

# LANGUAGES OF LOVE – MORE THAN SAYING I LOVE YOU

Edited transcript of presentation at  
the Brisbane Family Expo  
on July 24, 2004  
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Let me introduce this subject with a story.

I read a story about a woman in Salt Lake City, Utah who had an interesting experience. She had a middle school daughter who was participating in one of those drug awareness programs, called the DARE program. Her daughter, who was in grade 8, came home and told her Mum, "For our DARE program we are each supposed to come to school next Wednesday with a plain white T-shirt in our size and then we are going to silk screen a message onto it. Could you please have a new, clean white T-shirt ready for me then?" Her Mum said "Sure" and put it on her list to do.

I'll bet you can guess what happened when Wednesday came. There was no T-shirt, and when her daughter said, "Mum, where's my T-shirt?", Mum said, "Oh, I forgot!" So they scurried around the house trying to find a shirt that met those qualifications and couldn't find one. However, they did find one that had a message on the front but nothing on the back. So Mum told her to take that T-shirt and put the message on the back. Her daughter rolled her eyes and said, "Mum!!" But there was no better option and so she took that T-shirt. They silk screened it and she brought it home that afternoon. It ended up with a very interesting combination of messages. The original T-shirt had a message on the front "Families are forever" and on the back said, "Be smart - don't start".

**Sometimes we work hard and fail to work smart. If you're doing the wrong thing, does it help to do more of it? Does it help to double your efforts when you're going in the wrong direction? It doesn't, so "languages of love" is all about being smarter in the way we love.**

I had an experience some years ago. I worked at a company where I was a consultant and they had a lot of big projects and a lot of talented people. One man in particular said to me on a Monday morning, "Wally, I learned a very important family lesson this weekend." I said, "Tell me about it." "Well, you know it was our anniversary on Friday evening, so what I did was I arranged for a friend of my wife's to take her shopping all day long. I took the day off from work and I spent the day cleaning up the house, putting out flowers and candles and preparing a lovely dinner for us. I felt very noble making these sacrifices for my wife". I said, "How did it go?" He said, "Terrible!" I said, "Why was that?" He said, "Well, all day long I worked and had everything ready and her friend brought her home at the specified hour and dropped her off. She came into the house and saw the candles and the smell of dinner and said, 'Wow, thank you dear.' But it didn't have that level of enthusiasm it should have had."

Have you husbands ever had that experience? You've done something to please your wife, but you knew it wasn't quite the right thing. So this good man said, "Honey, what's wrong?" She said, "Oh nothing, I just appreciate so much that you did this for me." He said, "No, what's wrong?" She said, "It was just so sweet of you to do this." He said, "Honey, tell me what's bothering you." So she relented. She said, "You work long hours and if you're going to take a day off from work, don't send me shopping, I want to spend the day with you." Isn't that a powerful message! It was for me. Sometimes we try very hard to do something, but it's the wrong thing. He had assumed that preparing for her a big dinner would be a great blessing, but she would rather spend the time with him doing anything because his time was so valuable.

So languages of love... I believe that each of us has a very specific language, a way we prefer to hear the message.

Now, intriguingly just as a side note - it takes a while to learn languages of love. We do it imperfectly throughout our lives. I love the story that Haim Ginott tells. He had the experience of training parents and after a particular session, some parents came up to him and said, "We are trying so hard to use this language of compassion, but we just don't seem to get it right. We keep trying and trying." He, intriguingly as he experienced English as his third language, said, "You know, learning to speak compassion to your children may always be a bit of a foreign tongue. You may always express things with an accent, but for your children it can become their native tongue." If we try to bring compassion, love, sensitivity and understanding, we may work at it, we may struggle and may always do it imperfectly, but if we make our best efforts, for our children and the next generation, it can become second nature. It can become automatic.

I want to talk about **four ideas related to the languages of love.**

**The first is – watch for opportunities to connect.** The best book in the world on marriage was written by John Gottman called *'The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work'*. John was a long time psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle. He has been the researcher who has challenged our ways of thinking about relationships.

