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SOURCE LINES

It's still over 3 months until Valentine's Day

Bob and Sue have just returned from a perfect Valentines' Day dinner. Perfect in Bob's eyes at least. The restaurant was a nice cosy spot and they were tucked into a quiet corner which was lucky considering he had not made a reservation. In his mind, this was just an indicator that everything was going the right way. The food was great and the wine quite remarkable for the price. Bob had even given her red roses, which he bought from a lady walking table-to-table, and a very nice necklace which he got on sale that afternoon. But now that they were back home again he could clearly see the distance in her eyes and he was quite disappointed by her reaction. What more did she want? Why did she always make him feel like he was inadequate? He had all the ingredients right... Didn't he?

You have probably already figured the answer out. It was all last minute. Bob needed to have been planning and investing time in this weeks ago. But more importantly than that, he needed to be investing in the relationship months ago.

To help us get the point, let us imagine two different party scenes, one of them representing a couple the weekend before Valentine's Day. First, a couple ar-

rives. The party is generally divided into groups; guys on one side and girls on the other. Our couple splits up and he goes with the men and she goes with the women. The guys do a lot of laughing and so a little later she comes over to see him and to see what all the fun is about. He and another man turn and walk away to a corner of the room where they joke by themselves. She smiles over to him and he acts as if he hasn't noticed and turns to his buddy. Later on she says she is ready to leave and he tells her to go ahead and says he'll find his own way home later.

The second scene begins the same way but when she comes over to join the men's group he smiles and includes her in the banter. At a break in the conversation they wander off together and sample munchies. After a brief but warm conversation they separate again to join other groups. Catching each other's eye, they smile across the room. Later she comes close to indicate that she wants to leave. He is not ready to go but nevertheless willingly departs with her and on the way home they talk over what went on at the party.

Given these scenarios, how do you imagine each of the respective women would have received a Valentine's Day celebration from her

husband?

While these are scenes that focus on the men in the couples, women can behave in the same ways, both helpful and unhelpful. It is the little things that are indicators of the nature of a relationship. Among other things, the second couple appear to be friends while the first couple seem to enjoy others more than their partner. The first pair doesn't appear to be inclusive of each other while the other two naturally turn toward each other with warmth and do so even in the company of others. The second twosome is genuinely interested in each other's take on things while the first seem not to care.

Events like parties and Valentine's Day celebrations are often indicators of the health of our relationships. They cannot be isolated from all the other aspects of our lives together. In fact, they are based on all the normal things that we do day to day. Our ordinary lives offer us many opportunities to contribute to the strength of our relationships. The ways in which we interact with each other: the attention we give, the fondness we show, and the interest we demonstrate, are all ingredients that make our relationships work. When we know each other's hopes and dreams, when we are aware of the things that bring a smile to each other's lips, when we know what pleases one another and want to do and say those things, when we want to avoid those things that we know disturb our partner and are glad to do so,

then we are well on the road to a great Valentine's Day celebration. When we have these little things going on in our relationship, the things that don't quite go as planned on Valentine's Day don't concern us.

The day to day contributions we make to our relationships are, like money in the bank. We "bank" goodwill and understanding. We bank affection and friendship. The larger the deposit balance, the healthier the relationship and the more likely we are to overlook small glitches and even hurts. The balance in the bank tells us that these little things are the exception and not the rule. The last minute disappointments, like Bob's after the Valentine's dinner, can be taken in stride when everything else in the relationship is sound. Even though it is all rather last minute we will be grateful for the effort. But when the fundamentals are missing such an event would just be "more of the same" and leave us feeling sad and empty.

Over three months to go. What will Valentine's Day be like for you this year?

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Recommended Reading:
The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman.

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