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True Love is Passion, Rooted in Friendship

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Imagine you see a beautiful bouquet of roses. They are striking, taking your breath away. You draw closer, and with each fine detail of color, fragrance, and texture you become more enchanted. Not caring about the price, they become yours. Your happiness is real, but after bringing them home, you get distracted by a pile of work, dirty dishes, and Instagram alerts calling your name. Instead of trimming, watering and placing the bouquet in a vase, you leave them on the counter. By the time you remember them they are wilted, limp, and unattractive. How did your powerful infatuation sag into complacency?

Romantic love is more intoxicating than the rich beauty of roses. In a fifth-of-a-second glance at a potential mate, the brain feels a thrill. A neurological cocktail of adrenaline, dopamine and oxytocin floods the head and lights up the eyes. It is powerful and exciting, and makes us act with abandon, as it did for one giddy fifth grader whose love note (names changed) went viral:

Dear Lexi. Your eyes remind me of the evening sky. My heart felt like broken glass until I saw you, and then I felt like I had every Pokémon ever. I love how you play Zelda even when people think it's weird. If you liked me it would be my first ever victory. Love Jake.

During Valentine's season, we celebrate the passion of love by spending approximately 19.7 billion dollars (2016 numbers) on chocolate, pedicures and little message-stamped hearts that look and taste like sidewalk chalk. The holiday is named for St. Valentine who, as legend reports, was a priest in third century Rome. At that time, the emperor made a decree that young men should remain single to focus on their military pursuits. Valentine defied the emperor by marrying young lovers in secret. Eventually, he was found out and put to death. We revere his legacy now by grabbing and gifting plastic-wrapped flowers. But flowers and passion can wilt.

Fortunately, there is more to love than the fires of passion. Love in its complete form has two parts: passion and friendship. Love often begins with excitement, but it is maintained by being planted in a stable bond. In the brain, these two states light up in different but overlapping areas. Early excitement activates in the brain as desire, ecstasy, and goal-directed pursuit. But the brain's response to a cherished long-term spouse looks like contentment, caring, and nurturing.

Many relationships go cold because one or both of these sides of love are neglected. This happened with married clients I will call Victor and Vicky. They were in a rut. Victor had been downsized and was working a low-paying temp job, and they were behind on their mortgage. Vicky was working part-time at a call center, but her shift was early, while Victor's lasted until 9:00 each night. On top of that, their son's grade school was calling them regularly because of his disruptive behavior. "He has that ADHD," explained Vicky, "but he has a whole lot of the H."

Victor and Vicky were frustrated with their son, and each other. They had lost the silly humor and close relationship they once enjoyed, and now mostly passed grumbling in the night. When I asked what types of fun they used to have, they described going to

social gaming groups, and playing as a couple. “We loved board games,” Victor said, “but now we are just bored.”

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These two accepted the challenge to schedule time to talk, have fun, and cuddle. They worked on using supportive words rather than grunts or nods. Research has found that couples who remain close over years are those who support each other’s interests, growth, and feelings. Spouses who respond to each other’s words positively are also more physically attracted to each other. Just being nice is connected to being passionate. Another study found that for both husbands and wives, the biggest factor in how satisfied they felt about the sex, romance, and passion in their relationship was the quality of their friendship. Victor and Vicky didn’t need Caribbean cruises or diamonds to revive their relationship, they just needed to act like good friends and respond to each other with kindness and attention.

Passion and friendship are related, and both can be strengthened. Victor and Vicky recommitted to a once-a-week date, pulled out their Monopoly board, and got their work schedules in sync. This increased the quality and quantity of their time together, and they once again felt close.

How is your relationship doing? Is it rooted in a rich friendship? Are you feeling passion? It may need some tender loving care. A relationship that is nourished with love will stay fresh and alive for a lifetime.

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