

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.¹

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.”²

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.