



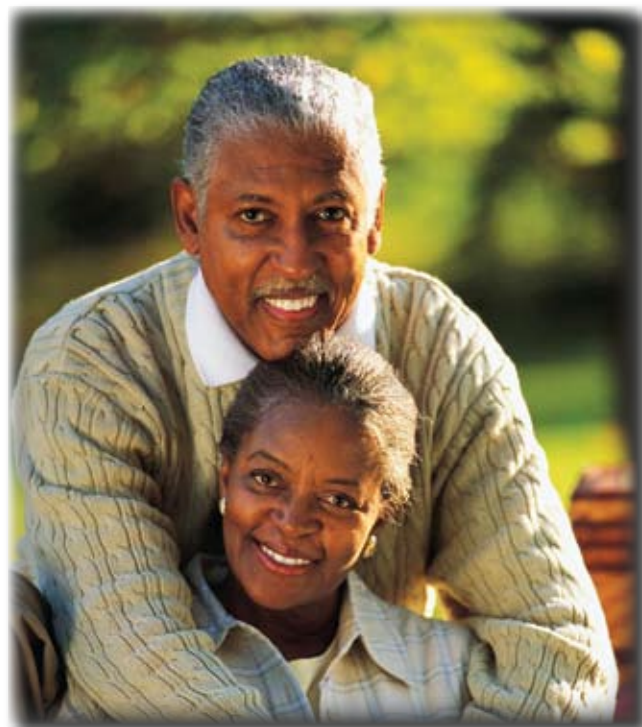
Will an 80-Year-Old Man Tell His Wife, 'I Love You More Than Ever'?

Maggie Scarf has invested more than 30 years putting marriages under her microscope. She herself has been married to Herb Scarf for 55 years. They are both in their late 70s. According to AOL News, which on Sept. 3, 2008, reported her interview with *USA Today*, she is convinced that older couples often show a lot of pleasure in each other's company. They confess to each other, "I love you more than ever."

We might not have learned about her observations had she not written a new book, titled *September Songs: The Good News About Marriage in the Later Years*. In it, Mrs. Scarf explains the U-shaped curve in marriage.

"There have been pretty influential studies over the past 40 years that show a couple's contentment is at the highest in the earliest phase of marriage." She writes, "What happens next? You get to know the other person's foibles and faults. Kids come along and you lose sleep and you want the other person to do more than they are doing. Then you are negotiating on a daily basis with your adolescents, and your sense of contentment and well-being goes down during that time."

However, the U-curve rises again when the children launch out and are on their own. "Then your sense of well-being, contentment, and time for intimacy go up," Scarf notes. "You rediscover the person you knew early on," she adds.



Scarf bases her conclusions on her interviews with 75 couples. The participants were all over the age of 50 and had been married for 20 years or more. For the most part, these couples "exuded well-being, contentment" and "had a huge amount of affection and closeness." They told Scarf that they "argued about the same subjects they argued about from Day 1, but there was a lowering of intensity." If they had conflicts, husband and wife "would often end in humor or they'd say, 'Let's not have this conversation.' "

When asked about their sex lives, some couples said that it was "about the same as they always had. For other couples there has been a slowing down. For some there is no sex life, and it's fine with them." In his own

IN THIS ISSUE

Will an 80-Year-Old Man Tell His Wife, "I Love You More Than Ever"?	1
Five Graces to Bolster Us and Our Family	2

frank and open way one husband admitted that what he still enjoyed was “curling up with his wife at night and kissing her lovely face in the morning.”

How did older couples respond to inquiries about a spouse’s unfaithfulness or disloyalty? Scarf reports that “there was no across-the-board answer. Some people said they couldn’t think of a big failing that the other person had.” In other situations the couple just figured out ways to survive.

“As you age, it’s no secret that you lose memory, vision, hearing, but there is one domain in which you probably get a lot better,” author Scarf acknowledges. “That is emotional control and emotional processing. . . . You’re interested in being with people closest to you and weaving a circle of positive friends and relatives—researchers call that ‘positivity.’ ”

Many congregations celebrate God’s blessings for older couples by sponsoring an annual gathering to honor those who are married 50 years or more. It’s a time to recall Christian marriage vows and recommit ourselves to God’s purposes for us as husbands and wives. It’s also a good opportunity for us reconnect with couples whom we have neglected or who have new needs similar to our own and with whom we can share mutual support.

