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Trust is the Key to Intimacy by Gerald Foley - 08/01/07

First Years and Forever

A monthly online newsletter for marriages in the early years



Jesus assures us that it is safe to put our faith and trust in Him, thereby giving married couples a great model for living in an intimate relationship. This month, Gerald Foley shares the story of a couple who learned one of the greatest lessons of all—that trusting our spouse is a decision that can yield ever greater love and intimacy.

—Crystal Sullivan, Editor

Trust is the Key to Intimacy

by Gerald Foley

When asked, "What is the most important component of long-term marriages?" most married couples answer "trust." When we trust another person, we sense that we can afford to be ourselves and to be open rather than defensive. Trust, the key to intimacy, determines the quality of a relationship.

Some of Jesus' most powerful words were "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust." (Mark 5:36). Love based on fear is conditional and creates an atmosphere of distrust and dishonesty, which is as corrosive to a relationship as acid is to metal. Without trust, even the mildest struggle can cause a relationship to unravel. Thoughts of separation or divorce actually provide a feeling of relief from the pain one experiences.

Julie shares her mistrust of her husband, Frank, after their young marriage was shattered by sexual infidelity: "The word 'trust' was no longer a part of my vocabulary. I felt confused, sad and lonely every day, like my best friend had just vanished into thin air. I felt betrayed and my stomach literally churned. It was as though I was being dragged down a raging river and I kept hitting all the jagged rocks along the way. I judged that Frank didn't deserve to be trusted...ever, and that it was his fault I was in such misery."

We tend to think of fear and trust like two ends of a teeter-totter. If fear goes up, trust goes down. However, fear is an emotion, while trust is a decision. People can make the decision to trust even though their fear level is high.

The decision to trust is often influenced by our past. We may have learned not to trust long before meeting our spouse because of hurts suffered at home or in other relationships. Every person brings some baggage from their past into marriage. Placing trust in a spouse who has the power to hurt us is often the scariest decision we are asked to make in a marriage.



Unfortunately, there are times when one or both persons violate the marriage relationship through thoughtless or sinful acts. Rebuilding trust is then the crucial step in transforming the marriage. This process begins with the individual, and need not wait until the other person proves he or she is trustworthy. The qualities needed for building trust are honesty, openness, and the willingness to change.

An old adage says, "Honesty is the best policy." Honesty includes integrity and reliability. A person of integrity doesn't seek to cover up or make excuses when they fail. Frank and Julie began the rebuilding of their marriage by participating in a Retrouvaille weekend for hurting marriages. Frank says, "During our misery as a couple, I was the King of Dishonest Behavior. One of the very first decisions I had to make to save our marriage was to choose to be trustworthy. My more reliable behavior went a long way toward healing our wounds and helped to build trust in our marriage. Julie's response to these simple actions showed me just how powerful my personal honesty was in the rebuilding process. Anything but complete honesty would have been devastating."

Rebuilding a relationship also needs openness and listening. Without openness a relationship can't grow beyond the surface level. Julie admits, "Openness sounded good to me. I was good at openly telling Frank every single thought and feeling I was having...loud and clear, mostly loud." Openness, however, comes from a conscious decision to reveal oneself to a partner.

Willingness to change means we stop trying to change our spouse and we start to make changes ourselves. A change in our actions can change or influence the other person. Julie says, "Being willing to change by making the decision to trust was the biggest risk of all. I was scared to death." Frank adds, "One action I devoted myself to doing was actually asking Julie for permission to do things, from walking down the street to the neighbors, to going to a ballgame. Making this small sacrifice and giving up this 'freedom' was a very small price to pay to rebuild the trust I had so thoroughly destroyed."

Frank found another change he could make was to affirm Julie. "Making a point of thanking Julie for dinner or confirming that she is the best mommy on the planet not only rebuilds trust but affirms Julie and helps to reflect her self-worth. Another significant way I can affirm Julie is by not jumping at the chance to be critical and knock her down verbally."

"Of all the things I have done in my life," says Frank, "I am proudest of this hell we have managed to walk through and in the process become friends and lovers once again."

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Questions for Reflection:

- Sexual infidelity is only one way we lose trust in our spouses. What are some other ways?
- Is lack of trust an issue in your relationship? Is it caused by past or current events?
- What are the circumstances in your relationship that have the most potential to cause distrust? What can you do to keep these from occurring?
- Trusting your spouse can be a difficult decision to make. Consider committing to a few minutes in prayer each day, asking God for the courage and strength to trust each other.



Gerald Foley is retired from ministry as a hospice and hospital chaplain. He has been active for many years with Catholic Engaged Encounter and Retrouvaille (for hurting marriages). He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Courage to Love When Your Marriage Hurts*, *Family Centered Church*, and *Empowering the Laity*. Gerald has earned an MA in history and an MSW in Social Work. He currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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