



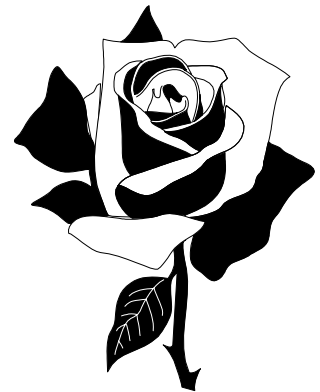
*Communicating* is giving of ourselves, which is all that we are. *Communication* is the link necessary to integrate two persons with separate identities into a marriage. The kinds of communication that nourish a marriage are listening with understanding, appreciating and affirming your partner, making requests for what you want, making and keeping promises, and expressing your feelings. These communications will increase intimacy and develop a partnership that will bring out the best in each person.

~ Sandra Gray Bender, Ph.D., *Recreating Marriage with the Same Old Spouse*, p. 87



## The Rose That Binds Us

Roses are red...  
Well, sometimes they're yellow  
But then what becomes of my rhyming scheme?  
'Cause "fellow" simply won't wax sentimental.  
Oh really, ending a line with "sentimental"  
    My love for you is elemental?  
Roses are...white  
And violets are...violet.  
    I married you because you're the best guy-I-met.  
Best leave the violets, the roses, the poesy  
Thank the Lord that my love's  
More sublime than my poetry.



~ Judy Parsley



## CHAPTER 20 – Of Minds and Hearts: Communicating With Each Other

### Focus Points



- Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Re-visiting consultation
- Character qualities to use in communication
- Cultural and gender influences
- Listening effectively



### A Couple's Story

Lindsay and James are getting out of the car at the park where they are going to have a picnic with some friends.

“James, please be sure to...”

“Yeah, Lindsay, I’ll lock the car when everything’s out.” He knows she’s security conscious.

She looks at him with frustration. “What I started to say was ‘Please be sure to get the bottle of sunscreen out from under your seat.’ The bottle slid underneath it. It really makes me upset when you assume what I’m going to say instead of listening to me,” Lindsay says.

“You’re right,” James says. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I just want to act like I’m on your wavelength. I’m afraid if I can’t figure out what you’re going to say that there’s something not right between us.”

Lindsay smiles at him. “Nah, nobody’s a mind reader. I just need you to allow me to say what I need to, and you’ll get it just fine. Otherwise, interrupting just slows things down and makes me upset. Let’s go eat...but please grab the sunscreen first!”

### Quotes for Guidance

✱ Consort with all men, O people of Bahá, in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and good-will. If it be accepted, if it fulfill its purpose, your object is attained. If any one should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding....

(Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 289)

✱ Settle all things, both great and small, by consultation. Without prior consultation, take no important step in your own personal affairs. Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another's projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 179)

- ✿ Be in perfect unity.... Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 93)

- ✿ They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.

(Shoghi Effendi: *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 22)

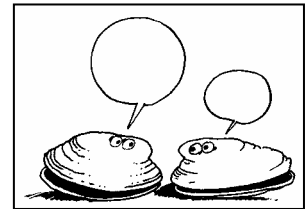
- ✿ In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other. In short, the relationship between husband and wife should be as held forth in the prayer revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which is often read at Bahá’í weddings: ‘Verily they are married in obedience to Thy command. Cause them to become the signs of harmony and unity until the end of time.’

(Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, pp. 226-227)



### Perspectives to Consider

Communication is vital, exasperating, challenging, wonderful, scary, clear, messy, risky, intimate, and a long list more. Verbal and non-verbal communication connects every aspect of your friendship and partner relationship, and they have emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual components to them. Your mutual communication may leave you feeling satisfied and happy or frustrated and miserable, depending on your compatibility, maturity, and skill level. Communication in marriage will affect your ability to live together peacefully, reach wise decisions, teach your children to communicate well, influence each other’s growth and development, prevent misunderstandings, be intimate, and on and on. It can strengthen a relationship immeasurably when it goes well and can quickly become destructive when it doesn’t.



