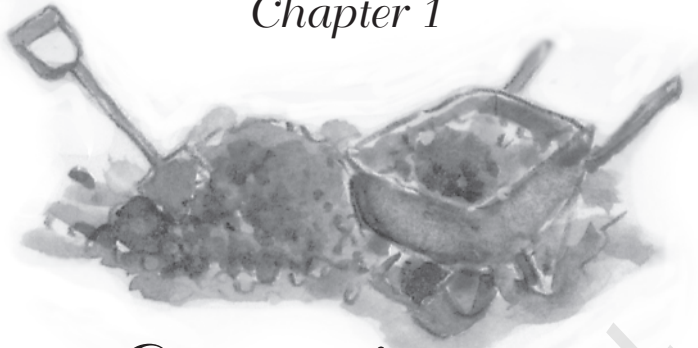


## Chapter 1



# Commitment

## The Choice to Pledge Your Best Efforts

*In marriage, the grass grows greener on the side of the fence you water most.*

—JAMES MARSHALL

You're in the backyard or a neighborhood park trying to relax and enjoy some peaceful time. But there are no healthy trees, the sun is scalding you, the bugs are buzzing you, and there just isn't much to look at.

You look around. You love flowers. You dream of flower beds packed with color. You yearn for some wildflowers along the fence. But what you see looks more like an RV parking lot than a botanical garden.

### *Cultivating Your Garden*

Every once in a while you dream of raising a few herbs and vegetables—maybe a little basil and some robust tomatoes. But

every time you've tried, the bugs and birds have enjoyed a feast while you have been exasperated.

It's discouraging. Your hopes and dreams are worlds apart from the dreary reality you see before you.

Imagine that something stirs inside you. You stiffen your resolve and march down to the local mom-and-pop or big box superstore. There you find a rack filled with colorful seed packets as vibrant as life. Or you're thrilled to find bins filled with bulk seeds from amaranthus to zucchini. You feel optimism building in your soul.

You grab a handful of packets and even get a pound of rutabaga seeds; you can't stand rutabaga, but the seeds are so interesting! You pay the cashier and head home. You get back to your barren patch, whether it's in your backyard or a block away at a few square yards of available park land, and heartless reality confronts you. Exactly how will you turn this parched plot into a verdant refuge? You now remember the shovels, compost, fertilizers, and so forth that filled the shelves at the store. Maybe you should have taken these gardening aspirations a little more seriously.

Yet you refuse to be intimidated. You grab a handful of precious seed. With a flourish you toss the seed toward the wasteland. You do the same with the next bag of seed. And the next. You have a nagging feeling that this may not be the way to guarantee a glorious garden. Some of the seeds may not take root, but at least it's a step in the right direction. You empty all the bags of seed over the parched soil and weeds.

Then you head back to the living room. You turn on the television, hoping to calm those nagging feelings about shovels, plans, watering, and fertilizing. You're willing to give Mother Nature a chance to show what she can do.

## Disappointing First Results

Let's turn the calendar ahead two or three months. You decide it's time to check on your garden. So you head over to the seed patch hoping to survey the lush vegetation and harvest some early crops. But as you arrive at the garden, you're surprised to find no hint of new growth (except maybe some fat birds that appear to have been enjoying a feast). If anything, the wannabe garden spot looks more desolate than before. You scratch your head. Oh, well. Maybe you can try again next summer.



## *What Is the Marriage Garden?*

Great gardens are not happy accidents. They are the result of careful planning, thorough preparation, and steady attention. We may take some workshops, consult books, check with neighbors, and quiz our county agricultural agent or other local experts in order to make a plan. We spend time testing and preparing the soil. We choose plants carefully. We tend them consistently—watching for bugs and applying fertilizer as needed. We try things out and see if they work, as every garden has its own unique topographic character, soil quality, and microclimate. And the successful gardener remembers to water regularly.

Maybe you can see the similarity of our gardening failures to our disappointments in marriage. Most of us enter the most important and challenging relationship of a lifetime without taking a single class to prepare us. Most of us read nothing more substantial than a romance novel to help us design our relationships. Most of us don't try to acquire the necessary tools to help us.

We usually don't have much of a plan for making the most of our little plot of love. Then, after we have thrown ourselves into marriage, we do not continue to water the plants or watch studiously for bothersome pests. We just settle into an easy chair and wait for a lush relationship.

It's not going to happen. Great relationships don't happen by accident.

