we use our time is the affliction of procrastination. One researcher in this field summarized her conclusions this way: “Procrastination is, hands down, our favorite form of self-sabotage.”^{3} In other words, procrastination undermines our attempts to accomplish our plans and goals.

I want to look at the epidemic of procrastination from a

biblical perspective. With God's help we will gain a better understanding of why we struggle with procrastination and learn some practical perspectives to help us conquer this time killer.

A Biblical Perspective on Time

You might be asking, Is this really a Christian worldview issue or simply a self-help question? Well, the Bible is very clear on how much God is concerned about how we use our time. Let me summarize a few of the principles the Bible teaches us about time:

1. God created time as a part of His "good creation" (Gen. 1:1).
2. God transcends time, existing in the past, present, and future simultaneously (Is. 43:12, Heb. 13:5, 1 Pet. 1:20, 2 Pet. 3:8).
3. God works in this world within the context of time (Gal. 4:4-5).
4. Our time on earth is precious and fleeting (Jas. 4:14, 1 Pet. 1:24).
5. Time has no meaning or value in eternity (Rev. 4:8-10).
6. God is very concerned with how we use our time on this earth (Eph. 5:16-17).

One way to see how much the Bible has to say about time is to replace references to *life* on this earth with the idea of *time* on this earth. After all, Ben Franklin was right in saying that time is the stuff that earthly life is made of. For example, let's apply this idea to a familiar verse, 2 Corinthians 5:14:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for

all, so that they who *“have time on this earth”* might no longer *“use their time”* for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. [{4}](#)

So, Christ’s sacrificial love for us demands that we use our time for Him.

Another example would be 1 Corinthians 10:31:

So whether you eat or you drink or *“however you spend your time, use all of your time for”* the glory of God. (NIV)

Peter highlighted the importance of how we use our time when he wrote:

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:17-20).

Knowing the heavy price our Father paid to redeem us, we should be very concerned about whether we are making the most of the time God has entrusted to us. It is very clear that misuse of our time is a great concern to God. As Christians, we have the ability to convert passing time into something good and eternal.

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:12-15). [{5}](#)

Naturally, Satan and the world system want us to waste that time and pass into eternity having accomplished nothing of eternal value. Thus, anything that causes us to waste our time is a spiritual issue. Thoreau captured this truth when he wrote: “As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.”[\[6\]](#)

In other words, procrastination is not a casual laughing matter. It is of great concern to our Lord.

Procrastination: The Consequences

As we continue to consider how to conquer procrastination, it would be helpful to have a working definition. An anonymous pundit quipped, “They said procrastination was the source of all my sorrow. I don’t know what that big word means—I’ll look it up tomorrow!” Procrastination literally means “to put off until tomorrow.” One study defined it as “postponing the completion of a task to the point of feeling uncomfortable about one’s delay.”[\[7\]](#)

Well, feeling uncomfortable is not fun, but it doesn’t sound that bad. Is that the only consequence of procrastination? Whether it is putting off balancing the checkbook, yard work, term papers, filling out expense reports, or reading the Bible, many of us have learned to live with our favorite areas of procrastination. However, studies have shown that procrastination has many undesirable consequences.

A direct consequence is decreased performance and productivity. Some procrastinators say they put off starting projects because they perform better under pressure. Don’t kid yourself! A study of university students showed that students who procrastinated had significantly lower grades than those who did not. Christians are called to “keep our behavior excellent among the Gentiles” and to “work heartily as unto the Lord.” When procrastination impacts our performance, we

are presenting a negative witness to the world.

The direct consequences of procrastination can be magnified well beyond our expectations. Consider these examples:

- In 1815, Napoleon was prepared to attack Wellington's British army at dawn, but delayed his attack until 11 AM. This delay allowed the Prussians to arrive in time to attack the French flank turning a certain French victory into a bitter defeat. Literally, procrastination caused Napoleon to meet his Waterloo.
- On October 31, 1846, after a tortuous shortcut gone bad cost them several weeks, the Donner Party decided to rest for a few days rather than press on over the Sierra Nevada mountains. Their delay caused them to be trapped by a monster blizzard resulting in thirty-six people dying of starvation and the rest living out their lives with the stain of cannibalism.
- The nation of Israel chose to delay entering the Promised Land, and the result was forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

These are extreme examples, but most of us have experienced times when we put off getting car repairs, working on the house, or starting a project, and found out that the consequences were much worse than we anticipated.

