

Love in action

Mary McKinney | Posted: Monday, January 26, 2015 10:25 am

The adage “love is a verb” has been used in books, documentaries and even as a song. It is the essence of 1 John 3:18, in which we are encouraged to love not with words or speech, but with action and truth.

Despite the wide recognition that love is action, people promise lifelong commitments without real attention to that fundamental truth.

Feeling love’s glow brings high hopes and heartfelt promises; it is common to remain entrenched in focusing on feeling, rather than action. Many songs, movies, television stories and other depictions support that fixed idea.

For me to work with couples as they prepare for lifelong commitment, or work to enhance or repair a commitment, is an immense privilege. It allows me to observe and promote the inherent power of commitment. Commitment is the action of love as a choice that is made repeatedly across time.

The feeling of love is largely about wanting and being wanted, sexually and otherwise. The action of loving also includes choosing.

Wanting and choosing — or being wanted and chosen — leads to a deeper relationship than only wanting and being wanted.

Commitment means choosing the relationship over and over, throughout a lifetime, even when you or the relationship isn’t chosen for a time.

In addition to sexual fidelity, it involves many other needs of the relationship, some which are unique and some are universal, such as enjoying time together and finding meaning in life together.

When a choice is made to meet these needs repeatedly and in ways that are consistent with personal and relationship values, the relationship deepens and spouses thrive.

Separating feelings from thoughts contributes to maintenance of a solid sense of self when values differ; differentiation is the ability to manage well during distress, with a solid sense of self that is undiminished by distress and it is necessary to continue with the choice.



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Many authors in the field of marriage and family therapy describe marriage as a third entity: There are the two spouses and the relationship. All three entities require care across time for any of them to be sustained and healthy.

Esther Perel refers to marriage as a “vessel that contains both security and adventure.” Perel adds that “commitment offers one of the great luxuries of life: time.” She continues that “erotically intelligent couples” treat their relationship as “something alive and ongoing” across time. These couples take opportunities to actively determine their relationship through choices, including in response to missteps.

Often, it is not immediately clear what response supports the relationship.

Sometimes, healthy response entails sacrifice of personal comfort, wishes, and even of needs, temporarily. It is problematic if that response comprises sacrifice of closely held values.

At times, values may be contradictory and require change in order to consider good options. For example, partners’ needs may be at odds with regards to the amount of social connection versus quiet time each one needs.

Likewise, differing needs mean differing response needs to anger and hurt.

Compromise, sacrifice and evolution are some of the options for response to differences that may strengthen each partner and the relationship.

Commitment to choosing the partner and the relationship, while maintaining core values, brings these options into view.

Chris Jami affirms, “To say that one waits a lifetime for his soul mate to come around is a paradox. People eventually get sick of waiting — take a chance on someone, and by the art of commitment, become soul mates, which takes a lifetime to perfect.”

This art is adventure and security, and means adjusting and growing within the safety of the “vessel” of marriage.

Obviously, that process of perfecting doesn’t always come without struggle or pain.

Adventure and security are equally possible in experiences of joy and heartache, including heartaches coming from the action — or lack of action — of the partner.

Every partner acts and fails to act in ways that bring grief to the other during a lifetime. Abuse erodes or removes the security of the vessel of marriage. Other sorrow in relationship is normal.

How a partner responds to heartache determines if the experience will help build up them and their relationship, or dismantle it all. Help from a psychotherapist is sometimes useful or necessary to renew adventure and security.

Choices made toward becoming soul mates are worthy of marriage.