Of course, romance can seem both easy and lush—at the beginning. But this first flush of intense and passionate emotion will not last forever, and is not what sustains a long-term relationship. It is more like the bridal bouquet at a wedding reception than the rich plant life that we hope will fill our yards.

Cultivating a great garden requires commitment at the beginning and commitment in the day-to-day work that makes a garden grow. Some people will be discouraged by the weeds and pests. But those who hang in there and who make and sustain a commitment will enjoy a lovely garden.

To have that lovely garden requires wise and steady effort over time. Healthy relationships also require this kind of commitment.

## **Healthy Commitment**

Let's savor a story of healthy commitment and then talk about the essential elements of commitment.

I admire John Glenn. He is duly famous for his work as a test pilot, astronaut, politician, and again as an astronaut later in life. I admire him most for his work as a husband.

John and his wife, Annie, grew up together. They played together as children and dated through high school. John described Annie as "pretty, with dark hair and a shy, bright smile."

They were in band, glee club and YMCA/YWCA together. They were devoted friends to each other.

But there were challenges. Some of their classmates teased Annie for her severe stuttering. But John didn't see her stuttering as a problem. "It was just something she did, no different from some people writing left-handed and others right-handed. I thought it was cruel and thoughtless to laugh at someone for something like that—especially Annie, whom I cared for—and I told them so."

Annie's stuttering made it almost impossible for her to do many things, including shopping. She would need to have someone else along to do the talking or write a description of what she wanted and show it to a clerk. Any public appearance was painful for Annie. Yet John lived a very public life.

At one point when John was on the brink of his first space launch, he got an urgent message from flight control to persuade his wife Annie to go along with a political PR event. When he asked his superior officer what it was all about, he learned that Vice President Johnson wanted to visit their home. Annie refused. John had been pressured with the threat that his place in the space program could be in jeopardy if he did not cooperate.

This is a situation where most of us might have fared poorly as husbands. We might have called our wives and said, "Look, I'm risking my life for the country—can't you simply step out of your comfort zone and meet with the vice president for a few minutes?" But John Glenn was different. "Annie wouldn't have refused to see the vice president without a really good reason. I called her, and she said Johnson wanted to bring in network television cameras and some of the reporters who were camped outside. She said she was tired, had a headache, and she just wasn't going to allow all those people in her house. I told her whatever she wanted to do; I would back her 100 percent."

Wow! John was mindful and respectful of his wife's feelings even when they caused him inconvenience. His commitment to Annie exceeded his commitment to his career.

Years later John Glenn was considered as a running mate for Jimmy Carter. Reportedly he was not chosen in part because of Annie's stutter. "It shocked us and it hurt." But, out of the political race, John Glenn joked that he was free to mow the lawn at home.



At one point later in life, Annie took an intensive course to help her overcome stuttering. After the three weeks of grueling training, she called home.

John described the conversation:

"John," she said on the line from Virginia, forming her words slowly and carefully, "today we went to a shopping center and went shopping. And I could ask for things. Imagine that."

I had never heard Annie speak that many words without a single pause. It was all I could do to reply, "That's wonderful!"

"I think so, too," she said slowly. "It's a start."

Annie grasped the gift of speech and held it tight. Our lives were transformed. "John," she said when she got home, hiding an impish smile, "I've wanted to tell you this for years: Pick up your socks."

Our phone bill increased as she started calling friends around the country. She had never been able to read children's stories to Lyn and Dave (our children) when they were little.

John Glenn might have been irritated many times by Annie's stuttering, her quietness, and the impact that her disability had on his life and career. But he wasn't. Instead he loved his Annie. He helped her. He saw past her impediment to the woman he loved. He was devoted to her.

If I had a chance to interview John Glenn, I would be less interested in knowing about the sights and sensations of outer space and more about the workings of his inner space. How did he learn to cultivate the garden of his marriage? What lessons in life prepared him to be loving and considerate even when it was inconvenient? How did he learn commitment? Did he ever feel irritated and have to stifle the urge to blame? What enabled him to see Annie in tender and loving ways even when he may have wished things were different?

## **Problems with Commitment**

Most of us aren't as good at commitment as John Glenn. In fact, many sociologists have observed that in our society, relationship commitment is a yellow and wilting plant. The leaves are falling to the ground.