In fact I might say that most marriage programs are still based on the assumption that if I could just share with you in a fair way what's wrong with you then you could change it and we'd both be happy. Let me ask you – is your favourite conversation one that starts with, "I've been thinking about what's weird about you and I'd like to share it with you in the kindest sort of way." Does it make you go, "YES! I've been waiting for this!" Probably not! Honest criticism is hard to take from family members, neighbours, friends or strangers. Criticism is not what we seek, is it?

John Gottman has done amazing research. He has written many books and one of them is called *Relationship Cure* where he talks about "bid busters". He has a laboratory in Seattle where couples spend time talking and working things through and experiencing a normal weekend. He tells a story of a couple staying for the weekend in this apartment like laboratory. The wife standing at the window overlooking the ocean, said to her husband, "Honey, look at the beautiful sail boat." Men, there's a trick, we might want to say, "What's so special about that sail boat?" That's the wrong answer, the wrong way to respond. Instead, what she's looking for is not some kind of nautical exchange, not some opportunity to talk about some sea going vessel. Almost anytime we say something to another person, it is a bid for connection. We're inviting another person to be involved in our lives. In a sense we are reaching out and saying, "I'd like us to be connected. I'd like us to relate to each other. Would you take note of me and participate in my life in some way?". Very often, not recognising that that's what it's about, we respond in ways that are 'bid busters'.

One 'bid buster' is not paying attention. For instance, have you ever been busy about the tasks of the day and a child says, "Hi Mummy, Hi Daddy" and we respond how? Nothing! Until he starts turning over the furniture and sets the house on fire, we don't notice, we don't respond. The child typically is saying, "Hey I'm home and I'd like you to notice that because I care about you and I hope you care about me." It's hard for us to shift gears isn't it? We don't do it easily or automatically.

There's another "bid buster" - starting on a sour note. The child arrives home and says, "Hi Mum" and you say, "You haven't cleaned your room yet." Is this a good response for this bid for connection? Does this leave a child saying, "You love me." No, it probably is a very cold, austere and unhelpful way of responding to a bid for connection.

Criticism is another 'bid buster'. Thinking about the example of the child coming home from school - what about your spouse coming home and you say, "You're late!" Not a very good way to connect is it? Pretty natural, but not very helpful. I hope that what you take away is, "If I become

more mindful in my family relationships, if I start thinking as a human and stop responding on my automatic reactions, I can have a lot stronger and healthier relationships”.

Another “bid buster” is “flooding”. Increasingly psychology has been interested in what we call “emotional flooding”. The idea of overloading someone with so much emotion that they flood. They are overwhelmed and cannot respond. We talked earlier about the boy who had a bad time on the school bus and if we overload him with more stuff, he won’t be able to cope.

I remember recently talking to our daughter Sarah on the phone. She has been dating a young man and wasn’t sure if they should move forward or not, whether they should marry or part company. She decided that maybe they should go different directions. She said to me, “It’s so hard. What do I do with the love I have for him?” I hate to admit that what I said was, “You know dear, if you had heeded your concern earlier, you wouldn’t have that pain today”. She didn’t need to hear me say that. I was adding insult to injury. Isn’t it hard? You have all the love for this person and you’re not sure what to do with it. That’s one form of “bid busting”.

Another one is practising a crabby habit of mind. It has taken a while but my family discovered that they ought not to ask any questions or make any special requests of me until I have paid the bills. **I am a cantankerous person and if a family member approaches me at a time like that, I will say, “You know, that’s not a very good question right now and in fact if you don’t mind, I’m going to send me to my room.” Sometimes we sense that we’re not in very good spirits and we end up taking it out on family members. Isn’t it better if recognizing our poor state of mind, instead of lashing out at family members who may have hoped to catch us in good humour, isn’t it better if we say, “I’m sorry. I don’t have my best to offer you right now. Let me see if I can settle myself down and be a better family member for you later on.”**

Another “bid buster” is avoiding the conversation you need to have. It keeps a cold distance between people. For instance, after saying to Sarah something that wasn’t very helpful, I can call her or email her and say, “Sarah, I’m sorry that I wasn’t more helpful, because I love your tender soul, I love your sweetness, I love the way you care about others.” That’s the conversation that needs to be had and to fail to do that is to fail to respond to her bid well.