In addition to the direct consequences, frequent procrastination increases stress, anxiety, and guilt with all their related side effects. A recent study found that "college students who procrastinate have higher levels of drinking, smoking, insomnia, stomach problems, colds and flu."[{8}](#) Many times we delay a task because we feel we need to relax instead, but the ultimate result is greater levels of stress.

Procrastination: Some Causes

Most of us struggle with procrastination in one or more areas of our lives. However, what we share are common symptoms, not necessarily a common root cause. Studies of procrastination have identified some distinctly different causes. If you have a pain in your foot, you need to know whether it is a splinter or bone cancer before selecting a course of treatment. If you are going to conquer procrastination, you need to be aware of your primary root cause.

Two of the most common causes are laziness and avoiding negative feelings. These cause us to delay starting tasks that may be difficult or unpleasant in favor of more pleasurable activities. Research has found that considering a task as boring or adverse is more likely to result in procrastination than a lack of capability to do the task well.[\[9\]](#) The Bible often addresses this issue including Proverbs 24 which says:

*I passed by the field of the sluggard
And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,
And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;
Its surface was covered with nettles,
And its stone wall was broken down.
When I saw, I reflected upon it;
I looked, and received instruction.
“A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,”
Then your poverty will come as a robber
And your want like an armed man (vv. 30-34).*

This cause is modeled by the college student who spends weeks playing video games and hanging out until the night before the term paper is due.

Two other common causes are lack of perspective and poor time management skills. This person is willing to take on an unpleasant task, but has a hard time knowing which tasks need

to be tackled right away and which can or should be delayed. This cause is epitomized by the college student who begins working on their term paper at the beginning of the semester by spending hours selecting just the right binder and creating cover graphics rather than researching their topic.

Perfectionism and fear of failure drive some people to procrastinate. Some perfectionists recognize that they don't have enough time to do a perfect job so they are discouraged about undertaking the job at all. Others believe they need uninterrupted time to be able to do a perfect job and they never can seem to clear off enough of their schedule to get started. And some wait until the last moment so they can blame any shortcoming of the finished product on insufficient time. They want to be able to say, "I am really much more talented than this shows, but I had to throw it together at the last moment. So, what can you expect?"

A very different cause is resentment. This person says, "I know I should be starting this task, but my spouse has been bugging me about it and I am going to show them that I am in control of my own time."

Procrastination: the Cure

Many of us feel frustrated by a pattern of procrastination. Like one author, we take the position "I am definitely going to take a course on time management . . . just as soon as I can work it into my schedule."[10](#)

However, God does not command us to make the most of our time without giving us the ability to do so. We need to tackle procrastination head on if we want to find a cure in our lives. From the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Nehemiah to the race to the moon in the 1960s,[11](#) some timeless principles stand out. From my studies of literature and the Bible and my experience in simultaneously raising a family, working as a

corporate executive, and pastoring young adults, I suggest five steps to reduce the impact of procrastination in your life. They are:

1. Probing your problem,
2. Praying for perspective,
3. Proper priorities,
4. Perspective-based planning, and
5. Proactive partnering.

Probing Your Problem

When we find ourselves consistently suffering the consequences of procrastination or we find ourselves tempted to procrastinate again, we need to do more than just say, "I am putting off tasks that I shouldn't." We need to examine why we are tempted to delay. The director of student counseling at Cal Tech University counsels us, "Each time you feel 'stuck' or find yourself procrastinating, ask yourself, 'What is going on here?' What am I feeling and how might that contribute to my procrastinating?"[\[12\]](#) Knowing that we are being motivated by resentment or fear or simply a desire to avoid unpleasant activities or feelings should determine how we apply the next four steps.

Prayer

Acknowledge that God has given us all of the time we need to accomplish everything He wants us to accomplish. Since that is probably far more than we normally accomplish, we need to invite God to lead our time management initiative. We need to pray for a clear understanding of God's priorities and perspective. If we are dealing with laziness, we should ask for self control. If we are dealing with emotions such as resentment or fear, we need to ask God to take our thoughts captive in obedience to Christ. If we are struggling with anxiety, we need His peace that passes understanding. If we are struggling with perfectionism, we need to acknowledge that

our total significance is found in Christ, not in our performance. Do not try to bypass this step. Time is a key battleground in the spiritual war. If we run onto the battlefield in our own power and wisdom, we will soon find ourselves hopelessly behind.