Roy Baumeister, the perceptive and famous psychologist, has written insightfully about a cultural shift that makes it much harder for marital commitment to survive in our society. He suggested that our cultural heroes have traditionally been people who sacrificed themselves for the well-being of others. Heroes set aside their own convenience and preferences in order to rescue a drowning child, protect a threatened family, or protect an attacked community. In contrast to heroes, villains have been the people who met their own needs above all others.

According to Baumeister, "[M]orality has become allied with self-interest. It is not simply that people have the right to do what is

best for them (although that is an important part of it); rather, it has become an almost sacred obligation to do so. The modern message is that what is right and good and valuable to do in life is to focus on yourself, to learn what is inside you, to express and cultivate these inner resources, to do what is best for yourself, and so forth.”

Baumeister wrote: “Survey researchers in the 1950s found that people tended to judge the self by its ability to make and maintain a marriage. By the 1970s, this was reversed: Marriages were judged by the contribution to the self, including increases in self-expression, happiness, and well-being. In fact, if a relationship does not bring pleasure, insight, satisfaction, and fulfillment to the self, then it is regarded as wrong, and the individual is justified—perhaps even obligated—to end the relationship and find a new, more fulfilling one.”

What was once considered selfish and egotistical is now a moral imperative. We must take care of ourselves. This cultural shift is much like a climate change that makes it much harder for the delicate plants of marital commitment to survive under the demands of self-interest.

## *Why Should We Cultivate Our Marriage Garden?*

Despite the big cultural trends, most of us still yearn to be thoughtful, helpful, and considerate. We value unselfishness in ourselves and others. Yet we may have made a subtle change in the questions we ask ourselves. The traditional heroes might have asked: *What's the right thing for me to do?*

Today we are more likely to ask: *How can I be in this relationship if it's not good for me?*



The latter question seems reasonable enough, yet it harbors a couple of subtle—and commitment-damaging—assumptions. First, it assumes that we can rightly assess the value of our marriage when we feel distressed. Research shows that the same biased perception that caused people to fall in love and ignore many challenges gets turned on its head when a relationship is distressed. At such times we see unrelenting badness and we ignore or undervalue the good.

Second, the idea that marriage must meet all our most fundamental needs puts a terrible burden on the relationship. It's like asking your Honda Accord to carry a couple of tons of lumber for building your backyard deck. The Accord was not designed for such duty. And marriage was not designed to meet all our needs.

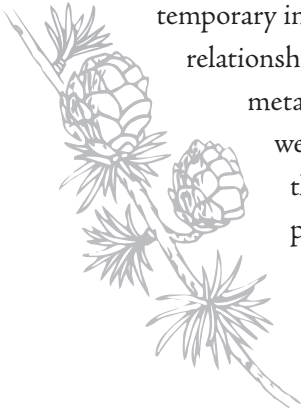
It's impossible and unhealthy to expect a garden or a marriage to be the only source of everything we require for ultimate survival and happiness. In the case of marriage there's no way our beloved wives or husbands can or should be responsible for every one of our wants, needs, pleasures, satisfactions, connections, and identity in the universe. The institution of marriage is groaning under such crushing expectations.

## **What Can Marriage Provide?**

Jonathan Haidt has wisely observed that we often make major life decisions while under the influence of temporary emotions. He compares passionate love to alcohol or marijuana. Such drugs make us high. But we can't sustain that high. We crash. He warns: "People are not allowed to sign contracts when they are drunk, and I sometimes wish we could prevent people from proposing marriage when they are high on passionate love because once a marriage proposal is accepted, families are notified, and a date is

set, it's very hard to stop the train. The drug is likely to wear off at some point during the stressful wedding planning phase, and many of these couples will walk down the aisle with doubt in their hearts and divorce in their future."

The best of marriages—those that are ultimately satisfying and enduring—provide two things: sweet companionship and opportunities to grow. The passion that got most people married—and that many people yearn for—is a temporary insanity. It was never designed to sustain relationships over time. Let's return to our garden metaphor. A good garden will thrill us when we first enjoy the seeds and blossoms, and then it provides a place to relax and enjoy peaceful moments. It will give us many opportunities to learn responsibility, consistency, and awareness. The garden is not likely to provide the thrills of an amusement park, the fitness promised by the gym, or the livelihood that takes you to the workplace. The same is true of marriage. Marriages provide solid benefits when we steadily care for them, but they do not meet all our needs.



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## *Reflection*

Take a few minutes to respond to these questions:

- What are some of the qualities that first attracted you to your partner? Do you still see and appreciate them? What are you doing or what can you do to remain mindful of them?