Isn’t it funny that sometimes we’re very synchronised with certain people? Andy and I seem to always have been very much in tune, we could be sitting around and happen to look up and catch each other’s eye and one of us would nod. We would jump up, grab the car keys and go to the store and buy chips and salsa. We just knew! Andy and I very much have a common language. That’s not always the case. Sometimes we have children who, the harder they try to please us, the more we resent them. It is for those children that we must be wise, patient and pray for help. If we are left to our automatic ways, we will be lead to a relationship that gets worse and worse and worse.

Watch for opportunities to connect. Another example - once I came home from work and was feeling a lot of pressure because I had meetings in the evening and as I was dashing from place to place. Our son Andy, then about 7 or 8, said, “Dad, today at school my leg really hurt me and it just ached and I don’t know what’s wrong.” It was real clear to me that he was concerned that there could be something seriously amiss and he was worried about it. It is easy to respond with our needs in mind instead of theirs. I was tempted to say, “Andy, do I look like the on-call physician? I mean what do you want me to do about it?” I didn’t do that. Instead I had on that occasion enough sense to say, “Andy, I have to go to a meeting. I expect to be back about 8.30pm. Would it be OK if when I get back, I pick you up and we go to the local restaurant and have dessert together and you and I can talk and see if we can figure this out?” Well, Andy was all over that. He said, “Sure Dad, that would be great!”. So I went to my meeting and got home at the appointed time and said, “Are you ready, Buddy?” “Yeah, I’m ready”. We took off and went to a restaurant and ordered our desserts. They had paper placemats so we played tic tac toe and laughed and talked about his day. I let him take the lead; I figured that he would bring up his leg when he was ready. It never came up. I don’t mean to suggest that he didn’t have a sore leg during the day; what I would suggest is that many of our aches and pains are an expression of our heart, not our legs. They’re

saying, "My life is sometimes confusing and overwhelming and I'm just wondering if anyone out there cares and would take time for me." If Andy had brought up the leg we would have talked about it, where it hurt and how often, and tried to figure something out and see if he needed to go to the physician. He didn't. The healing he needed was not a slice of pie, but a slice of Dad.

Languages of love - watching for opportunities to connect. Speaking now as a grandparent, I would say that Nancy and I are always looking for opportunities to connect with our grandsons. Because we have finally gotten just wise enough to say, "Anytime we get a chance we'll take it." So when Max says, "Poppa, come and look at my train", do I say, "Well, Max I'm quite busy and it's actually quite important and I don't have time for trains"? No, the universe stops and I go and look at his train. In fact, in our house in Little Rock, we live 500 miles from our grandson Chad and 1500 miles from Max and Sam. When they come to visit we want to make the time special. So I went up in our attic and put down some flooring and set up a suspended track at just their height so that I could set up my childhood electric trains. We go up there in the attic and the boys run around the attic following the train.

**Let me move to the second idea – we should notice what our partner or child loves.** What do they love? Notice what they care about, what interests them. What has worked in the past?

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned about languages of love came from my own experiences. Nancy and I have been married now for almost 33 years and we say "33 years of uninterrupted, wedded bliss." Then we pause and anyone who laughs has some marriage experience. Those who think, "Oh, isn't that wonderful" need to get married.

