

Week 30: Letting Grace Show Us How to Love

Several winters ago, in Chicago, we found ourselves in the middle of a “polar vortex.” The thermostat hovered around zero. The schools were frequently closed. It was painful to go outside.

And my wife went to New Orleans without me.

It was a business trip, and she went out of her way to make provisions for the kids and me—she even flew her mother in to help with childcare while I was at work. Nevertheless, on the night the thermostat short-circuited and I discovered dog poop wedged in the couch cushions, she sent me a video of her enjoying Bourbon Street.

And I got as bitter as the weather outside.

When that happens—when I feel like I’m on my own and nobody cares about me—I put a big, invisible wall between me and everybody I love. When she returned from New Orleans a few days later, I wanted to be good to her but, to be honest, I also *didn’t* want to. So, I wasn’t. The problem is, after a few weeks behind my walls, I was lonelier than ever and I just wanted my wife back.

I couldn’t figure out how to accomplish it though. I felt like something big needed to change, like I needed to orchestrate something new and epic. I got away for an evening to brainstorm ideas, but I couldn’t come up with anything. Until I realized I had fallen prey to three big fallacies about how to truly love someone.

1. **We think the key to loving well is a mystery.** As a marital therapist, couples come to me to save their marriage or make it grow. They think I hold the answers. They think they don’t know how to do it. Most of us think we have to read a bunch of books or talk to a bunch of counselors to discover the hidden solutions to love and relationships.
2. **We believe something *new* must happen to get a relationship firing on all cylinders again.** It’s a consumer approach to love: when it’s broken, we shop for something new to fix it. It’s a medical approach to love: when a relationship is ailing, we try a new medicine to heal it.
3. **We think the new thing must be *big*.** We think our relationships require open-heart surgery, not penicillin. Which is why, in marriage, for instance, we end up having kids to save the marriage. Or going on expensive vacations to rekindle a cooling love. Or buying a new house. Or orchestrating extravagant dates. Or having big fights. When the problem feels insurmountable, we assume the solution must be big, as well.

Yet, loving relationships aren't destroyed by a lack of knowledge, lack of innovation, or lack of grandeur. *They are destroyed by ego.* And it is ego that keeps us from hearing the voice inside, which is whispering the answers we already know about how to make our relationships come alive.

On the night I got away to come up with some mysterious, innovative, and grand ways to get my marriage back on track, I sat in a quiet nook and observed my ego doing its thing—it had put up the wall between my wife and I, and now my ego was trying to take the wall it had erected. My ego is attached to shiny-new things, grand displays, and sophisticated answers and solutions.

I watched my ego do its thing, and I realized it was masking the real answers.

So, I stopped watching my ego and I began listening for the voice beneath my ego—the voice I call grace, because it is the voice in me that knows exactly how to love. As I listened, I heard this: “You haven't put her first in years.” And then I heard four very specific answers: kiss her on the forehead first thing every morning; say goodbye to her last before leaving the house each day; send her one text every day while apart; say hello to her first when you walk in the door at night.

The answers were not mysterious, new, and grand.

The answers were obvious, old, and small.

Relationships do not thrive on big things; they thrive upon small things done every day. They don't thrive necessarily on doing new things; they thrive upon doing old things we used to do and quit doing somewhere along the way. And, if we can set aside our ego for a little while, we don't need anyone to tell us what those things are. *We already know.* Beneath all of our hiding and pretending and protecting and defending and accusing and criticizing, there is a voice always whispering the answer.

Relationships can change on a dime, and that dime is the moment we look past our ego and listen to the voice of grace within us. What we hear will be obvious, old, and small, but it will also be unique and specific to who we are and to the love we share.

Because the voice of grace is that good.