**Don't Clam Up!**

In a family, you will communicate about everything and interact with each other on every imaginable topic, including, how to organize your home so it supports everyone’s needs, having children, what to wear, or what kind of food to buy and how much to spend on it. Sometimes these will be general discussions; other times you will fully utilize the tool of consultation (see Chapter 3). It is one of the most significant ways you will communicate with each other. You will use it to explore your thoughts, feelings, and goals, and the more skill you develop in consulting, the smoother your communications and decision making will be. Remember that making decisions as a twosome is different from group consultation, because there is no such thing as a majority vote. This challenges you to reach mutual agreement wherever possible. If it has been a while since you assessed your consultation skills, it may be time to revisit Worksheet 3A. Where do you still need to focus for skill development?

Consultation is one way that your communication has a spiritual component. This includes beginning with prayer and seeking God’s guidance in your decisions. Praying together by itself is also a form of communication. You agree on what you are praying for/about, read or say prayers out loud with each other, and build a spiritual connection between you through the prayers. Positive spiritual qualities of character also apply to communication. This includes being *kind and courteous* in your interactions, *courageous* in speaking up when difficult issues must

be raised, *assertive* in addressing small problems so that they don't become big ones, *patient* when listening, and much more.



Effective communication takes time and is **built on trust**. The degree to which you trust each other affects your ability to risk being vulnerable and share important things about yourself. Getting to know and trust someone is essential to intimate and safe communication about personal issues. What can you do to increase your trust in each other? How will you know when it is safe to share something? What does breaking trust look like to you? How can you re-build it when it's been broken? Do you want to re-build it?

When the trust is well-established, and you are getting to know your partner and are seriously considering marriage, it feels joyful to share what's in your heart, soul, and mind. There can be a real spark of connection between you and a feeling of communicating **“on the same wavelength.”** You may experience knowing what is on your partner's mind before he or she speaks or be able to finish each other's sentences. You may be very aware of each other's moods and emotions. While being on the same wavelength can be great when it works well, *don't place excessive importance on it*. Some people will never have the ability to sense emotions and thoughts in another person clearly, and this is not a requirement for marriage. It would simply require that your verbal communication skills are very good.

A component of verbal communication that may not be intuitively obvious is **effective listening**. When someone *truly* listens to you, it enhances trust and harmony in your communications, and you feel respected, validated, and appreciated. Allow your partner to communicate fully without interruption, listen with your heart as well as your mind, and check to make sure you have fully understood what the other is saying before you respond. Listening with your heart means listening with love, with

### Consulting About the Big Issues?

In many cases, it will be wise to set aside judgment about whether something is big or small when it comes to consultation and decision-making. Even small things can become big, for example, if they are left to build up inside, if one of you minimizes the issue, if it relates indirectly to another “bigger” issue, or if you bypass consultation. As is natural, at any given time, you will probably have different perceptions of what is big or small.

Because you can't be certain of your partner's perspective, the qualities of tact and wisdom are crucial for in-depth consultations of all kinds. Larger, deeper issues may involve many emotions that will require expression and sensitive responses. Additional **pauses or breaks** may assist you if your emotions are escalating during the discussion and leading you to say things you will later regret. Agree ahead of time to call for a “time out” if needed. If you can maintain a spiritual attitude and remember that preserving the quality of your relationship is very important, you will likely communicate in a loving way and be happier and more satisfied with the outcome of the consultation.

Many topics might qualify as “big” ones for you, depending on how they will affect your future and your relationship. These might include whether to marry or not, purchasing or selling a home, when to/whether to have or adopt children, and so on. Consultations on more intense subjects usually **take more time**. You may be able to share with each other and resolve a matter in a short session; alternatively, it may take several sessions over a period of a days, weeks, or months.

The physical setup for more serious and in-depth consultations can also be very important. You may need to be away from your usual environment and set up space where you can be focused and undisturbed.

While **praying for guidance** at the beginning of a consultation is always important, it becomes even more necessary when you are facing decisions that have a serious or long-term effect. It may be wise to pause repeatedly during the consultation for prayer as well.

When a matter is very serious, it is also wise to agree to **wait for a while after making the decision** and then re-visit it to confirm whether it is still the right choice.

caring, and with compassion. When people feel heard, it boosts their self-confidence, and they are likely to feel more loving toward you—and to improve their own listening skills.

