



# Christian Report

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## Charting a Course For Christian Marriage

### Continuing our Letter of Encouragement to Christian Military Couples

In our last installment dealing with the balance of power in the marriage, we left our “Salty Shrinks” poking around their studies for a favorite specialty meat catalog. Alas, events have moved them on. Those delicacies never got ordered. What was in the mailbox recently were two challenge coins Herschel awarded to two fellow veterans for their assistance during a Vietnam War 50th Anniversary Commemorative Partner event at his church. The program was well attended. Five Vietnam War Ear veterans were honored along with the Gold Star daughter of a Vietnam Veterans Memorial honoree. During the event we three veterans shared some of our wartime experiences and how it had impacted our spiritual relationship with God and the church. We felt led to express some of our innermost feelings and thoughts. In a nutshell, we delved into our vulnerabilities. That leads us into the topic of dealing with emotional vulnerabilities within the context of a Christian marriage.

Obviously, we need to feel safe to express vulnerable emotions and especially if that involves confessing sins and asking forgiveness. This requires the courage to speak up even when some degree of anxiety is felt. As intimate and committed couples we need the space to be ourselves, in the current state in which we find ourselves. As Christians we are seeking to be more Christlike, but we remain a “work in progress”. We have a need to honor both our own

and our spouse’s unique personality, interests and passions and especially the progress or level of their spiritual journey toward accepting Christ’s indwelling presence.

This topic calls for us to “put ourselves out there” so to speak. In our first letter on Christian Marriage back in early 2023, we referred to three elements or “tickets” that need to be “punched” or in place for any marriage to have a chance for true success. They come into play in a big way when making the decision about expressing one’s vulnerability. Successful marriages need:

#### **Emotional and Physical Safety.**

If either person does not feel safe, that must be addressed and fixed. For three years we co-

taught a domestic conflict containment class at our base. Our convictions in this area are strong ones.

**Freedom from Addiction.** If there is an addiction at play in the couple by either or both members, then the “drug of choice” (whether chemical or behavioral) will be the primary object of their relationships, not the spouse. Anne was clinical director of two Navy alcohol rehab services in naval hospitals. This is reliable advice.

**Absence of a Third-Party Relationship.** Even if an affair has not blossomed fully yet, the emotional energy that a third close relationship skims off leaves little energy to invest in meaningful relationship work as well as causing damage to trust and robbing a couple of the prerequisite need to feel unique and special to one another.



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When these three “tickets” are in question, the advice that follows is best done within the context and with the assistance of a professional counselor or pastor. Our experience and training as counselors to couples impressed upon us the importance of creating an atmosphere where eventually each member of the couple could find the courage to talk honestly and openly about their feelings and the issues in the relationship that were related to those feelings.

The Hebrews writer reminds us that we are invited by God to “come boldly into the throne of grace... to obtain mercy and grace to help in time of need.” One way of expressing grace toward our spouses is to show it

in how we raise issues with them and in how we respond to them when they raise issues. We like to call this listening with our hearts. We listen with our hearts when we begin conversations in such a way that they get off to a good start. So often efforts to deal with sensitive feelings around problems can quickly raise defensiveness between spouses. This makes it discouraging to share emotions and hard to get down to actually talking a problem out. Listening with your heart around a problem is more likely to occur if the spouse who is distressed about something composes a good “I-statement.”

An “I statement” is sharing an emotion that is related to a mutual problem the other spouse may or may not be aware of or focused on at the time or even see at all. In non-accusatory language the spouse with the concern tells his or her spouse what they are feeling in relationship to a situation or their spouse’s behavior. (Example: I feel left out and hurt when you spend so much of your time off with work friends.) Having then expressed their own emotions and the other’s be-



havior with which it was associated, one endeavors to begin to stop talking and listen oneself. It is admittedly a rather abrupt change of direction from being the burdened one to being the listener. Note we did not say that our feelings are “caused by” the spouse because we think it is important to acknowledge that our own thoughts and feelings about a situation color how we conceptualize it.

While in that listener role we coach a person to look for some aspect of their spouse’s response to which they can relate. Yes, his or her response is likely to be self-defensive to some degree. (Example of spousal response: I really like going to the range with my buddies; our practice makes us better marksmen for competitions.) The critical skill at this

point is to reflect some level of understanding back to him or her while your emotions are not being dealt with.

That would then be followed by a specific behavioral request. (Example: I know you and your buddies really enjoy spending time together at the gun range, I hear that. But would you try to plan more couple activities that would include me so I don’t feel so left out and I can be more a part of your social life?)

The best response of the spouse receiving the news about their spouse’s feelings around a problem is to work toward being as good of an “active listener” as one can under the circumstances. What is an active listener you ask? Active listening simply involves the listener sincerely trying to hear the emotional need of their spouse that has been shared in relation to a particular problem or area of conflict. Checking out what you think you hear is very helpful. (Example: You really feel second place in my social life don’t you?)

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Believe us, guys and gals, if you can sincerely respond like this you have listened with your heart and your marriage is going to grow closer and closer.

