

Prologue

You are being presented with four articles that represent my 40-year marriage to the same man, Larry. The goals of these pieces are to introduce myself as a woman and wife who participates as a co-partner within the institution of marriage, and to generate interest in increasing one's personal knowledge of marital and family love. I embrace the importance of the marriage institution for its practical and emotional benefits, and in my evolved understanding, more importantly, for its representation as a sacrament. These introductory articles utilize the metaphor of a "vine" taken from the poem "Love Vine" ([click link to full poem](#)) that I wrote in 2004, after 28 years of marriage. Such a time-period suggests that I had accumulated experiences and knowledge about the life cycle of love in marriage and its complexities based on observations, living, and being inside a marriage. The poem was generated by instinct and mind to cope with life circumstances. A vine is not a straight upward or vertical trajectory. Note the characteristics of a vine from hunker.com: *Despite their inability to support their own weight, vines have remarkable tensile strength. A resistance to pulling and breaking is one of the signature characteristics of vines. These plants climb, creep and sprawl, often spreading out horizontally, as well as mounting vertically.* In the articles, actual thoughts and personal written responses are italicized, and questions are presented. I hope you pause to consider your feelings, ideas, and responses. I hope you find through these readings a story of human family love that is surprising, sturdy, stunted, sad, saluted, and "made perfect" because of God's Love. Let me know.

The love vine, twisting and turning; short or long. For better or worse, for right or wrong.

-R. C. Diggs, 2004

Our Marriage for Better or Worse

Part I: First 10 Years

My students at a historically Black college were surprised and expressive when I told them as part of my self-introduction as their speech teacher that I've been married for over 40 years. They chattered a bit among themselves about knowing folks that can't stay together for five minutes let alone 40 years. In other words, we seemed rare, special.

My goals for the series of four articles that I will be posting are targeted at people who are married and would like to remain so, whether newly-wed or long-term. Through my marriage lens of 40 years, I will consider the developmental aspects of marriage (how we grow and change) and the spiritual foundations. I am a Christian and though my husband and I went through our spiritual journeys at different time-lines (and always will), my/our God-conscious commitment is central to our longevity. In creating the first four articles that reflect the 40 years of our marriage in broad strokes, I examine some of my journaling notes, use conversations with my husband, reflections, and research. I will reference research, but I will not fill the short articles with too much. It's important that you talk back along the way, so I will ask you questions to consider.

So, where shall I begin? You might want to know something about my marriage background for this beginning article. Our marriage is an only marriage for each of us; we had no children at the time of the marriage. My husband, Larry and I were married in 1976 by the Justice of the Peace within the context of supportive families and caring friends. It just seems

natural that how a marriage **begins** seems important somehow to how it proceeds; we were both baby boomers, goal-oriented, some higher education, employed, and dependable. **How did your marriage begin?**

Our view of marriage was very superficial in 1976: an “iffy” proposition, *if it works it works, if it doesn't move on*. However, after accepting Christ (salvation) in my life months before the birth of our first child in 1980, my thoughts on marriage changed; Larry's Christian conversion happened in 1982. Our Christian conversion ideals prioritized a change from old, destructive behaviors and values (i.e., sin) to new, constructive set of behaviors and values (i.e., righteousness). Now, marriage meant to persist in the work, consult the scripture, engage in prayer, and look to the Bible to guide our lives and moral decisions.

Are you thinking, “That was easy!” Think again! For all of our 40 years our marriage has been a mixture of highs, lows, and plateaus. Now that's real talk. However, I think if you can begin to accept that “that's life”: bringing together two different people within a cooperative relationship takes energy (some call it work), expressive love, rest, breaks, support, prayer, comfort, value of commitment, and more. **Think about what you need to make it in your marriage.**

So, from 1976-1986, the first 10 years of our marriage our better or worse was tested. You know, those vows that we take in a traditional wedding ceremony. I don't know if Larry can recall a time in our early days when he was faithful. You see, he cheated a lot! Did he tell me this? Can he tell me this? Probably not, but I know now what I didn't want to know then. Is it necessary for him to tell me the dirty details? Not now, but I was pushing for truth in 1976 and rightly so.

