

Romance and Commitment: The Best Medicine for Marriage

By Shelley Smith Beatty

Our marriage has thrived because we have learned to actively keep each other at the top of the “to do” list. That perspective helps everything else to fall into place.

They said it couldn't be done. We were told that our marriage would not survive.

We had been married only a few months when my husband, Bob, reported a conversation he had had with an operating-room nurse. When she learned that he was an intern and that he would take his neurosurgical training at the same hospital as his residency, she said that she would be surprised if his marriage survived. She claimed that marriages could not last through the commitment to the hospital and the horrendous hours needed to train for his particular specialty.

The six years of post-medical-school training were indeed difficult. I was married to a man who, in a certain sense, was married to a hospital. But our lives aren't much different now. Even though his training is completed, his commitment to his patients remains the same. No matter how important I am to him, the hospital and his patients often require him to spend long hours away from home.

When Bob was training to become a neurosurgeon, our time together was greatly limited. His schedule took him away from home half of the evenings and nights. And, during each seven-day period, he spent three days entirely at the hospital.

He worked every day, including weekends. Every other Sunday was his only day off. The year he spent as chief resident, he was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When he was home, he had to be reachable by phone at all times and be prepared to go to the hospital at any time. There were many weeks when I did not see Bob at all.

But eleven years and three children later, I am pleased to report that our marriage not only survived but thrived. Our marriage was solemnized in a temple of the Lord, which perhaps gave it an edge over other residents' marriages. But it thrived because the basic elements needed in any marriage were there—namely love and romance. That doesn't mean we never had a misunderstanding or didn't see the need to improve our marriage. What it does mean is that we remained committed to one another and sought ways to make sure we had more ups than downs in our life together.

Bob told me daily how much he loved and appreciated me, often over the telephone in a late-night conversation. Bob also told me that I was beautiful, even when I was pregnant. (I especially needed to hear that during those times.)

I always appreciated a phone call from my husband, especially when the children were small. I had no means to get out of the house, and the phone call from someone who spoke grown-up English seemed like a lifeline.

Occasionally, I found a note tucked under my pillow. Bob also brought

me flowers, and sometimes he sent me a surprise card in the mail to let me know he loved and appreciated me. In addition, he remembered my birthday, our anniversary, and holidays like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. Bob was also unpredictable in his delivery, in a delightful way. While making the bed, I might find a valentine bouquet on the pillow, or I might open the refrigerator to spy a note inside. Very often, the cards were homemade. One card from my football-fanatic husband featured a cut-out picture of a football team in action with the words "I love you even more than football."

We have consistently been able to celebrate our anniversary. Bob's schedule meant that he had to make special arrangements weeks before, trading schedules or working extra time to have that evening free. It was his way of letting me know that I was more important than work and that spending time with me was worth the extra effort. He has done other things to make me feel appreciated. On one occasion, he told me to keep a particular Saturday afternoon open and gave me no other details. Finally, when that afternoon arrived, he took me to a women's clothing store and handed me an envelope full of quarters, dimes, and nickels.

I knew that we had to be very careful about the money we spent. We budgeted right to the penny, including the small allotment Bob had to spend on meals while he was at the hospital. Bob had skimmed on meals and skipped desserts and candy bars for weeks to save some money to allow me a mini-shopping spree. I was deeply touched by his self-sacrifice.

Many of the things I did for my husband during those early years seemed small, but often they took extra effort. For instance, I always tried to cook breakfast for him. With my husband's schedule, I had to

arise anywhere from 4:00 to 5:30 A.M. Even when I had been up with a baby most of the night, I still made sure he ate before he left home.

I made it a habit to pack a lunch for him, too. Very often, his schedule would not meet the hospital cafeteria hours, and the brown-bag lunch would be all he could eat until he came home again, sometimes two days later.

When Bob arrived home, I usually had a hot dinner waiting for him. He was not able to get home in time to eat dinner with the children, so I fixed him a separate dinner for later, when he returned between 8:00 and 10:00 P.M. The meals were small contributions that required a little extra effort, but they meant a lot to him.

I also found that one of the greatest gifts I could give Bob was a positive, cheerful attitude. I had promised myself before marriage that I would not complain about his schedule and that I would be a constant support to him. When he arrived at the door after work, I would give him a cheerful "Hello" and a big hug.

The times that I drove him to work so I could use our car were a real test. Often, after my husband called for a ride, between my departure from home and my arrival at the hospital, an emergency had arisen that demanded his attention. This left me with restless children in a parked car in front of the hospital. Waiting an hour or more was not unusual; on more than one occasion, I waited for three hours.

But I always tried to greet Bob cheerfully, and I didn't complain, realizing that he had no control over the situation. A positive, cheerful attitude can be a real boost to someone who is tired and hungry.

Many of the things that have kept the romantic fires burning in our

marriage are the same ones that helped spark the flame during the courtship period. We've tried not to let those things that were crucial during dating slip into unimportance.

One thing we have continued to do is watch our appearance. Bob has kept himself in good physical condition. I'm sure I would still love him if he had put on a few pounds, but I appreciate the fact that I can still see the same man I was attracted to in the beginning. In return, I do the same for him. I jog each morning and carefully watch my weight.

My husband and I also still date—actual dates, at times set aside just for Bob and me. On our dates, we have a rule that we do not discuss work or children. Sometimes our dates are simply quiet evenings at home watching old movies on television after the children are in bed. Sometimes we go for walks and buy ice-cream cones, go window shopping, or see movies. We have visited sick friends, played one-on-one basketball, jogged together, redeemed coupons at a hamburger place, and visited the library or a museum. Occasionally, we go to a play or a concert. It isn't so much where we go or what we do; it's that we do it together.

We also take time to plan. In our planning sessions we calendar and coordinate our schedules. How frustrating it can be for a wife who has a busy Saturday planned to watch her husband zip off Saturday morning to a work party at the church—in their one and only car! What self-respecting Latter-day Saint wife can really complain about her husband participating in a ward work party? But a wife *can* complain if it has not been coordinated with her schedule.

Our weekly planning sessions have also helped us become more interested in each other's activities. It has given us time to look inward or examine our children's needs and to decide on the action we need

to take to resolve problems. We also budget and plan financially, as well as plan dates, time with the children, **family** home evenings, and Sunday meetings and activities.

An outsider, I'm sure, would view our lives as total chaos, seeing the pressure of Bob's occupation, our church activities and responsibilities, our children's school schedules, and our activities and lessons. People are always coming or going at our house, and our phone rings anytime, night or day. Occasionally our lives settle down to the hurry-scurry level, but our priorities remain the same. We have learned to actively keep each other at the top of the list, and everything else seems to fall into place.

[photos] Photography by Derek Smith

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