Then the task is to negotiate. When both spouses feel at least partially heard, then some level of goodwill can lead to a collaborative decision about the issue. Of course, that decision requires implementation in good faith. (Example: How about my going to the range on Tuesdays and leaving the weekends open for more couple activities?) It helps to have follow up discussions about how the decision works and suggestions for tweaking it.

We know this example is one that is, perhaps, simplistic, but the process is one that reflects the nature of dealing with even more difficult topics related to deeper relationship and spiritual issues. Often very basic needs get buried because one spouse does not trust the other to really hear them and respond lovingly to something they may not, at first exposure, want to hear.

The challenge is clearly for one spouse to feel both courageous enough, and safe enough, to admit a relationship or spiritual problem they are having that the couple needs to work out together. The issue might not even be a change in their spouse that they need, but just to be able to share their innermost selves.

Is this a formula for a perfect conversation that easily gets one's feelings heard, and a problem resolved? We wish it were that simple. No! Conversations are never easily scripted like that in real life. Listening with your heart creates the opportunity to get the conversation about a very personal issue off to a good start.

This is much more effective than starting with some type of accusatory remark or nonverbal show of bitterness which will likely lead to an escalation or a mutual display of upset and defensiveness. You can

be absolutely sure that this approach is more effective than an opening remark such as "the problem with you is you spend too much time at the range!"

We would like to clear up one possible area of confusion that can make some folks hesitate to listen to another's emotions about a difficult issue. That is the belief that listening and being understanding when another is struggling about something in the relationship is tantamount to agreeing with them. We do not give up our agency nor our convictions simply in making an honest effort to understand the dilemma the other person is experiencing. Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well is a beautiful example of His offering understanding yet asserting his guidance regarding righteous behavior and His own authority as the Messiah. He took time for a few moments of conversation and showed a level of empathy for the woman. Then He expressed that understanding through



a respectful conversation. Christ stayed two days in Samaria teaching and making disciples because He first simply asked her for a drink. This simple request was filled with empathetic symbolism due to his ignoring the rigorous Jewish laws regarding Samaritans. He communicated His acceptance of her humanity not her personal behavior. That is what we do when we listen with an understanding heart.

Listening with our hearts allows our spouse to get to the bottom of things. Notice in Christ's conversation at the well the topic moves from water to husbands to the hope for the Messiah. The whole village is blessed by that initial dialogue at the well. When our spouse asks us figuratively for a "drink of water" endeavor to help him or her move their conversation to where it needs to shed light on his or her own core needs.

Hopefully, our description of "listening with our hearts" will yield relief from troubling issues. We know it is a challenging approach that takes time and

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patience to put into operation. The main point is trying to get tough stuff out there for discussion and see the conversation get off to a reasonably promising start. We will close with a bit of advice from our last installment---try to catch your spouse doing something right as you work through the tough conversations when both of you are showing some vulnerability.



We will leave it at that. There is another challenge coin coming soon for a much beloved nephew that recently completed vocational training to become a welder. He doesn't know it, yet, but he will be awarded a BRAVO ZULU coin. Not sure what that is? Ask a sailor!

*Dr. Herschel Hughes, Jr., CDR, MSC, USNR (Ret.) and Dr. Anne S. Hughes, LCDR, USNR (Ret.) are CMF Local Reps who are engaged in CMF's Marriage & Family and Combat Trauma Ministries. During different seasons of the year, they are able to adopt a vagabond lifestyle with their RV and enjoy traveling to different military ministry posts while continuing their own Bible teaching and ministry via video conference.*

## TAPS: In Memoriam

It is always with great sadness to us remaining here on earth to learn of the passing of our beloved friends and co-laborers in the Kingdom. Yet we rejoice as they have been promoted to their great reward, for as it is written "...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him..." (1 Cor 2:9). Indeed, what is sorrow for us is not sorrow for them, and their homecoming is precious in the eyes of our Heavenly Father (Ps 116:15).

We often hear about the passing of our members far after the fact, so please bear with us when our announcements are not timely. Please also forgive us for not announcing the passing of one of your loved ones as this is a new feature of the Christian Report. Please call or send an email letting us know if we can inform our membership of the passing of your loved one.

**Mr. Daniel W. Terhune** — February 25, 2024. Daniel was a long-time member of CMF. Not only was Daniel a proud Marine, but later enlisted in the US Navy and served throughout the Pacific with Air Group 15 on the USS Antietam as a navigator/gunner in the backseat of the SB2C Helldiver. He is survived by his son, David, and is interred at Nelson National Cemetery in Nicholasville, KY.

**Mrs. Lois Weikart** — December 26, 2023. Lois has joined her beloved husband, PSG Raymond Weikart, USA (Ret) in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ray Weikart passed away December 11, 2022. They are survived by their children, Martin, Richard, Linda, and Don. Both Ray and Lois are interred at Memorial Gardens Cemetery in Colorado Springs, CO.

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**Mailing Address:** PO Box 449  
Veradale, WA 99037-0449  
(800)798-7875  
(303)761-1959  
<https://www.CMFHQ.ORG>  
office@CMFHQ.org

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