- What have you invested toward creating a vibrant marriage garden of your relationship? As you listen to your heart, what more do you feel you would like to do to make your marriage flourish?

## Different Kinds of Commitment

Scholars who study commitment talk about three kinds of commitment. The first is attraction. This might be called the “want to” commitment because a person is drawn toward the partner. Some people are committed to a relationship because of the sexual rewards and satisfactions of the relationship. Maybe he sees her as beautiful, charming, intelligent, and capable. She may see him as kind, capable, and good-hearted. This kind of commitment can help sustain a relationship—if we continue to focus on the attractive elements of our partners after the thrill of first flush. This kind of attraction fails if we let familiarity crowd out appreciation.

A second kind of commitment is moral obligation. This can be called the “ought to” kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship even when it is challenging because they see it as a vow, an obligation, or a duty. For many people, commitment to marriage is a vital part of their religious or family values.

Christensen and Jacobson tell this story about Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln was outside talking to a congressman about the important political matters of the day when his wife Mary Todd Lincoln stormed out of the house, ruthlessly castigated Lincoln for something he had done, and then

stormed back inside. Aghast that a wife would behave so outrageously in public, the congressman looked to see Lincoln's reaction. Lincoln was undisturbed by the incident and explained to the incredulous congressman that such outbursts made his wife feel so much better that he hardly wanted to put a stop to them.

It seems likely that, at the time of the attack, Lincoln did not remain committed to his marriage because of attraction. He may have stayed because of obligation—a commitment to his own values. As a result, his wife's declaration of war could not disturb his commitment to an enduring union.

Was Lincoln trapped in a hopeless and unhealthy relationship? Not very likely. It's more probable that, like John Glenn, he sincerely loved his wife the way she was and was more interested in his commitment to the relationship, with all its long-term pleasures and demands, than he was in flawless personal happiness for himself at all times. Maybe he was committed to work steadily toward the harvest of healthy companionship.

The third kind of commitment is constraint. This can be called the "have to" kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship because of the children, because of social consequences of divorce, or because of financial limitations. Some stay in a relationship simply because getting out seems too scary or risky. This isn't the kind of commitment that can be expected to make a marriage flourish yet it can keep people in a relationship through a bad patch. Rather than give up on the garden during a dry spell, we persist. Extra effort is needed to keep the plants from wilting and dying, but normal weather returns and the garden flourishes again.

Linda Waite and colleagues found that “two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later.” She wrote that “one reason divorce is relatively high in our society is because now either person can leave, and we are more willing to leave than we used to be if we hit a bad patch. We’re less likely to work it through. But there’s evidence that dramatic turnarounds are commonplace. They’re the typical experience.”

Even commitment based on constraint can be good for marriage.

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### *Reflection*

How important is each kind of commitment to you?

- Are you inclined to honor a relationship with commitment because of the attractions? What are you already doing to keep those attractions front-and-center in your mind?
  - Do you stay in a relationship because you believe that it is right to stay? Do you see it as a vow, obligation, or duty? If so, do you give yourself credit for the nobility of unselfish sacrifice?
  - Do you stay in a relationship because you see no good way of getting out? Are you willing to infuse new life into the relationship to see if it will flourish?
  - Do you tell your relationship story to yourself and others in ways that show two people working to appreciate each other and cultivate companionship? If so, you are cultivating commitment.
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## *How Can We Cultivate Commitment?*

What can we do to maintain and strengthen commitment in marriage? Here are a few ways to do it.

### **Make the Relationship Primary**

With many demands on our time, sometimes our marriages only get cold leftovers from last night's dinner. Marriage may get only small fragments of spare time and energy. This is likely to leave the relationship starved and empty.

In contrast, when decisions are made about how we use our time and energy, the effect on the relationship should be considered. Does my hobby interfere with essential relationship time? Do my friends come before my spouse?

### **Make Couple Time a Priority**

John Gottman, one of the world's leaders in marriage research, has observed that it is not the trips to Hawaii that ensure the strength of a relationship as much as the common, shared, regular activities. Some couples work in the yard together. Some cook together. Some attend church together.

Bill Doherty describes taking time every day to just talk with his wife Leah for a few minutes. Usually right after dinner they send the children to play while they share with each other. They do not use the time to solve relationship problems or to deal with conflicts. They use it to connect. This small commitment feeds the companionship.