Since the number of older marriage partners is growing in all congregations, the door is wide open now for encouraging a Golden Age Couples Group. It would not organize simply for its own pleasure but to be a positive force to bolster husbands and wives in the entire local community to grow as faithful spouses, servants of Christ and His church, the most closely woven circle of all.

Many marriages falter and break apart because partners refuse to forgive each other. Older couples are tempted to deny forgiveness to each other too. The latter years of marriage will be especially beautiful, and in line with God’s gracious will, when husband and wife are daily learning by God’s Spirit to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). Tuned to God’s forgiveness in Christ, older, married lovers will care about, honor and respect each other. Each knows the God given role and relationship they have with one another.

Reflecting God’s compassion, they have many opportunities and reasons to say to each other, “I love you more now than ever.”

Five Graces to Bolster Us and Our Family

Have we heard the word “grace” so often that we fail to be embraced and empowered by the several facets of its full beauty?

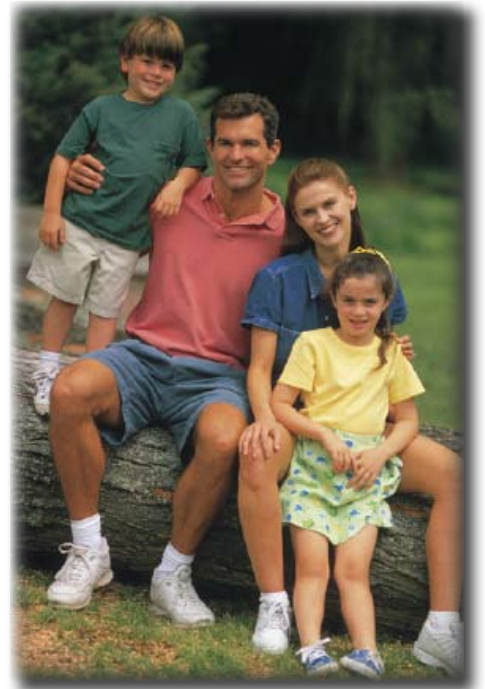
Sure, we know the definition: “undeserved love.” That’s easy to say.

We have also repeatedly been refreshed by the apostle’s promise, “But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His incredible kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7). Being “refreshed” then, means that we practice the grace of God to revitalize our personal and family relationships.

■ The Grace of Humility

Our home relationships suffer deeply when we stop talking with one another. Perhaps we have given in to an anger that clams us up. What provokes us? Actually, we are afraid first and then angry because our supposed superiority is being challenged and exposed. So we scamper into our shell and withdraw from the truth. We shut out our loved ones and become more anxious about our standing with them. We even begin to blame them for revealing who we really are, namely, ordinary, sinful, and stumbling children of God who continue to miss the mark of His saving will for us.

How can we be changed?
How can we begin to see and talk with



one another again with acceptance and a sense of harmony? "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind," the apostle wrote to the Christians in Rome. This reconstruction comes through God's grace of humility. "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you," Paul advised. Then he continued, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:3-5).

God calls us to repent of the competitive and arrogant attitudes and actions that move us to fear, anger and disconnection. Then in faith, we can receive from Christ Jesus the grace of humility so that we are better able to express, especially in our family circle, how we belong to Him and to one another as members of His body.

■ The Grace of Reconciliation

When arguments and differences among family members fester and are untreated, our alienation from one another easily becomes entrenched. Hard feelings are multiplied. Piques and resentments pile up in a tall wall between us. We try hard to justify what we are doing but we know that the habits of our selfishness are unacceptable to God. Hanging on to slights and perceived or actual betrayals only besieges our conscience and robs us of composure. So we need to question ourselves. How long will we continue down this road, so ugly to God and so hazardous for us?

