Breaking marital logjams

As more and more trouble spots arise in a marriage they tend to be walled off one by one. Eventually there is little to say except “Pass the butter.”

The following article is recommended to our readers by the Home and Family Service of the General Conference.

By ROGER L. DUDLEY

Art and Carrie sat quietly through the first two days of the Adventist Marriage Enrichment Seminar while my wife and I, as co-leaders, attempted to focus on the important place communication plays in almost every aspect of married life. Other couples joined in the discussion freely, but the Taylors said nothing, except as they occasionally responded to a direct question.

Following the close of the Saturday night session, with only one more day remaining, Art indicated that he would like to speak to me in private. We walked into an adjoining room.

“Our marriage doesn’t have a lot of fighting and quarreling in it,” he began. “It just doesn’t have much of anything. It’s blah. After listening today, I can see what my problem is. I don’t know how to communicate with my wife. We just don’t talk to each other about anything meaningful. But I don’t know what to do about it. How can we build a new bridge?”

All human relationships depend for success upon the accurate transmission and reception of interpersonal messages. Since marriage is the most intimate of relationships, involving the meshing of two lives along countless dimensions, the importance of communication skills is magnified. They are pivotal in the enriched marriage. In this short article I cannot attempt to discuss or even list all the communication skills, but I do wish to focus on one central concept—communication for the purpose of understanding and of being understood.

Marriage counselors generally agree that couples with marital troubles have at least one thing in common: They are not communicating. Some marriage partners “clam up” and do not speak at all. Others talk to each other about their problems and may even seek solutions. But somehow they fail to put across their ideas, their judgments, and their inner feelings accurately enough to be understood by their mates. Often the words spoken come across in such a hostile, blame-casting manner that the attempts to communicate actually make the problem worse.

The difficulty here is that too often each partner approaches the discussion of a problem as if he were a trial lawyer arguing his case before a jury. Each presents his or her strong points in hopes of winning a favorable decision. While one is speaking the other is busy formulating a rebuttal.

But marriage needs to be removed from the contest arena, and placed in the setting of two people pledged to grow into deeper levels of intimacy. God has ordained that the “two shall be one” (Eph. 5:31). However, their union is by no means complete at the moment when the minister pronounces them husband and wife. It takes years to attain to an even more complete sense of oneness. Such oneness takes place when the partners come to share more and more areas of their lives with each other. But even though they merge into one, they retain their own individuality, their own personal characteristics. This might be called the “mystery of marriage” (see verse 32).

Each partner brings to the relationship unique backgrounds, perceptions, expectations, and needs. Because of this, as well as the fact that our lives are bound up with each other on many points, there is opportunity for friction to develop. We are so close that we are sensitive to every slight irregularity or rough spot. Yet when the inevitable problems develop, proper communication can make these problems into stepping stones to greater oneness rather than their being walls to keep us apart.

Dialog for understanding

This means that the couple should keep in mind that they love each other, that each is eager to understand the deepest needs of the other, and to meet those needs as far as is consistent with maintaining integrity and psychological health. It means that in no way would either wish to hurt the other while in pursuit of personal goals. Therefore, husband and wife approach dialog in search of mutual understanding, rather than in an attempt to win a victory. This kind of communication does not seek to win a point, but to understand one’s spouse and to be understood in return.

The one who speaks first, then, does not try to argue his case. He does not try to convince or to change his mate. He only wants her to “step into his moccasins,” and to be able to experience the situation as he experi-

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ADVENTIST REVIEW. SEPTEMBER 20, 1979
ences it—to see through his eyes, to think with his brain, to feel the feelings that he is aware of. A person needs to be able to describe the elation he feels at a promotion, the gripping fear of failure on the job, the sorrow and disappointment that result when some cherished plans have gone awry, the resentment that is felt over the way another has mismanaged some household decision.

And the partner who listens first must truly listen, no defensiveness, no rebuttals, no denying the appropriateness of the spouse’s feelings. Instead, giving careful, patient attention to what the partner is saying. The listener will often check with the speaker to make sure the message is being received correctly both as to content and emotion. At this point the listener has but one purpose—to put himself so completely in his mate’s world that he can experience what the other is experiencing.