The worst recall of those days was when I learned that he had a “girl-friend” in my presence and I was unaware. How disrespectful, and in reflection, how completely unaware, trusting I was! Wow! I was **that** woman who was very task-oriented, and managing my husband was not my task! Benefits and costs were wrapped up in this! We liked how we felt together sexually he ran amuck, and I became aware. So, no, I didn’t blame myself; I blamed him?

Then, on the evening of December 16, 1984, I became the wife of a new Believer, my husband Larry. I’m thinking: *He accepted the Lord! I can’t believe it...I believe it Lord!*
“Greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world. He’s crying, broken. I must go to him. I want to be with Him. Praise God (embrace). I love you Larry. I love you. I sense he’s still crying-he doesn’t embrace me. I feel that he should begin to praise- “stand up Larry God knows whatever it is...I rejoice with myriad of thoughts (We are in the midst of trouble-what now?). I confess, “I’m scared,” to a male altar worker who says, “Don’t doubt God, believe Him. Accept.” Larry is quiet. I call his mom with the good news. I recall how quiet we were, strange, new behaving. I suggested we pray together. I also began to feel argumentative because he’s not talking. I must be sensing this silence...it is bothering me. I prayed in a.m.

In 2017, I asked Larry to look back at what I included in my documentation of our 10-year journey and to respond. He wrote: *As we started this path of marriage, I was not ready the first few years. I was used to doing things my way before marriage. I just thank God for the prayers of my dear wife and others who helped us through the first 10 years. Now when our three kids come in the mix there are many issues to deal with. In some ways our parenting styles are at odds, the backgrounds that we come from...what to do when your child get gets into trouble at school, church and with other adults. The change in my life when I accepted God in*

my life. I wanted the best for my family and for each of us.... Before accepting Christ, I was not a good father or spouse. Late nights and parties.

In my reflection or looking back on what happened following his Christian conversion (the Quietness), Larry believed his experience was private and unnecessary to express what he had already given to God. My mind and thoughts were another hurdle as I wanted something he was not ready to produce: talk. Thus, I was anxious and wanted action; whereas Larry wanted acceptance and my love; however, his quiet behavior of trying to measure the emotional atmosphere and to follow my lead were challenging. Even though I was happy and excited that he accepted Christ, I was afraid of how this unspoken change would impact our relationship. Our communication behaviors and interpretations of each other's messages were tense. His silence around his experience soon moved to annoyance as I, in my romantic mind, wanted to be the one he runs to and tells all. Celebrating his Christian conversion with family and friends publicly contradicted my expression of distance and curt behavior privately; breaking through this communicative silence required spiritual intervention, a change in values and beliefs.

Within the ten years, Larry and I became parents to three children (1980, 1982, 1985). We agreed that I would be a stay-at-home mom during each child's first year and by 1986 we reaffirmed our wedding vows. So, why did we stay married for the first 10 years?

Our social networks of church, work, family, friends, extracurricular activities were helpful to pour our energy, to lament, and seek solace. My background in interpersonal communication likely guided my desire to persist in the effort to make connections with Larry and to seek trusted and wise community counsel. Ultimately, we pushed through to express some complaints and reveal sadness for the sake of the marriage. Johnson and Loscocco (2014) examine marriage through the prism of gender and race and address the challenging role of the

wife in marriage. Kanewischer and Harris (2015) found that wives initiate marital therapy more often than husbands. Though my husband exhibited a quiet demeanor and I more vocal, we were still motivated to obtain advice to stay in the marital struggle by seeking private talks with specific friends and clerical counsel - who valued faith and marital stability. They offered prayer, explanations, reminders, and affirmation to *wait it out* as we talked and talked more about what wanted and needed in our relationship. Again, not easy or simple. Chaney, Shirisia, and Skogrand (2016) examined how religion strengthened three marriages and found that couples infused religion in all aspects of their marriage: religion is foundational, couples practiced religion, sought religion during difficult times, and religion transcended race.

So, we are ordinary people who ask God to help us to remember that we serve a God who does extraordinary things; God helps us to remember the Love we first sought if we pause. Pause, now that's rare! But before you think we have a special talent or gift, know that everyday is a test of faith and trust in God. **Can you pause?** Try, and reclaim time as on your side and Give Love **time** under the banner of Christian commitment. Such reclaiming-taking back helped us to look again and motivated us to cling to our *love vine*.