In His grace of reconciliation God seeks, and finds us while we are yet sinners. He restores us on the path of return to Him and the end of hostilities with one another. We reverse the course of our lives, hold on to His mercy, and spring out of "Jail" and on to "Go." We move ahead with our lives again.

Recalling our reconciliation with God, the apostle reminded the Corinthian Christians that in Christ, God was actually reconciling the whole world to Himself and was entrusting to believers "the message of reconciliation." In fact, He calls us Christians "agents of reconciliation." As such we say to one another, "Be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (See 2 Cor. 5:16-21.) In this righteousness God qualifies us to actualize His

reconciliation by forgiving and living in peace with our parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents and children—the whole family.

■ The Grace of Endurance

In his brief address, a pastor encouraged the wedding couple—when confronting difficult times—to remind each other out loud, "In view of eternity, so what!" It's another way of confessing in faith, "Our future is altogether secure because of God's love and care for us from now on. His forgiveness and compassion will sustain us whatever happens. We will be able to survive because He has guaranteed through His Son, Jesus, that nothing will be able to cut us off from His commitment to our everlasting well being in His presence." Or as one Christian mother repeatedly

counsels her husband and children, "It will pass!"

When we Christians learn to relax by the grace of endurance into eternity we are able to focus on the strains and stresses of the present. We can even rejoice in them, the apostle promises. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand,

and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:1-6).

We can face life squarely and be honest about what challenges us today because we know that God will be watching over us with His unwavering warmth next year at this same time. Other circumstances will

*The Grace of Humility
The Grace of Reconciliation
The Grace of Endurance
The Grace of Renewable Energy
The Grace of Appreciation*



change, but His tenderness will not. Whatever tension erupts He will consistently see us through it. He will enable us to endure by His grace, until there are no more tensions at all.

■ The Grace of Renewable Energy

From time to time we get caught up in family conflicts that derail us. They bewilder and confuse us. We lose sight of what's central to our lives and get lost in devilish and divisive details. We get pushed farther and farther away from God and from one another. Eventually we may even be drained of the desire and energy to address what is eternally essential because we are tangled up in what's trivial and ephemeral.

The psalmist lamented, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (Ps. 42:5). Then by God's grace of renewable energy he corrected himself. God called him to review again that there is only one wellspring that provides healthy yearning, cleansed ambitions and aspiring confidence. It's the merciful, forgiving and restoring God, who has created us, redeems us, sets us apart to belong to him forever, and strengthens us for wholesome and helping relationships with others.

The psalmist refocuses himself and us, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps. 42:11). Wasting energy on inconsequential minutia creates distance between us and our loved ones. We return to what is of immeasurable value and therefore to a mending of our breaches with loved ones when we confess with the psalmist, "For you are the God in whom I take refuge . . . Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God" (Ps. 43:2-4).

What's our role in seeking the energy by which we are renewed? Paul instructed the Colossian Christians, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:15-16). Remembering and trusting the words of our Lord Jesus Christ will indeed renew us in his spirit and life.

■ The Grace of Appreciation

Chilly and foreboding is the household atmosphere where members no longer care enough about one another to say, "Thank you!" or "That was very kind of



you. I appreciate you!" Without such expressions we have little to build on to generate additional thankful thoughts and acts of kindness. We can best reap a harvest of thanksgivings when a sufficient number of unselfish and sacrificial activities have already been planted, born fruit and openly recognized and rewarded with cheerful attention. The grace of appreciation is a powerful gift of God's Spirit.

Both Paul and the Christians in Philippi gushed with joy and thanksgiving because of their gift to the apostle, which helped feed the spreading of the good news of Christ in the first century. "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now," he wrote (Phil. 1:3-5). He wanted them to know how their offering was uplifting to all the Christians who heard about it. He also was confident that publicly acknowledging their good work would help stimulate them to continue this overflowing of their love. He added, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Phil. 1:6-7).

The ancient pastoral counsel to young couples applies also to the children who fill out their family circle. "Show one another attention, affection and appreciation. This is one of the best AAA programs ever invented." It all begins with thanksgiving for the grace of God in Jesus Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us. All appreciation radiates from that underserved love.



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