

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return....."

Valentine's Day. An article by Susie Itzstein

What image does this conjure up for you?

For me, here I am about to write an article about Valentine's day and I have spent hours, days thinking about this, flitting through ideas in my head, leafing through pages of my favourite books, poems, songs on Love....., my favourite writers and theorists on love and relationships (being as one of the many hats that I wear is as a marriage and family Therapist).....

and I'm thinking about you the reader and I keep talking myself out of writing anything with too much feeling because I tell myself the guys won't read it (and they are the ones that most need to), people will think it's kitsch, and people think that Valentine's Day is just another commercial rip-off.....

Ideas of what to write about come and go.....but the overwhelming feeling and noticing within me is one of sadness and regret that I live as part of a culture/community that doesn't make love and strengthening the expression of love and marriages and families as one of its top priorities. That we don't take every opportunity that there is to communicate to our loved ones of our love for them. As well, when it comes down to basics, most people, men and women, don't know how to do this.

So, I'm not interested in writing about where Valentine's Day originated and why we celebrate it. It's a designated day for expressing our love. For me it is an "official" chance to focus my energy and attention on my loved ones. I invite you to consider doing the same. How about taking it as an opportunity to let those people that are important to you know about it. You may say: "they know that I love them" Well, my experience from counselling and teaching people about how to be in relationship is that the vast majority of people don't know it. Unless you very regularly tell your loved ones "I love you" as well as doing "loving behaviours" they don't know it, and certainly don't feel it.

Isn't it about time that you got the love that you want?

Come on guys, own up.....you too long for feeling close. Terrence Real, a therapist (who has intensively researched male depression) and author of a great book:

"How Can I Get Through To You: Reconnecting Men To Women" says most men grow up with a societal **myth** that he calls the "masculine code" - a code that says that men don't need relationships. "Not only is this a lie.....it's a very destructive lie", he says.

Yet we do not raise boys and men to BE intimate. We raise boys to become strong, competitive performers. The very "code" of masculinity they learned as boys (being tough, being a man of few words) guarantees that they will become lousy husbands and lovers.

And how do the traditional roles of women contribute to the crisis our society is facing of a 50% divorce rate for first marriages, 65% for the second. Women are filing for 2/3rds of the divorces and we are experiencing the "walk-away wife" syndrome. The reason why they are doing this is simply because they can. They now have the economic resources to do so. Women empowered by feminism and economic change are asking for **real** emotional intimacy in their marriages. Men are failing to live up to women's expectations, mainly because they haven't been taught how. Men need to develop a relational consciousness. Yet, women have not been taught to put action behind their words. They complain and go on and on about what they are unhappy about, in such a way that men turn off, so much so that many wives are feeling unheard, not powerful, and in a state of chronic slow-burn resentment and anger.

Says Terrence Real: "Our mothers and grandmothers taught their daughters to shut up and eat it. Feminism taught women to speak out and leave it. **Women need to be taught to stand firm and mean it.**"

Falling in love is easy. Staying in love is another matter.

These down-to-earth, practical skills, adapted from Michele Weiner-Davis's book "*Divorce Busting*", can help break couples out of those "relationship ruts" that we all get into. We all need to stretch beyond our usual comfort zone to make our relationships more loving. I challenge you to put some of these into practice as your gift for Valentine's Day. They will have much more meaning than a perfunctory bunch of roses or box of chocolates.

Some **Tips for Men** to make our relationships more loving are:

- * Spend **time** together. The biggest reasons marriages fail is that partners don't spend enough time together.
- * **Talk** to her. Even though it doesn't come naturally, and you are not in the mood. Verbal communication is important for women and they use it as a life-line. Says Diane Sollee of www.smartmarriages.com: "*The number one predictor of divorce is habitual avoidance of conflict.* And what's sad is the reason we avoid conflict is because we believe it will cause divorce." She refers to the cartoon where the couple explains to the marriage counselor, "We never talk any more. We figured out that's when we have most of our fights."
- * **Listen** to her. Discover how much more you learn when you listen without judgement or being "in fix-it mode". She often just wants you to listen.
- * Remember **the little things** and "**work smart**". Men are often overwhelmed by women's needs when it comes to relationships. They feel they can never satisfy their wives. Men, you don't have to work harder, you just have to work smarter. This means doing the little things that count and let her be the one to tell you what it is that counts for her.

Some **Tips for Women** are:

- * **Don't judge** him. Under all judgements and criticisms is a **need**. Translate your criticisms and complaints into **what you need**.
- * Men often withdraw because they don't know what to do and then women interpret that to mean they don't care. Tell him what you want from him in a mode where you -
 - a) **Get to the point and be brief.**
 - b) Instead of telling him what he's doing wrong; **tell him what doing it right** would look like.
 - c) **Be specific.** Help him give you what you want. Instead of "you're never home", or "you're working too hard" replace it with: "I want you to finish work early and have dinner with me and the kids."
- * **Appreciate him.** Men often feel unappreciated. So at every opportunity focus on **what you have to be grateful for. Focus on positives.** Become a "**love-finder**" instead of a "fault-finder". You will find that the more you are grateful for, the more will be given you.

Tips for **BOTH Men and Women**:

- * "**it takes one to tango**" says Weiner-Davis in "*Divorce Busting*" meaning we have the ability to effect change in our relationships by changing ourselves.
- * **quit doing what isn't working.** Quit doing more of the same. Remember the quote that goes something like "insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting something different".
- * **do something different.** This is where relationship education and therapy comes in - we need to learn how to do things differently.
- * become a 'hope monger' - know that most marriage problems are resolvable if you have the tools.
- * **the tools don't come naturally - we need to learn them.** Every relationship needs relationship education and relationship enrichment. We need to prepare for the marriage and not just for the wedding! We need to make an on-going investment in our relationships.
- * **focus on your strengths** and your relationship vision and goals.

Let me finish by telling you that I am unabashedly biased about our need for relationship education and relationship enrichment. It's not just because it's the work that I do, but because I have the privilege of being with couples re-experiencing the tenderness and connection that they have been

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longing for which they had resigned themselves to ever getting. How special it is to see the light returning to their eyes as they sit knee to knee, eye to eye and heart to heart.

I wish you a loving Valentine's Day (as well as the whole New Year) where you get to feel more cherished and precious than you ever have. Never forget how lovable and loving and deserving of love you are.