Proper Priorities

A simplistic view of our priorities can often get us into time management trouble. God does not want us to have a hierarchy where we do everything possible for the top tier no matter how trivial before we move onto the next level of the hierarchy. Most of us usually have important time commitments for our spouse, our employer, our children, our church, our neighbors, and our personal spiritual and physical health, all on our task list at the same time. The Bible teaches us that Christ is our *life*, not just a priority (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:1-3). We need to seek His direction each day for what is important for that day. If we are dealing with laziness, we need to acknowledge the importance God places on the tasks we are given.

In the flesh, we have a tendency to forget the unpleasant hard tasks on our list in order to partake of more pleasant interruptions to our plan. One practical tool to help deal with this is keeping an up-to-date task list. Over the last thirty years I have done this in a number of ways. What I have found most practical for me is as follows:

- Keep an ongoing list of all known tasks no matter how far away they are due. I do this on my computer since this is my long-term master list.
- Each week, list all tasks for that week on a sheet of paper. I put my work related tasks on one side of the paper and my personal/family tasks on the other.
- Add a column for each day of the week. Select the first day you may be able to work on each task and place an A or B for

that task in the column for that day. An A means the task is critical and really needs to be worked on that day. A B indicates that it would be good to work on that task, but it is not mandatory.

- As tasks are started, mark a dot by the letter. As tasks are completed, put a check mark by the task. If tasks are delegated, put the other person's initial by the task. If tasks are rescheduled, put an arrow by the task.

- Update the sheet of paper every morning to reflect that day's priorities. For example, a task that was a B on Monday and Tuesday may need to be changed to an A on Wednesday.

Note: If I am working on B tasks before addressing all of the A tasks, it is a warning that I may have moved into procrastination mode.

Perspective-based Planning

Committing to keep an updated list of priorities is a big step, but that list may not be very meaningful if we do not set aside time for planning. Many of us have been surprised by unintentional procrastination. We thought we had plenty of time until we started working on the task and discovered that it was harder than expected or we forgot that we needed to order some parts with a long lead time. If your task is to pick up a loaf of bread, then no planning is required. If your task is a major term project, a major product development, or putting a man on the moon, you need to take some time to think through the subtasks required by this project. Proverbs 1:25 teaches us:

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage,
But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.

Perspective based planning means to look at the priority of the overall project and ask these questions about each

subtask:

- What other tasks must I accomplish before I can do this task?
- How long should this task take?
- What are the consequences of delaying this task?
- Are the tasks broken down into small enough increments to take advantage of openings in my schedule to work on them?
- Should this task be delegated to someone else?
- How likely is this task to take longer than expected?

Once I have done this planning, I can do a good job of filling out my weekly priority sheet.

Proactive Partnering

If you are struggling with procrastination issues, don't try to tackle it on your own. Galatians 6:1-5 tells us that we are to help restore those who are struggling and help bear one another's burdens. Yet we are to accept this help without passing our responsibilities onto someone else: "For each one will bear his own load."

Look around for someone who seems to be effective in managing their time. Share your dilemma with them and ask them to help provide guidance and accountability. Ask them to take a look at your weekly priority lists and project plans to see if they are reasonable. Pick out some intermediate deadlines that they will check on and hold you to. It is much easier to recover from missing one intermediate deadline than to be almost to the final deadline and realize that you are way behind.

An accountability partner can also help us avoid swinging from procrastinator to workaholic. Sometimes the partner needs to reassure us that it is ok to take some time for relaxation. After all, Jesus told his disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Sometimes the partner needs to challenge our priorities.

You may have noticed that each of these steps will take some time. Productive people have learned that sufficient time spent in planning will save much more time in the long run.

Conclusion

We have been given the high calling of using our time for God's glory. We are called to be wise and make the most of our time. However, many of us know that we let procrastination rob value from the time God has entrusted to us. God understands our temptation in this area and wants to help us conquer procrastination. We can participate in this by acknowledging our underlying motivation, adopting God's perspective and priorities through prayer, practicing a discipline of planning, and allowing others to hold us accountable. When we commit to practicing these things, we will be able to rejoice in the privilege we have of converting fleeting time into eternal value.

Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanack, June 1746.
2. All Scriptures are from the NASB except where noted.
3. Alyce P. Cornyn-Selby, manager and author, Procrastinator's Success Kit (Beynch Press Publishing, 1987).
4. Italics indicate the author's substituted words.
- 5 . See also Col 4:5-6.
6. Henry David Thoreau, Walden, chapter 1, "Eternity," accessible online at www.kenkifer.com/Thoreau/economy.htm.
7. Judith L. Johnson and A. Michael Bloom, "An analysis of the contribution of the five factors of personality to variance in academic procrastination," *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1995): 127-133.
8. Pychyl, T. A., Morin, R.W., & Salmon, B. R. "Procrastination and planning fallacy: An examination of the study habits of university students," special issue, *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 15, (2000): 135-150.
9. Irene Tham, Journal of Young Investigators, Vol. 2, Issue 1

(June 1999),
www.jyi.org/volumes/volume2/issue1/features/tham.html.

10. Louis Boone, author of *Contemporary Marketing and Contemporary Business*,
www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/louis_e_boone.html.

11. For an interesting treatment of how the race to the moon was accomplished ahead of schedule, check out Mike Gray, *Angle of Attack: Harrison Storms and the Race to the Moon* (W. W. Norton and Co., 1992).

12. Dr. Kevin P. Austin, Director of the Student Counseling Services, CalTech University;
www.counseling.caltech.edu/articles/procrastination.html

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Confessions of a Cellphone-Challenged Journalist

I have a confession.

Not one of those tawdry confessions, but it is a little embarrassing. You see, I am cellphone challenged.

I used a cellphone once – about ten years ago when volunteering to help rebuild Miami after Hurricane Andrew. The BellSouth loaner, a real clunker, helped me navigate the storm-ravaged county amidst downed street signs and landmarks.

But I've never owned one. Voicemail takes my messages and I've seldom wanted to be more accessible. Some of my friends swear by cellphones. Others swear at them. Ever been in a movie theater when a filmgoer gets a call and decides to talk?

My wife attended a conference presentation during which a

woman asked the speaker a question from the audience. In the middle of her question, with all eyes on her, her cellphone rang. She not only answered it, but also conducted a brief conversation while everyone watched aghast.

Airline travelers talk before takeoff until the flight attendant tells them to stop. They resume talking when the plane lands. They talk walking through the airport, on the inter-terminal shuttle, entering the restroom. They talk while using the toilet or washing their hands. Some restrooms sound like offices.

Drivers talk. Beachgoers talk. Students talk between classes. Shoppers talk while cruising the aisles. ("What kind of cheese did you want me to get?")

Some restaurants ask diners not to use cellphones. Some summer camps have banned them because they distract kids from social and recreational activities.

My doctor's office has a sign asking patients to please not talk on cellphones while the doctor or nurse is examining them. (Let your mind wander on that theme for a moment.)

One of my favorite signs is inside a nearby church: "Please turn off cellphones during service. (Let God call you.)"

The hit movie, "Bruce Almighty," depicts God's attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the number is valid in many area codes. After the film's release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after 20 calls per hour clogged her cellphone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station seemed to think they'd really discovered a direct line to God. One left a message confessing her adultery.

Another number holder decided to offer some friendly advice. She changed her voice message to say, "Looking for God? Well, I'm not Him, but I do know Him. And knowing Him has changed my life. You can know Him too. In fact, it's a local call."

Come to think of it, that may not be a bad idea. Jeremiah (the Jewish prophet, not the bullfrog) said God told him, "Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know." It doesn't even require a cellphone.

I guess I can live with cellphones if people can realize that they're not for everyone. If you have one, I certainly don't fault you. But please, do turn it off when you go to see the doctor.

Giving Can Be Good for You: Science Says So

"All You Need is Love"

Do you want happiness and fulfillment in life? Then practice giving, advises an influential medical professor.

"It really is good to be good," claims Stephen Post, PhD., professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. "Science says it is so."[\[1\]](#)

Post and coauthor Jill Neimark present evidence in their book, [Why Good Things Happen to Good People](#). The institute Post heads has funded "over fifty studies [related to giving] at forty-four major universities."[\[2\]](#) He's convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in a

fragmented society.