Communication, especially in a close relationship, can be **emotionally hazardous at times**. Misunderstandings may happen, you may unintentionally hurt your partner's feelings, or you could accidentally (or intentionally) use words that make the other upset. All this could make you wonder occasionally whether it's easier to just stay silent... In the long run, though, it's more productive to keep patiently developing your sensitivity and communications skills. (See Chapter 21)

There may also be **cultural or gender-related influences** that affect your communication patterns. Some cultures teach that it is important *not* to be honest or direct in communication, if there is any chance that it will upset the listener. Other cultures train people to share loudly and often with each other, assuming everyone should be thick-skinned enough to take it. Some families and cultures teach male children not to express themselves but to stay quiet and let females do the communicating; others teach male dominance and that females should be demure and silent. Studying—and getting exposure to—each other's cultures as well as reading books about gender differences in communication may support you in understanding your compatibility in this area.



### Ways to Know You are Mature and Compatible in Communication Styles

You may be wondering how to tell if you are each mature and skilled in communicating and whether you are **compatible in your ability to communicate**. Below are some ways you could assess this.

- You are self-aware and raise issues promptly and appropriately, rather than letting them fester and grow
- You have regular communications and consultations that are unified and productive
- Your consultations usually flow smoothly, and you reach decisions you are both comfortable with at the end, leading to unified action.
- As you carry out the decisions and see their wisdom, you are confident that the decision was sound because you shared all relevant thoughts, facts, and opinions during the consultation process.
- You have developed communication skills that are healthy and constructive (see Chapter 21)
- There is a flow of openness between you about your hopes, dreams, emotions, thoughts, and experiences
- You can laugh together—especially over tense issues
- Over time and with lots of practice, you will likely develop the ability to express profound love and respect toward one other consistently.

When it comes to **non-verbal communication**, you will need to hone your observational skills to see, hear, and understand messages your partner is giving *without* speaking. This type of communication includes a glance, a stare, a frown, a smile, a loving look, a hand gesture, and much more. Your tone of voice is also a powerful non-verbal cue beyond the words that you say. Non-verbal signals can enrich communication and help express your personality. They can also communicate strong meaning along with your words, sometimes appropriately and helpfully, sometimes not. Be conscious of the impact of gestures or intonations that emphasize your points—do they make your message too strong? If you smile while you are telling a story, do your words have greater meaning for the people who are hearing it? If you frown when talking, does that expression overwhelm the meaning of anything you might say?

When communication works well, it weaves the fabric that binds you closely together, and you begin to know—and appreciate—each other more than any other person. Rather than un-raveling the relationship via poor communication and hurtful interactions, you create a beautiful tapestry that can warm, protect, and comfort you as you sit together in front of the fireplace of your marriage “fortress.”



## Coaching

- ⇒ While being in a close relationship with someone gives you greater sensitivity to each other's thoughts and emotions, and sometimes you can guess what the other is thinking, it can be unwise to make assumptions about what the other person thinks or feels. Neither is it wise to expect your partner to read *your* mind. It is a **romantic myth** that couples should always be able to “read each other's minds” and know what the other means, thinks, and needs. In fact, assuming that you do know can often feel to your partner like an *invalidation* of his/her feelings and thoughts. Clear communication lessens the possibility of misunderstandings.
- ⇒ Remember the analogy that marriage is like one long conversation with your partner, your companion for life—choose someone with whom you enjoy communicating!
- ⇒ If you rearrange the letters of **LISTEN** they form the word **SILENT**. The Chinese written characters for “listen” include the concepts of listening with the ears, mind, eyes, and heart.
- ⇒ If you are having difficulty communicating or consulting, set up a regular, daily time to share with each other how you think your communication flowed that day, what went well and what didn't. Remember to share your successes, as well as the difficulties. This daily analysis will help your skills gradually improve.
- ⇒ Sometimes when communication feels like a struggle, you may start questioning your relationship. While there may valid concerns worth examining, you should not immediately ask whether there is something wrong with your relationship or whether your partner loves you based on a single instance or miscommunication. If you have to repeat something you've already said, if one of you won't let something drop and pursues it single-mindedly, or if one of you is distracted by a concern, it doesn't mean that your relationship is necessarily at risk.



## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you prefer to communicate with your partner on important topics? How about on daily matters? In-person conversation? E-mail? Instant messaging? Written notes? A hug? Others? All of these?
2. Does one of you prefer one approach and the other something different? (Example: one doesn't enjoy long talks on the phone, one *must* be looking someone in the eye to have a serious conversation, one finds it easier to write a letter or email to the other first before having a difficult conversation?)
3. Do you prefer to carry a cell phone and be available all the time? Would you rather not be that available?
4. How do you feel about the amount of communication between the two of you? Would you prefer more or less?
5. Do you notice a difference in your communication if you pray together first?
6. What might be an indication that you need to have an in-depth consultation?
7. Can you effectively solve difficulties through consultation? Examples?
8. Do you patiently listen to each other?
9. What character virtues do you regularly use in your communications? (See Appendix A)
10. How well do you listen to your partner? How well does he/she listen to you?
11. Do you feel each of you is able to concentrate on listening to the other without your attention wandering?
12. Does either of you ever use a tone of voice that bothers the other? What can you do to remind yourself to avoid using it?
13. What may indicate that one of your parents or others taught you to avoid direct communication in resolving issues?

14. Does the amount of communication your partner has with others seem excessive or annoying to you? How do you deal with this?
15. With whom is it appropriate or inappropriate to talk about your relationship? Are there topics that should be confidential and not shared? Finances? Feelings? Sex and intimacy? Other matters? What would you expect of your spouse in this matter?
16. How do you talk about each other and your relationship in front of others? How do they feel and respond when you do?



## Activities

1. Pray, meditate, reflect, and write in your journal about the importance of communication between you and your partner in marriage. You also may wish to reflect on the current state of your communication.
2. Have an in-depth consultation(s) with each other about all of the topics below that are relevant to you. The object is to have a *meaningful* consultation so you both understand each other's views on the issue, and you are also able to assess your ability to consult. Choose another topic than the ones listed, if necessary. This consultation may take awhile, so remember that you may want to pray first, and then identify an appropriate, time and place without distractions.
  - Whether to finish college before getting married or not
  - How to show affection
  - Geographical distance from each other and/or family before and after marriage
  - Where to live after marriage
  - How you would handle moving to another location (Examples: employment, religious service, college enrollment, being near parents)
  - How you would handle sibling rivalry among your children or conflicts among half- or stepchildren
  - Whether you would be willing to loan money to others and under what circumstances
3. Discuss together how the communication on the above subjects flowed and how you felt about it:
  - a. Were you able to listen completely?
  - b. Did you each feel heard?
  - c. How did each of you listen in a manner that was helpful?
  - d. Did either of you interact in a manner that was *not* helpful?
  - e. What are some verbal and non-verbal listening skills you'd like to alter in yourself and/or in your partner?
  - f. Did either of you withhold information?
  - g. Was it difficult to be honest with your partner about your thoughts and feelings?
  - h. Were you sensitive to each other's feelings?
  - i. Were you able to reach consensus peacefully? Are you both ready and committed to abide by the decisions you came to?
  - j. What might you do differently another time?
4. List below the character qualities that you believe can contribute to effective communication in your relationship (see Appendix A for suggestions). Do you each demonstrate these?

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5. Say a few of the following phrases to each other in a variety of different tones of voice and with varied expressions on your face. Watch your partner's reaction to these different non-verbal cues. Discuss which ones you like and which ones you would prefer *not* to have as part of your communication with each other.
- a. Sit down
  - b. Yes, dear
  - c. Come with me
  - d. Let the dog out
  - e. Pass the salt
  - f. Will you call me
  - g. Why did you do that
  - h. Can you hear me
  - i. All right, I'll do it

6. What did you discover during this exercise about communication?

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7. If you identify that you/your families have different cultural backgrounds, study books on the cultures involved and identify activities that will further your understanding. This might include watching movies, attending a family reunion, visiting a cultural museum, and so on. What did you do? What did you learn from the experiences that would make a difference to you in a marriage?

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8. Visit a library or bookstore to get a couple of current books that address gender differences in communication. Read through and discuss the key points together with the goal of identifying what applies to your relationship. **Note:** It is clear that men and women (and all individuals!) have differences in how they communicate. However, as you study the differences, remember the goal is unity, and don't focus so much on stereotypical or side-taking models of communication that stress your differences and don't assist you to bridge them. What did you learn new that will be useful in your communications with each other?

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