## **Set Limits on Intrusions**

For commitment to thrive, a couple must be willing to set some boundaries. For example, a couple could decide that they will not invite a member of the extended family to come live with them unless they have discussed it together and have come to agreement. Some couples agree not to talk with anyone outside the relationship about their marriage problems unless that person is a friend of the relationship—that is, someone who wants to help them succeed as a couple. Some couples decide that both partners will avoid going out to dinner or spending time alone with someone who could be a threat to the relationship. Some couples agree to carefully monitor their feelings of attraction to others outside the relationship so that they won't allow other attractions to grow.

## **Build Rituals of Connection**

Each couple can design rituals of connection that can help sustain relationship commitment. Some couples take classes together and share their discoveries with each other. Some couples take time for hugging, walking, running, or other exercising. Any activity that helps a couple to feel close can strengthen and support commitment. For many couples it takes years to find the right activities that both partners enjoy. Even then, they require periodic readjustment.

## **Commit as a Positive Choice**

Commitment in a relationship does not have to be left to chance. It can be a choice.

John Gottman has suggested things that couples can do to strengthen their relationship. They can keep a list—or

scrapbook—of great moments in the relationship. Each partner can work to stay aware of qualities and strengths in the person he or she loves. When there are problems, rather than conclude that the relationship is a sinking ship, they can see the trouble as a passing storm.

Scott Stanley and his colleagues have described ways to cultivate commitment. They write,

Most people seem to want a lifelong best friend in a mate. While for many couples this may come easily, the message for most couples is that it takes some work to nurture such a union. Constraint can lend stability, but it is dedication that can fuel a bonded, lifelong friendship. The good news is that the factors that underlie dedication are things about which people have choices. People can choose how they will handle the allure of alternatives. People can choose the priority they will place on their relationships. People can choose to nurture a positive, long-term vision for their relationship. And people can choose to think of commitment either as loss or gain.

One of the challenges we face in commitment is that we often try very hard but experience no improvement in our relationship. This can be discouraging. The problem may be that effective commitment includes working hard *and* working smart. When we are doing the wrong things, working harder at them won't help. Sometimes we must learn new ways.

One of the best ways to build commitment and to strengthen a relationship is to fill it with positives. Gottman suggests that the magic ratio is five positives for each negative. This ratio is the most important key to a healthy relationship. Later



chapters in this book will give many more ideas for nurturing the potential of your relationship.

Commitment is more than a white-knuckled resolve to hold on through tough times. It includes the willingness and goodness to strengthen the relationship with positives.

## **Bearing Fruit over Time**

Those who are committed to investing in their marriage are likely to enjoy a relationship that gets better and better over time. Although there are clearly relationships where two people are destroying each other and the relationship should end, most relationships would probably benefit from a little more commitment.

I have learned more about growth, struggle, pain, and misunderstanding from almost forty years of marriage with Nancy than I learned in all the rest of my life put together. I'm glad for those humbling and enlarging lessons.

I can also say I have learned more about joy, trust, happiness, unselfishness, peace, and purposeful living from Nancy than from all the people I have ever known. Maybe, as Thomas Paine suggested, we value the things that we have labored over. A single tomato from a cherished plant is cause for celebration. A simple breakthrough in marital understanding is cause for joy.

Daniel Wile, a wise therapist and writer, has observed that "there is value, when choosing a long-term partner, in realizing that you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of irresolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the next ten, twenty, or fifty years." There is no perfect marriage. Every marriage has conflicts or problems, many of which will never be resolved.

In the absence of commitment, even the most promising plot of land bears no fruit. In the absence of commitment, even

the most promising relationships will not grow. Commitment is not always fun. But we only get to strong relationships by struggling through storms, droughts, and pests. Yet the harvest can be glorious.

### **Exercise**

Read over the following list of ways to show commitment; mark those that you or your spouse already do well. You might also mark those that you would like to learn to do well.

## Commitment

	<i>Things I Already Do Well</i>	<i>Things I Would Like to Do Better</i>	<i>Things My Partner Already Does Well</i>
I make time to do things with my spouse.			
I try to honor occasions that are important to my spouse (anniversaries and so on).			
I don't flirt with anyone except my spouse.			
I have worked with my spouse to establish traditions that bring us close.			
When I promise my spouse that I will do something, I do it.			
I put effort into making our time together special.			
I look for and remember the good qualities in my partner.			
I make a point of remembering our good times.			
I keep confidences.			
I don't share details of my intimate relationship with anyone outside the relationship.			
I speak kindly of my spouse in private and in public.			
I don't speak poorly of my spouse to others.			