Of course there must also be an opportunity, once a message about a person has been satisfactorily transmitted, to reverse roles and allow the listener to become the speaker, and vice versa. Obviously it will take time and effort to share oneself thus, and to be assured of being understood. But there is no other way to know another deeply and to feel with him.

Note that communicating is not attempting to persuade, much less compel, our partner to accept our view of things. We have not been given the responsibility of reconstructing our mates. We have only to facilitate the best understanding possible in the present stage of our relationship. But if we truly love, the better we understand the real feelings of each other, the more we will seek for changes in our lives that will meet the deep emotional needs of our partners. Thus problems are solved through communication, but as more of a byproduct than as a result of direct bargaining. Dialog says, “I just want to share myself so that you may know me. Then you can decide what to do about my needs.”

The problems are in communication

With this background it becomes easier to understand what the counselors mean when they say that “every marriage problem is a communication problem.” Take finances, for instance. The root of the problem is not as simple as saying that one spouse is a spendthrift while the other is conservative, or that the lack of fiscal responsibility is leading to family disaster. Money is not merely a medium of exchange. It has deep emotional overtones for most people. For Jim, brought up in the depression in a family struggling to make ends meet, it may be a symbol of actual survival. He is afraid that the family may come to actual want if Jane keeps on spending the way she does. But to Jane, who has low self-worth, and who has never felt that she was as good as other people, money may be a source of status. She needs to keep up with the neighbors to prop up her own self-esteem.

Jim and Jane could wrangle over budgets, attempt to put limits on each other, or indulge in scapegoating. But first they need to understand each other, to unclog the emotional channels. Let Jim endeavor to explain himself and his deepest fears. Let Jane listen patiently with a real desire to understand and feel with him. Then let Jane explain to a sympathetic Jim her need for propping-up. Now the way is open for them to grow closer together. And in seeking to meet each other’s needs, Jim and Jane will find compromises with which each can be happy.

The same principle applies in other areas, too. Suppose it is role responsibilities. If Martha feels frustrated, frazzled, and used, because she works at an outside job, and then comes home to find all the housework and care of the children awaiting her, she had better seek to articulate to Myron as clearly as possible what is happening inside of her. And Myron had better listen without either apologies or defenses, but with the purpose of knowing more completely what makes Martha tick. Myron may have some feelings to share also. How does he feel when, finally escaping the pressures of the “rat race” at the company, he hurries home to his castle with every jangling nerve crying out for rest and peace, only to find a long list of duties awaiting him?

We could continue discussing problem areas such as in-laws, time for each other, spiritual values, child-rearing, or any other area of married life. Success in all areas is enhanced by good communication. The type of communication I have in mind takes place over a period of time. One session usually is not enough for a couple to truly understand the inner life of each other in any particular marital area.

For one thing, it takes much self-awareness and practice to be able to communicate our inner selves accurately. Most of us do not understand our own feelings well enough to transmit them without much self-searching. For another, it takes much skill to learn to listen in such a way as to receive a mate’s message correctly without having it garbled by the static of our own biases. But the rewards are well worth a lifetime of marital effort to understand and to be understood.

In those marriages where communication skills are lacking, the opposite effect takes place. The couple find an area of disagreement for which no ready solution appears. So they stop talking about it. The subject is placed off-limits, something they do not discuss any longer, since it leads only to trouble. Thus they wall off from each other an area of their lives. As more and more trouble spots arise, they too are walled off—one by one. Eventually there is little left to say except “Pass the butter.” The two have become strangers, and what might have been a life of intimate sharing has become a life of married singleness, or the marriage is terminated.

In contrast, the type of communication we have been discussing uses problems to open up more areas of the life to each other, on a deeper level. Thus there is a constant growing into the complete oneness that God intended for marriage. The Marriage Encounter people illustrate this closeness with the saying, “From henceforth, let us be so close that when one weeps, the other will taste salt.”