After 27 years of marriage I realised that my usual way of showing love to Nancy wasn't working so well. I'm a person who loves stuff, in all forms; I love toys, I love books, I just love stuff. I have to keep finding more storage space to put all the stuff I can't live without but have no place to use. Nancy's kind of weird because whenever I think about buying something she says, "How will you use it honey?" "Honey, that's a goofy question. I'll store it because I know that I have it and I'll be happy because I have it".

I love stuff, and when I feel loving and appreciative towards Nancy, what do I do? I buy her stuff of course. Anyone in their right mind loves stuff. **Some of you might know what the conspiracy of nature is. It's a term we use in physics and it operates the same in marriage. No matter who you marry it is a person who does not want to be loved the way you show love.** The same is broadly true with your children too. Each of your children prefers to be loved in a way that's different from the way you would like to love them. That would seem like an ironic and painful and unfair twist of fate, but think of it as a blessing. When we're young we imagine love to be that sweet and simple thing that we're just filled with appreciation and passion for another person and it just flows out naturally and we fall into love. As we get older we realise that love is a commitment to act in the best interests of another person. It requires that we do homework and that we adjust our own lives to accommodate those we love. It's not that simple passionate expression that we thought it was when we were young. Isn't that as it should be? Because something as dear as love should not be cheaply won.

Continuing with the languages of love - I have bought things for Nancy and typically she would respond, "That's really nice honey, but I don't need that" and I say, "Ha, ha, ha... what does that have to do with anything? Honey, this is stuff. We can make some storage space for you too so you can store your stuff". Then she says, "Besides that, we can't afford it". I say, "Honey, that's not our problem, that's the bank's problem!" If you have the sense that one of us is better at managing money, then you are correct. Being a very quick learner, it only took me 27 years to notice that this wasn't working very well. If you think that to be merely a fable, then you are welcome to consult Nancy who will confirm that I am a slow learner. I figure if something I'm doing isn't working, then all I need to do is do lots more of it. I bought her more stuff and bigger stuff which didn't work any better than my first attempt.

So, finally I said to myself, "What works with Nancy? What does she do to show love? What has she appreciated in the past? What does she ask for?" With a bit of reflection, I remembered that Nancy would fairly often take a 3 x 5 index card and on it she would write an expression of appreciation. From the time we were first married she has done that. She would write one and put it in my bag for work, and I would feel great when I opened it and read it. That is so sweet. Then I'd dig in my bag and wonder where the stuff is, because if she loves me there would be stuff! Well, there wasn't stuff in the early years, but then Nancy learned more quickly than I. I would go off to conferences and in my bag would be a little wrapped package for every day that I'd be gone. Because Nancy is a very thrifty person, these would be things she bought on sale at Kmart, which made her happy, but it was stuff, and I still have some of that stuff today. So I realised that the 'stuff' thing works really well for me but not for Nancy. So I thought I'd try something different.

About 5 years ago as the holiday season approached, the big gift giving season, I thought I'd try this new approach. I write on my calendar every single thing I do every day. It's just a little tiny square with not much room and not much information, but I can tell you what I've done every day for 35 years. So that year, when I wanted to prepare something for Nancy, I pulled out my calendar. I read through the events of the previous year and it surprised me that after just a few months we had forgotten some of those things that were such a blessing at the time. I started looking at places Nancy and I had gone together and experiences we had shared. Each month there were several. So I sat down at my computer and I started to write *'Dear Nancy, remember when...'*. and I started to write about all the wonderful, joyous, meaningful experiences we'd shared, and it felt good. It took a lot of time and I went through the months, writing on the computer to Nancy. I ended up with a single spaced 3 or 4 page letter. I printed it out on some really nice paper and put an expensive sticker on it and put it in a nice envelope. I put it under our Christmas tree.

It's our tradition that on Christmas morning, our youngest Sarah, passes out one gift at a time and we all try to enjoy the blessing of every single gift. That process began and it was a while before she got down to that envelope. My anxiety was rising. "I haven't bought Nancy any stuff; she's going to hate me; she's going to leave me; she's going to make fun of me in the newspaper."