Post says research has produced remarkable findings: “Giving protects overall health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease.” If pharmaceutical companies could charge for giving, we might see ads for “Give Back” instead of “Prozac,” he speculates. One program, “Rx: Volunteer,” has some California HMO physicians giving volunteerism “prescriptions” to their Medicare patients.[\[3\]](#)

Post and Neimark say around five hundred scientific studies demonstrate that unselfish love can enhance health. For instance, Paul Wink, a Wellesley College psychologist, studied data that followed about two hundred people every decade since the 1920s. Giving during high school correlated with good mental and physical health across life spans.[\[4\]](#)

Other research says that giving correlates with lower teen depression and suicide risk and with lower depression among the elderly. Studies at Stanford and elsewhere found links between frequent volunteering and delaying death. Post says giving even trumps receiving when it comes to reducing mortality.[\[5\]](#)

Give more; enjoy life and live longer? Maybe, as Jesus famously said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 NASB). Both Jewish and Christian biblical texts admonish us to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Mt. 22:39 NIV). I don’t know about you, but I find it fascinating to explore these ways that contemporary science and social science often highlight the value of ancient biblical principles.

Post presents research to support the value of ten ways of expressing giving love. Here we will examine four of them: compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening.

“Love cures,” wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger. It cures “both the ones who give it and the ones who receive

it.”{6}

Compassion’s Benefits

Illustrations abound of giving’s personal benefits.

Millard Fuller, a millionaire, gave away much of his wealth at age thirty. He and his wife, Linda, sold their business and affiliated with Koinonia Farm, a Georgia Christian community. They built houses in Zaire and then founded [Habitat for Humanity](#) in 1976 to help needy people build affordable homes. Fuller’s goal was “to eliminate poverty housing from the face of the earth. Get rid of shacks!”{7}

Today, Habitat volunteers have constructed over two hundred twenty-five thousand houses, helping over a million people in over three thousand communities worldwide.{8} Countless volunteers attest to the personal satisfaction their involvement brings. And they’re in over ninety countries. In Amman, Jordan, for example, I had lunch with the Habitat director there who involves compassionate volunteers in the Middle East.

As I reflect on his work, I’m reminded of another Middle Eastern leader who showed great compassion. One of His followers wrote, “When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36 NIV).

Stephen Post says “we’re hardwired to open our hearts and to care—and in fact, compassion is important for the survival of the species.”{9} He cites preliminary psychological research in which “compassion significantly reduced depression and stress.”{10}

In that light, consider the intriguing tale of a former *Playboy* model who has devoted her life to helping poor kids in Haiti. Susan Scott Krabacher’s childhood helped her connect

with the hurting children she now serves. Sexual abuse, her mother's psychiatric breakdown, multiple foster homes, and her brother's suicide took their emotional toll. In her late teens, she became a *Playboy* centerfold and moved into the Playboy mansion.

Ten years of playing mixed with depression. Eventually she reconnected with the Christian faith of her youth. Observing Haiti's poverty prompted her to learn more of the biblical take on life. The foundation she and her husband started runs three orphanages for twenty-three hundred children. "I work long hours," Krabacher notes, "put up with unbelievable sacrifice, bury too many children, and get no compensation but love, which is the greatest freedom you can know and the most important thing in the world."[\[11\]](#)

Humor – Good Medicine

There are intriguing parallels between some modern social scientific findings and time-tested biblical life-lessons. One of these involves humor. An ancient proverb says, "A joyful heart is good medicine" (Prov. 17:22 NASB).

Humor heals. Think about how you felt the last time you roared with laughter. Maybe a funny movie, a family situation, or an uproarious joke session had you even crying and gasping for air. Your abdominal muscles and heartbeat went wild. One Stanford psychiatrist "found that a hundred laughs is the aerobic equivalent of ten minutes of rowing."[\[12\]](#)

Stephen Post sees humor as a way to help others, "a very effective way of connecting, of lightening another's life as well as our own." Interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted by a Tel Aviv University researcher found that many cited humor "as a way of surviving trauma." Post notes that Ronald Reagan was a master of using humor to put other people [and perhaps himself] at ease. When President Reagan was shot

and at risk of dying, he quipped to the emergency room doctors, “I hope you’re all Republicans.”[{13}](#)

Of course, bitter humor can hurt rather than heal. But positive humor can help people relate and communicate openness. Post cites psychologist Robert Provine who monitored and analyzed over twelve hundred “bouts” of laughter in public places. Provine says shared, contagious laughter can be “an important signal you send to someone that says, ‘This is play. I’m not going to attack or hurt you.’”[{14}](#)

Humor is also important for a successful marriage, according to University of Washington psychologist John Gottman. He found that coping with issues “through dialogue, laughter, and affection” was a good predictor of whether marriages would last.[{15}](#)

On a Detroit TV talk show, the host and I were discussing my book, *Secrets of Successful Humor*. He asked about humor and marriage. I told him, “The secret of our marriage is that we take time two evenings each week to go out to a lovely restaurant. A nice dinner, some candlelight, soft music, a slow walk home. She goes Tuesdays; I go Fridays.”

