

CREATE SHARED MEANING

In this final article on the research of John Gottman PH.D., we will discuss the creation of shared meaning. In his extensive study of successful couples, Gottman observed that the marital friendship was most often nourished and strengthened by the development of shared meaning. The spouses developed shared dreams, and these shared dreams are rooted in shared rituals, shared stories. In pursuing this area of marital strength, Gottman developed an interview protocol to find out about family rituals, people's roles, goals, the meaning of central symbols (e.g. What does "home" mean? What is the meaning of family dinner times? What is the source of spirituality?).

Gottman found out that successful married couples had meaningful daily rituals e.g. attempts to have everyone at the family dinner, sharing in prayer before meals, end of the day reunion times to recap everyone's day, a family play time when everyone tried to be together for several hours, birthday celebrations, religious rituals and church activities, volunteering together, a regular date night, etc. Also, these couples expressed a shared appreciation concerning the meaning and importance of marriage. Often this involved a religious and spiritual dimension of life which energized their daily lives. The spouses were mutually engaged in the same shared spiritual symbols and goals.

These shared meanings were key to what Gottman calls a "Sound Marital House." These shared meanings help build a sense of mutual purpose on a daily basis. They help the married couple to build their own strong culture over time which is based on the larger meaning they share, in our case the call to Christian Marriage.

The shared meaning, spiritual rituals and activities help keep focus on the marriage and the family. The shared meaning nourishes the marital friendship, mutual honoring, mutual respect and motivates the positive small daily exchanges between the spouses which in turn strengthen the shared meaning.

As a married couple, take time to look at your routines and take steps to enrich your marital lives. Resolve to be more intentional about living a Christian Marriage and enjoying a Christian family life. Often we let ourselves become too busy with too many things. We let our children become over scheduled. We have less time together as married couples and as parents with children and we lose focus on our calling to holiness in married and family life. Gottman is a practicing Jew who finds the Sabbath Rituals of Judaism, a full day to focus on God, family, and relaxation together to be helpful, healing and energizing. As Christian married couples we can find in our Sabbath an energizing time for focus on God, marriage and family. We will all be happier, the research says if we let God become more central and our Christian rituals and symbols more a part of our daily life.

I hope that you have found this series on principles of successfully married couples interesting. We heard about a couple greeting each other after work with five quick successive hugs in order to make sure they had the day's five positive interactions to one negative ratio in place. That is not quite the spirit but it is a start! Let's pray that all of us who are married couples will be more intentional in living out our calling and in putting these principals to work.

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