Sarah handed her the envelope with Nancy seeming a bit confused not knowing what it was. She opened it, unfolded it and began to read. She read about January and the blessings of that month, then February and as she read it the tears began to pour down her face. She said, "Honey, this is what I want". I said, "Oh good, and there'll be some great sales after Christmas".

So now, every year, I get out my calendar and write all the sweet experiences. You'd think that would only work for one year, but it seems to work every year - because that's Nancy's language of love. Nancy wants to celebrate the good experiences we've had together, she wants to appreciate the blessings that come into our lives.

The problem developed then, that once I had worked out her language of love, the children followed suit and last Christmas every member of the family gave Nancy a letter. I remember on Christmas night, Nancy said, "Honey, I don't know if I can carry on. I feel like my eyes are going to fall out. I've been crying all day long." Every time she read a letter with expressions of love and appreciation it filled her heart and flooded out her eyes.

We can notice what other people care about. While we may often show love and wonder why our partner is so unappreciative, instead of being insulted we should say, "Ah, here's an opportunity for me to learn, to investigate, to synchronise with this person."

Incidentally, I learned something akin to this in parent/child relationships also. I was a High School Math teacher before I went back to get a PhD and as a Math teacher one of the subjects I taught was geometry. Some time ago, a student named Scott taught me a lot. He was a short very mild fellow, quiet most of the time, but a good-hearted boy. I loved him then and I love him now. One day while the students were working on their assignments for geometry, Scott called me over to his desk and said, "What I like to do on Saturday mornings at 6am is I like to drive the truck up north of

town and park it and then crawl through the mud and the cattails at the edge of the lake and I just love to watch the ducks come in and land and they paddle around and then take off. It's wonderful. Do you want to go with me on Saturday?"

Now I don't know what you usually do on Saturday mornings at 6am - maybe still sleeping? Maybe we should take the time to do something different when the opportunity arises. So Scott picked me up on Saturday morning and we went up to the lake. We parked the truck and crawled right to the edge of the lake and watched the ducks land and take off. It was a lovely experience. But I'm not addicted! I had a nice time, but I still manage to sleep in on Saturday mornings in spite of that glorious experience.

Another experience around that time, as the students were working on their assignments - Scott called me over and said "My Dad is taking me big game hunting in Montana. He's arranged a hunting lodge and a guide and horses and we could have a glorious time". I said "Scott you must be excited". It seemed to be a question that caught Scott off guard. He said "Not really. I really wish that Dad would go up to the lake and watch the ducks."

Sometimes what we do for others is really what we want to do for ourselves. In fact, if confession is good for the soul, let me enrich my soul here. Andy, our son, earned his Eagle Scout Award and I said, "Andy, I'm so proud of you that I'd like to take you to Mulboons for dinner". I was feeling enormously noble. Why did I want to go to Mulboons? Was it because Andy loved it or because I loved it? I know that Mulboons offers a pound of boiled shrimp on ice for each entree that's ordered, and if I take with me 3 or 4 people who don't like shrimp, I can eat 3 or 4 pounds of shrimp myself before eating dinner. There it is - confession.

Well Andy, who's gentle but wise, said, "Dad, I don't know if that's what I want". I said, "Andy, I don't know if you get to pick what you get". What! Who got the Eagle Scout Award? Am I taking myself out to dinner? Well, after a while I got myself settled down and said, "Andy if you had a chance to chose, what would you want?" "Dad, when I go skiing with my High School group, I have to spend almost the entire morning standing in line to rent skis. Is there a chance we could look at some garage sales and find some skis and buy them for me so that I don't have to waste all that time?" Don't you hate it when kids are reasonable! I said, "Well, OK you look in the paper and see if you can find any used skis for sale." Within a few days we found skis, poles and boots for \$20 in his size and I found a different reason to go to Mulboons.

So when it comes to languages of love we can notice what matters to other people. We can notice what's important to them.