It hit a nerve. The host roared, long and loud. Contagious laughter spread throughout the studio audience. We all enjoyed some communal fun that helped open us up to each other.

Loyalty Bonds

A famous biblical proverb notes, “A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need” (Prov. 17:17 NLT). Post believes that “Loyalty is love that lasts. . . . The commitment inherent in loyalty defuses our deepest existential anxiety.” He continues: “Broken covenants are hard to restore and never quite attain their state of original trust. It’s not easy to find loyalty in our society.”[{16}](#)

Marriage and friendship, of course, can be significant expressions of loyalty. University of Chicago demographer Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher co-authored the book *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. Analyzing data from over six thousand families, Waite discovered strong correlations between marriage and longevity. Gallagher says their research demonstrated that, compared to similar singles, married folks “are physically healthier, live longer . . . experience less anxiety, depression, hostility, and loneliness, and are more likely to tell you that they’re happy with life in general. They have more sex than single people of the same age.” Of course there’s a caveat, Post notes. High-conflict marriages bring stress and can lower immune function.[{17}](#)

Friendships count, too. University of North Carolina sociologist Rebecca Adams’ frequent childhood moves had her attending thirteen schools by the time she entered college. She feels she learned how to *make* new friends but wasn’t as good at *maintaining* them. These experiences helped motivate her to study friendship. She’s discovered strong links between quality of relationships and mental well-being. Adams notes, “It’s been shown over and over again that friendship is more important to psychological well-being than family relations are. . . . Friendships are voluntary. So we’ll choose friendships that support our psychological well-being.”[{18}](#)

Men can learn a lot from women about friendship. Male and female friendship styles often differ, Adams says: “Men define their friendships in terms of shared activities, and women define them in terms of conversation. For men, a friend is their fishing, golfing, or bowling buddy. For women, a friend is someone they can confide in.” Of course there are exceptions, but Post notes that emotional intimacy is what nourishes friendships most.[{19}](#)

Giving love through compassion, humor, and loyalty all contribute to our well-being. But, is anybody listening?

“I’m Listening”

The television comedy *Frasier* was one of the most popular TV series in U.S. history. It’s been called “a thinking person’s comedy.” Reruns are ubiquitous, about six episodes daily in our area. Frasier Crane, the protagonist, is a caring, sensitive, cultured—but insecure and sometimes pompous—Seattle radio psychiatrist who always greets his callers with, “I’m listening.” Yet sometimes he becomes so wrapped up in himself that he tunes others out. He’s not alone. In one amusing scene, Frasier’s ex wife, Lilith (also a psychiatrist), tries to converse with Frasier’s brother, Niles (yet another psychiatrist), about an especially weighty matter. Niles, focused on a video game, doesn’t pay her sufficient attention, prompting Lilith to exclaim, “Is there a *chair* here I could talk to?”

I confess that in our home, my wife Meg sometimes has to use Lilith’s line to get my attention. (Mind you, I don’t confess that it’s as often as *she* might *claim*!) But listening is a powerful form of affirmation and an important tool in understanding and communication. Solomon, a wise Jewish king, wrote, “What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!” (Proverbs 18:13 NLT)

Stephen Post writes, “When we truly absorb another’s story, we are saying, ‘You count. Your life and feelings and thoughts matter to me. And I want to know who you really are.’” He claims that listening can help both the listener and the one listened to. New studies indicate: “Listening activates the part of our brains hardwired for empathy. . . . When we listen to others in pain, their stress response quiets down and their body has a better chance to heal.”[{20}](#)

Post says that without a good listener, we can feel terribly alone, “like the psalmist in the Bible who cries out, ‘No man cared for my soul.’” He continues, “This has led some scholars to call the God of the Psalms a God of listening. Our need for

a listener is an inherent aspect of all prayer.”[\[21\]](#)

So, giving love is good for you. Science says so. Compassion, humor, loyalty, and listening are important ways you can express giving love. Is it as intriguing to you as it is to me that contemporary science and social science are often in harmony with age-old biblical counsel? Makes me think I should read the Bible more often.

