

How to Extend Your Love Long Past Valentine's Day

I never thought a sandhill crane would make me cry.

A pair of these brown beauties were living in our little corner of the neighborhood for the last year. It seems fitting, since they happen to be the logo of our development.

We've watched them establish a routine. Foraging for food. Teasing our dogs by remaining just outside the boundary of the invisible fence that corrals our two eager boxers. Proclaiming, quite loudly, that they were large and in charge.

And always together. Until now.

For the past week, we've only seen one. One by himself (herself?) searching for food. And looking ever so lonely. I find myself hoping against hope that he's alone because his mate is nesting somewhere in the area. Wishing that she'll accompany him again a month from now with two newly hatched chicks.

Because, you see, sandhill cranes are one of those breeds that mate for life. And life for them is usually longer than 20 years. They mate when they're about 2 years old, and spend the next 20-30 years nesting, raising chicks, and watching them leave to start their own families.

A circle of life. The rhythm of nature.

It makes me appreciate the lifetime I've had with my own husband. Seasons and decades. Experiences that have been good, bad and occasionally so ugly the only thing you can do is stifle a gag reflex. Otherwise known as life.

There's something special about sharing all those things across decades with one person. With someone who knows you,

sometimes better than you know yourself. Someone who gets your quirks, overlooks your faults, and loves you anyway.

Someone who understands what real love is. Not just the hearts-and-flowers kind of love celebrated once a year on Valentine's Day. But a love that's in it for the duration. A love that puts the other person's needs and desires ahead of your own. And a love that never lets go.

I'm grateful for that kind of love. For the "mate for a lifetime" commitment. I know that not everyone has the opportunity for that experience, and I don't take it for granted.

So here's my challenge: Valentine's Day has passed, but don't wait another 12 months to show your love. While hearts and flowers are nice, consider other ways to communicate the deep joy and privilege of doing life together.

Identify a task the other person is responsible for, and surprise him or her by taking care of it. Do something together to get out of your rut. It doesn't have to be dinner at a fancy restaurant (although that's always nice!). Perhaps a spontaneous neighborhood walk after dinner. Or maybe sharing, without jokes or teasing, how much he or she means to you. Hold hands. Lock eyes with a smile. Bite your tongue when he leaves his clothes on the floor (again). Or when she tells you (for the 20th time) to pick up your clothes.

Expressing love—real love—isn't easy to do day in and day out. We're selfish by nature. We want our marriage and our world to revolve around us, not around the other person. And we want it *now*.

Christians know that to maintain this kind of deep, unselfish, humble love requires the supernatural equipping of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who encourages, prompts, and gives us the desire to love our spouse the way we want to be loved.

And if you need additional motivation, consider my lonely sandhill crane. Don't wait till it's too late to say—and show—your love.

You won't be sorry! {eo}

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