**Let's look at the third idea. It's called customizing your love. There are 3 different languages of love. Tell me, show me, and touch me.** Think about show me. Can you picture a sweet woman in the kitchen taking care of the kids, preparing dinner, answering the phone and her husband comes in to get a drink out of the fridge and says, "Honey, I sure love you." She tenses up and he thinks, "That's so weird, I don't know why she's been tense for 20 years of our marriage." She is saying in her heart "If you love me you would wash carrots, or change diapers or answer the phone or help around the house." That's a "show me" isn't it. Of course almost always "show-mes" marry people who aren't "show-ers". That's the conspiracy of nature at work.

We can notice our partner's requests and often they'll ask us to do things we don't prefer, just as it should be. Love is not something cheaply given or easily shown. It requires a sacrifice of the soul. I'm not saying a sacrifice is good in its own right. I believe in an intelligent sacrifice. Giving up something without someone being blessed by it is not useful.

There are also "tell-mes" - those people who are dying to hear those words "I love you - you are important to me - I just couldn't live without you" and they've married the strong, silent type who, after being pestered and cajoled, finally says, "Look, I told you I loved you when I married you and if it changes I'll let you know!"

There are “touch-mes” - have you known people who love to snuggle? They'd rather snuggle than eat. Some say that “touch-mes” are mainly female, but I just love snuggling. My dear wife has very much accommodated her husband. We wake up about 5am with me waking up a few minutes earlier than her and as soon as she stirs I put out my arm and she rolls into and we snuggle and I'm in heaven. Now if you're young, you might have a hard time imagining snuggling for 45 minutes without having something break out. I'm here to tell you that snuggling in its own right is a sweet blessing for those who are snugglers, or even just sitting close enough to let your shoulders touch.

Each one of those languages of love is unique.

**The fourth idea is that of the universal languages - taking time and being understanding.**

Think about what those two have in common. Taking time is about bringing myself to be where you are physically. Being understanding is bringing my heart to where you are emotionally. In both cases it's about bringing myself to you - offering my whole soul. Sometimes that takes the form of time and sometimes the form of compassion or understanding.

I think of the example I've heard of about a wife who one evening was preparing the dinner after having worked hard all day. She walked into the living room where her husband was reading the evening newspaper and said to her husband as she sighed deeply, “Oh, I am so tired!” He wanting to be noble and helpful said, “Honey, why don't you go and lie down for a few minutes before you finish cooking dinner?” She stiffened, stomped out of the room and slammed the door. He said, as men tend to do, “I wonder why she has been tense for the last 20 years?” You may say, “OK so she's tired, what am I supposed to make of that?” Here's the answer – nothing - you let her decide. You say, “Oh Honey, it looks to me like you're just exhausted.” So we reflect and we let the person who's had the experience tell us what it means. “You know, today at work my boss just chewed me out and I felt like zero.” Or maybe she'll say, “Sometimes I just get overwhelmed and feel exhausted and feel desperate for a break. Could you order a pizza?” What “I'm tired” means depends on her life experience. So instead of interpreting and mind reading and guessing, you'd do well to say, “It looks like you're really tired, tell me about it” and let her say what that means.

There's a story I heard that I thought was a fascinating one. There was a man who one day decided he needed to have some better health habits. He changed his diet, started walking. He really tried to change his daily regimen. One day he showed up at work with an enormous and rich coffee cake. His co-workers said “Hey, we thought you'd decided to be healthy, what's with the cake”. He said “This is no ordinary coffee cake. I have indeed tried to change my ways and normally I don't even go past the bakery anymore. But this morning I passed the bakery and looked into the window and saw this cake and it looked very special and so I prayed, ‘Lord if you want me to have that coffee cake, make a parking place in front of the bakery.’ Sure enough, on the eighth time around the block...”

We may in our efforts to love and serve each other be pretty unskilled and we bump into each other and don't do very well, but if we keep going around the block we will eventually have the coffee cake.