Notes

1. Stephen Post, PhD, and Jill Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 15.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 7.
4. Ibid., 7-8, 48-51.
5. Ibid., 8-10, 68-69.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 25, 275.
8. www.habitat.org
9. Post and Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen*, 179-180.
10. Ibid., 184.
11. Ibid., 177-8; see also Susan Krabacher (as told to Kristi Watts), “Diary of a Playboy Centerfold,” *The 700 Club*, www.cbn.com/700club/features/amazing/Susan_Krabacher061506.aspx; accessed January 24, 2008.
12. Post and Neimark, *Why Good Things Happen*, 132.
13. Ibid., 133-135.
14. Ibid., 139-140.
15. Ibid., 141-142.
16. Ibid., 199-200.
17. Ibid., 203-205.
18. Ibid., 216-217.
19. Ibid., 221.
20. Ibid., 231-232.
21. Ibid., 234.

A Doctor's Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own

challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a website www.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.net to chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes [biblical references](#) to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and

find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit [his website](#) and youll see what I mean.

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Your Money, Your Life or Your Wine

Could offering a cup of human kindness save your life sometime? It helped protect guests from a menacing gunman at a recent Washington, DC, dinner gathering.

Comedian Jack Benny had a famous skit in which an armed robber pointed a gun at Benny, whose comedy often poked fun at his own miserly show business persona. In the routine, Benny told the robber to put the gun down. The robber persisted. “Your money or your life!” demanded the crook, irritated by the delay. “I’m thinking it over,” deadpanned Benny.[\[1\]](#)

Quick thinking helped save the DC dinner guests.

Give me your money!

The Washington Post reports[\[2\]](#) that some friends had enjoyed steak and shrimp at a DC home and were sitting on the back patio sipping wine around midnight. A hooded gunman slipped in through an open gate and held a pistol to a fourteen-year-old

girl's head. "Give me your money, or I'll start shooting," demanded the intruder.

The guests—including the girl's parents—froze. Then one adult—Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan—had an idea.

"We were just finishing dinner," Rowan said to the uninvited guest. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The robber sipped their French wine and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

Michael Rabdau, the girl's father, offered the man the glass. Rowan offered the bottle. The man—with hood down, by this point—sipped more wine and sampled some Camembert cheese. Then he stowed the gun in his pocket and admitted, "I think I may have come to the wrong house. I'm sorry. Can I get a hug?"

Rowan hugged the man. Then Rabdau, his wife and the other two guests each hugged him. The man asked for a group hug; the five adults complied. He left with the wine glass. There were no injuries, no theft. The stunned guests entered the house and stared at each other silently. Police came. Investigators discovered the empty and unbroken wine glass on the ground in a nearby alley.

"I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty," Rabdau recalled, according to the *Post*. "He was very aggressive at first; then it turned into a love fest. I don't know what it was."

"There was this degree of disbelief and terror at the same time," Rabdau observed. "Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned—like, we're one big happy family now. I thought: Was it the wine? Was it the cheese?" The entire encounter lasted about ten minutes. DC police chalked it up as strange but true.

Gentle Answers

An old Jewish proverb says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” {3} I suspect her friends are extremely grateful that Cha Cha Rowan had the presence of mind to offer a gentle reply to the intruder’s demands.

Sometimes the psychological approach can deter disaster. Kindness and hospitality often can defuse tension and help open hearts and minds. Was the robber lonely? Feeling sad or rejected? Weary of his lifestyle? Hungry for acceptance and friendship? Rowan and her friends struck an emotional chord that resonated, apparently deeply.

Brute force and overwhelming arguments are common cultural responses to danger or opposition and, of course, theyre sometimes necessary. Most of us are glad Hitler was defeated and that legislators outlawed slavery. But could gentle answers improve any disputes—or families, marriages, workplaces, political relationships—that you’ve seen?

Notes

1. George Grow, “Funnyman Jack Benny Won Hearts Mainly by Making Fun of Himself,” Voice of America News, 21 May 2005; at www.voanews.com/specialenglish/archive/2005-05/2005-05-21-voa1.cfm (accessed July 19, 2007).
2. Allison Klein, A Gate-Crasher’s Change of Heart, Washington Post, July 13, 2007; B01; at <http://tinyurl.com/2q9mjc> (accessed July 17, 2007).
3. Proverbs 15:1 NIV.

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