

# Chapter 14

## KEEPING THE LOVE TANK FULL

Love is the most important word in the English language—and the most confusing. Both

secular and  
religious thinkers  
agree that love  
plays a central  
role in life. We  
are told that  
“love is a many-  
splendored  
thing” and that  
“love makes the  
world go round.”

Thousands of  
books, songs,  
magazines, and  
movies are  
peppered with  
the word.

Numerous  
philosophical  
and theological  
systems have

made a  
prominent place  
for love. And the  
founder of the  
Christian faith  
wanted love to  
be the  
distinguishing  
characteristic of  
His followers.<sup>1</sup>

Psychologists  
have concluded  
that the need to  
feel loved is a  
primary human  
emotional need.  
For love, we will  
climb mountains,  
cross seas,  
traverse desert

sands, and  
endure untold  
hardships.

Without love,  
mountains  
become  
unclimbable,  
seas uncrossable,  
deserts  
unbearable, and  
hardships our

plight in life. The  
Christian apostle  
to the Gentiles,  
Paul, exalted love  
when he  
indicated that all  
human  
accomplishments  
that are not  
motivated by

love are, in the  
end, empty. He  
concluded that in  
the last scene of  
the human  
drama, only  
three characters  
will remain:  
"faith, hope and  
love. But the  
greatest of these



is love."<sup>2</sup>

If we can agree  
that the word  
love permeates  
human society,  
both historically  
and in the  
present, we must  
also agree that it  
is a most

confusing word.

We use it in a  
thousand ways.

We say, "I love  
hot dogs," and in  
the next breath,

"I love my  
mother." We  
speak of loving  
activities:

swimming,

skiing, hunting.

We love objects:

food, cars,

houses. We love

animals: dogs,

cats, even pet

snails. We love

nature: trees,

grass, flowers,

and weather. We

love people:  
mother, father,  
son, daughter,  
parents, wives,  
husbands,  
friends. We even  
fall in love with  
love.

If all that is not  
confusing

enough, we also  
use the word  
love to explain  
behavior. "I did it  
because I love  
her." That  
explanation is  
given for all  
kinds of actions.  
A man is  
involved in an

adulterous  
relationship, and  
he calls it love.

The preacher, on  
the other hand,  
calls it sin. The  
wife of an  
alcoholic picks  
up the pieces  
after her

husband's latest  
episode. She  
calls it love, but  
the psychologist  
calls it  
codependency.  
The parent  
indulges all the  
child's wishes,  
calling it love.  
The family

therapist would  
call it  
irresponsible  
parenting. What  
is loving  
behavior?

The purpose of  
this book is not



to eliminate all  
confusion  
surrounding the  
word love, but to  
focus on that  
kind of love that  
is essential to  
our emotional  
health. Child  
psychologists  
affirm that every

child has certain basic emotional needs that must be met if he is to be emotionally stable. Among those emotional needs, none is more basic than the need for love

and affection, the need to sense that he or she belongs and is wanted. With an adequate supply of affection, the child will likely develop into a responsible adult. Without

that love, he or  
she will be  
emotionally and  
socially retarded.

I liked the  
metaphor the  
first time I heard  
it: "Inside every  
child is an  
'emotional tank'

waiting to be  
filled with love.

When a child  
really feels loved,  
he will develop  
normally but  
when the love  
tank is empty,  
the child will  
misbehave. Much  
of the

misbehavior of  
children is  
motivated by the  
cravings of an  
empty 'love  
tank.'" I was  
listening to Dr.  
Ross Campbell, a  
psychiatrist who  
specializes in the

treatment of  
children and  
adolescents.

As I listened, I  
thought of the  
hundreds of  
parents who had  
paraded the  
misdeeds of their  
children through

my office. I had  
never visualized  
an empty love  
tank inside those  
children, but I  
had certainly  
seen the results  
of it. Their  
misbehavior was  
a misguided  
search for the



love they did not  
feel. They were  
seeking love in  
all the wrong  
places and in all  
the wrong ways.

I remember  
Ashley, who at  
thirteen years of  
age was being

treated for a  
sexually  
transmitted  
disease. Her  
parents were  
crushed. They  
were angry with  
Ashley. They  
were upset with  
the school, which  
they blamed for

teaching her  
about sex. "Why  
would she do  
this?" they asked.

At the heart of  
mankind's  
existence is the  
desire to be  
intimate and to  
be loved by

another.

Marriage is  
designed to  
meet that need  
for intimacy and  
love.

In my  
conversation  
with Ashley, she  
told me of her

parents' divorce  
when she was six  
years old. "I  
thought my  
father left  
because he  
didn't love me,"  
she said. "When  
my mother  
remarried when I  
was ten, I felt she

now had  
someone to love  
her, but I still had  
no one to love  
me. I wanted so  
much to be  
loved. I met this  
boy at school. He  
was older than  
me, but he liked

me. I couldn't  
believe it. He was  
kind to me, and  
in a while I really  
felt he loved me.  
I didn't want to  
have sex, but I  
wanted to be  
loved."