References

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APPENDIX A

Love Vine

The origin: (melodic, jazz like, inviting, sensual)

The love vine,

Twisting and turning; short or long.

For better or worse, for right or wrong.

Being on the love vine

Has benefits and loss.

You get companionship at some steep costs

Its roots can be deep or shallow.

Its longevity brief or sustained.

If a worthwhile vine at all, it must be maintained.

The process: (trot, fast paced)

The early flames of youth, body and soul attraction

Propel us to pursue the love vine fruit.

The taste is so good we believe we have the root.

We wallow in this amazing find, but

As time and life would have come to show

We sometimes feel more than we really know.

Sometimes we pretend to feel passion love

For the sake of the other.

And as we pretend, perhaps, the other fails to bother.

Or maybe you both pretend.
And so you stay to tend the love vine.
Offering to the other this and that line.

Or maybe you accept that love is hard
And you talk and act to really deal
And strive to express what you really feel.

For those who stay or leave the love vine
There is wear and tear on the mind
And that way of suffering is not kind.

There is no pretend in this.
I gallop, you trot. I boil, you simmer.
I crash, you dash. I burn, you glimmer.

There is no pretend in this.
I laugh, you smile. I talk, you walk.
I crawl, you climb. I fall, you balk.

Even though we change places with circumstance
The twists and turns of the love vine remain
And those enraptured must bear its terrain.

Seeking the ideal: (slowing DOWN THE beats, pacing, more serious)

How can we who climb the love vine
Find a branch of its kind
That can support some peace of mind?

Enough of this constant boiling-simmering
Galloping-trotting; falling-crawling-climbing.
I want a place on the vine that's imbibing.

I can stay there a while, maybe for years.
I can document it and reveal how it happened
Rather than the days and weeks, then dampened.

What is the way out of this boiling?
Even in my ripeness, rather than stew, I boil.
Don't touch me! And then recoil.

Realizing the Ideal: (rich, deep..)

I've been on the love vine a long time.
I want something better with age.
This it the *I want, I want¹* stage.

But tending love is not an *I want* proposition.
At best it is *we want*. Here lies the dilemma.
The ideal tending is performed by each member.

Love Vine cont'd

For the bitter to be made sweet, I cannot make it.
Nor can another fruit on the vine or the picker.
Only the source can do it--if we confess, that is much quicker.

I'm growing old on the love vine
Trying as I might to make the fruit sweet
Slowly, sadly, sighing at times of defeat.

In the midst of my hurt and hardness I forget the source.
It has taken distance and times of repeated separations
For me to remember that the source is a builder of nations.

All of my unfilled expectations about my love vine
Can be absorbed by replacing *I, my* branch mind
With the *Spirit, divine* branch kind.

God, you are my only hope.
I strive to ripen under the sun, not the cloud.
To declare my love, loud and proud!

Come from the source of sun, rain, earth!
The mover of humanity, the nation shaker
I want to shine in your glory only--not the love vine but the love maker!

The final chapter: (even beats and less deep and lighter)

Will I petrify, remain a stone when things go wrong.
I am who I am but what about who God wants me to be.
Can I pause long enough to let God help me to see?

It is sour, mixed with laughter, joy, and pain.

The hardness--hurts and helps.

Develops?

How do I feel?

What do I lose or gain?

Pain?

It's the other who is at rest while I implode.

What prevents me from stewing slowly?

Glory.

What are the benefits of my implosion?

I write and think about the act

And travel a distance from the fact.

And then I see that the victory is the goal. (high lighter hopeful!)

The victory is in what God wants.

Therein lies the glory. While what I want, haunts.

I in my vanity-- vain and self-invested.

Struggling to get my way--your way.

Can we pause to consider a better today?

The call came minutes--an hour after the implosion.

I wanted to say, **'so you needed something, that's why you called.'**

But I didn't say what I wanted to say, I stalled.

And waited for God to speak to me
As He does when I'm willing to hear.
He told me what would be helpful to draw my love near.

And that's all I wanted all along,
To feel close to the other fruit on the vine.
Not just any fruit, but the one I call mine.

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