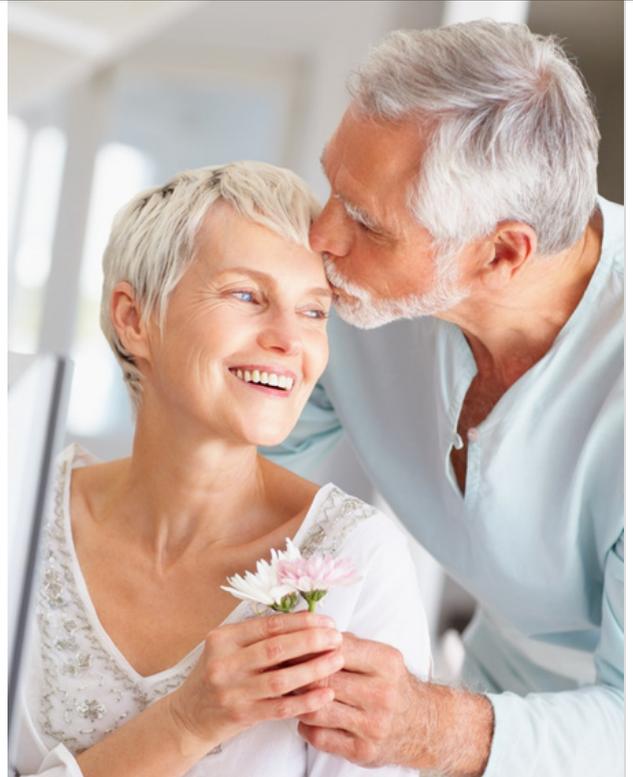


# NOT JUST LITTLE THINGS

by Karen Holford



I was running late, rushing around the house, picking up last minute things. Finally I had everything I needed. I closed the door and quickly turned my key in the lock. As I did, the key broke in two, and there I was, “imprisoned” outside my own home. My husband and youngest son had the other two keys. My husband was away for a few days, and my son wouldn’t be home from school until early evening. I needed to work on my computer. I had deadlines. But I was on the wrong side of the door. A little thing, a tiny crack in a key, but it made a massive difference to my life! Fortunately, a local locksmith cut me a new key from the broken pieces in just a few moments.

We’re surrounded by small things that make a big difference. Jesus noticed them too—a seed grows into a mustard bush; a small crumb of yeast works through a whole batch of bread dough; and a tiny teaspoon of faith moves a mountain. A man sells everything he has to buy a small but precious pearl because of the difference it will make to his life.

Little things make a big difference in our marriages too, much more than we realize.

I often assign homework for the troubled couples I see as a family therapist. Each partner is to do one loving thing for the other person every day, just something small and simple, without attracting any attention to it or making any comment. Each person is to keep one diary of the loving things they have

done for their partner and a separate diary of the loving things they notice their partner doing for them. This is where we start, helping them to show loving care in the little details of their lives. They may not feel like doing loving things. They may blame their spouse for all the pain in their relationship. They may feel too tired or too hurt to think of something kind to do. But this is an important task. Each of them needs to know their partner cares enough to try. If they don’t see signs of love, they may withdraw and give up working on the relationship.

When they do this homework two things happen—each person spends time thinking of loving things to do for their partner, and each person has to look out for evidence that their partner is being loving toward them. These two things can change their perspective on their marriage and help to build some of the love back into their relationship. Unless someone feels loved, accepted, hopeful, and safe, they’re unlikely

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to risk talking about what’s really bothering their relationship. They may also be less likely to work on projects together, be supportive or helpful, encourage each other toward their goals, or be generous with each other—all vital ingredients of a successful and happy marriage.

John Gottman is famous for his research into what makes a successful marriage. In

his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*,<sup>1</sup> he describes the things couples do and say that help him to predict the long-term well-being of their relationship. He’s discovered that it’s the very little things that matter, like responding warmly and thoughtfully to the most insignificant comment the other person makes:

“Oh look, it’s raining again!”

“Oh dear, that means you’ll get wet walking to work. Let me drive you.”

Successful couples turn to each other like sunflowers turning toward the sun. They seek each other out for companionship, comfort, and connection in the smallest aspects of their lives. These snippets of relationship may seem unimportant and mundane, but they are like tiny threads. Twist lots of those threads together, and you’ll have a strong rope. Carelessly let some fray, and the rope that binds you will weaken.

We see Jesus doing many little things to build connections with those He meets. We see Him turning toward those who need His love and forgiveness, not away from them. Like inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house for supper, asking a woman at a well for a drink of water, or touching a leper. His thoughtful kindness opens their hearts to His love.

Our marriages are like bank accounts. The more we invest in our relationships—a penny of thoughtfulness here and a dime of helpfulness there—the more love, generosity, and goodwill we’ll have in our banks. Then we can draw on these valuable resources when we face challenges together.

But what if your partner isn’t investing in the relationship? What if it feels like your relational bank account is already hugely overdrawn? Just as one person doing little bits of damage can quickly destroy a happy relationship, one person doing little bits of love can transform a marriage into a place of

## Simple things that can make a **big difference** to your marriage:

- Ask if you can pick up something from the store on the way home.
- Send a short text, note, or e-mail with a loving message.
- Work together on a household chore.
- Offer to make your spouse’s favorite drink.
- Speak kindly with a gentle voice.
- Smile warmly.

love, peace, and joy. It’s still an experiment worth trying because it’s how God treats us.

Ellen White expressed this beautifully: “Love cannot long exist without expression. Let not the heart of one connected with you starve for the want of kindness and sympathy. . . . Determine to be all that it is possible to be to each other. Continue the early attentions. . . . Study to advance the happiness of each other. Let there be mutual love, mutual forbearance. Then marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love. The warmth of true friendship, the love that binds heart to heart, is a foretaste of the joys of heaven” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 360).

*Dear Loving Father in Heaven, Thank You for showing Your love to us in a million different ways each day, even though we’re not aware of them all. Please take away our selfishness and give us the desire, inspiration, and courage to invest our best love and thoughtfulness in the marriage You have given us. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Orion Books, 1999).



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