Ashley's "love

tank" had been  
empty for many  
years. Her  
mother and  
stepfather had  
provided for her  
physical needs  
but had not  
realized the deep  
emotional  
struggle raging



inside her. They  
certainly loved  
Ashley, and they  
thought that she  
felt their love.

Not until it was  
almost too late  
did they discover  
that they were  
not speaking

Ashley's primary  
love language.

The emotional  
need for love,  
however, is not  
simply a  
childhood  
phenomenon.

That need  
follows us into  
adulthood and  
into marriage.  
The “in love”  
experience  
temporarily  
meets that need,  
but it is  
inevitably a  
“quick fix” and,

as we shall learn  
later, has a  
limited and  
predictable life  
span. After we  
come down from  
the high of the  
"in love"  
obsession, the  
emotional need

for love  
resurfaces  
because it is  
fundamental to  
our nature. It is  
at the center of  
our emotional  
desires. We  
needed love  
before we “fell in  
love,” and we will

need it as long  
as we live.

The need to feel  
loved by one's  
spouse is at the  
heart of marital  
desires. A man  
said to me  
recently, "What  
good is the

house, the cars,  
the place at the  
beach, or any of  
the rest of it if  
your wife doesn't  
love you?" Do  
you understand  
what he was  
really saying?  
"More than  
anything, I want

to be loved by  
my wife."

Material things  
are no  
replacement for  
human,  
emotional love. A  
wife says, "He  
ignores me all  
day long and



then wants to  
jump in bed with  
me. I hate it." She  
is not a wife who  
hates sex; she is  
a wife  
desperately  
pleading for  
emotional love.

Something in our

nature cries out  
to be loved by  
another. Isolation  
is devastating to  
the human  
psyche. That is  
why solitary  
confinement is  
considered the  
cruelest of  
punishments. At

the heart of  
mankind's  
existence is the  
desire to be  
intimate and to  
be loved by  
another.

Marriage is  
designed to  
meet that need

for intimacy and  
love. That is why  
the ancient  
biblical writings  
spoke of the  
husband and  
wife becoming  
“one flesh.” That  
did not mean  
that individuals  
would lose their

identity; it meant that they would enter into each other's lives in a deep and intimate way. The New Testament writers challenged both the husband and

the wife to love  
each other. From  
Plato to Peck,  
writers have  
emphasized the  
importance of  
love in marriage.

But, if love is  
important, it is  
also elusive. I

have listened to  
many married  
couples share  
their secret pain.

Some came to  
me because the  
inner ache had  
become  
unbearable.

Others came  
because they

realized that  
their behavior  
patterns or the  
misbehavior of  
their spouse was  
destroying the  
marriage. Some  
came simply to  
inform me that  
they no longer



wanted to be  
married. Their  
dreams of "living  
happily ever  
after" had been  
dashed against  
the hard walls of  
reality. Again and  
again I have  
heard the words  
"Our love is

gone, our  
relationship is  
dead. We used  
to feel close, but  
not now. We no  
longer enjoy  
being with each  
other. We don't  
meet each  
other's needs."

Their stories bear  
testimony that  
adults as well as  
children have  
"love tanks."

Could it be that  
deep inside  
hurting couples  
exists an invisible  
"emotional love

tank" with its  
gauge on  
empty? Could  
the misbehavior,  
withdrawal, harsh  
words, and  
critical spirit  
occur because of  
that empty tank?  
If we could find a  
way to fill it,

could the  
marriage be  
reborn? With a  
full tank would  
couples be able  
to create an  
emotional  
climate where it  
is possible to  
discuss

differences and  
resolve conflicts?  
Could that tank  
be the key that  
makes marriage  
work?

Those questions  
sent me on a

long journey.

Along the way, I  
discovered the  
simple yet  
powerful insights  
contained in this  
book. The  
journey has  
taken me not  
only through  
thirty years of

marriage  
counseling but  
into the hearts  
and minds of  
hundreds of  
couples  
throughout  
America. From  
Seattle to Miami,  
couples have



invited me into  
the inner  
chamber of their  
marriages, and  
we have talked  
openly. The  
illustrations  
included in this  
book are cut  
from the fabric  
of real life. Only

names and  
places are  
changed to  
protect the  
privacy of the  
individuals who  
have spoken so  
freely.

I am convinced  
that keeping the

emotional love  
tank full is as  
important to a  
marriage as  
maintaining the  
proper oil level is  
to an  
automobile.

Running your  
marriage on an  
empty "love

tank" may cost  
you even more  
than trying to  
drive your car  
without oil. What  
you are about to  
read has the  
potential of  
saving thousands  
of marriages and

can even  
enhance the  
emotional  
climate of a  
good marriage.

Whatever the  
quality of your  
marriage now, it  
can always be  
better.

WARNING:

Understanding  
the five love  
languages and  
learning to speak  
the primary love  
language of your  
spouse may  
radically affect  
his or her

behavior. People  
behave  
differently when  
their emotional  
love tanks are  
full.

Before we  
examine the five

love languages,  
however, we  
must address  
one other  
important but  
confusing  
phenomenon:  
the euphoric  
experience of  
"falling in love."



# NOTES

1. John 13:35.

2. 1 Corinthians  
13:13.