

Hello everyone. Guess what! I have just discovered that my car has been unregistered for two months and I have been driving around, blissfully unaware. Well, it began to register with me that marriage can be a bit like a car. An odd analogy perhaps, but bear with me. It can work absolutely fine until the day it suddenly is not, or you can be driving around in your car as in your marriage presuming that everything is tickety boo with no problems and then apparently out of the blue...Wham!! you get struck with something like an unregistered car, or a mechanical fault. Most marital problems, so it said, could have been prevented with standard preventative maintenance and of course that also applies to cars. When things are going well in a marriage we have a tendency to grow lax, to take things for granted. Now I think I have some authority to speak on the matter, because this year I will have been married for 40 years. Believe me I got married very young.

All the little things we do in a marriage to make it strong in the beginning, somehow need to be maintained. It's amazing the efforts that need to go into a marriage to fix it after it has a fault. But let's try to not slip into a fault situation. Let's not get into complacency and over-relax and let our guard down, letting things run down and fall apart. If you are lucky enough, don't let them run down and fall apart at all. And if they have run down and fallen apart, then perhaps some of these suggestions might help. Preventive maintenance in marriage should actually be fun and enjoyable because it's all about spending time and building a relationship with the person you love, but of course it involves intimacy and that can be threatening as well.

I have found some tips for marriage which have helped me over the years and perhaps they may help you also. They are only little. For those of you who are not married, perhaps you can treat this reflection as ways that you might build up or restore either your most significant relationships with other people, or even your prayer life with God.

The first thing is talk every day. It sounds simple, but research has shown that couples often talk to each other very little indeed. Communication however is the foundation of all good relationships; having time to talk, time to communicate is essential to good maintenance. Talking allows us to keep up with the other person's life. If we are like most people, we go our separate ways from our spouse until the evening. I encourage you even though you are tired and exhausted from a hard day's work, keep reconnecting in your marriage. A marriage needs daily attention just like your relationship with God. Communication is perhaps the greatest single means to give your marriage the loving attention it needs. If you don't know how to communicate well and it's a problem for you, well you probably know that, so invest in going on a communication course, find resources, books - there's endless stuff on the internet; make it a project you do together. Learning to communicate is a skill like anything else, it can be learnt and actually it's just not something we are born with. But if we master it, it will apply not only in marriage and significant relationships, but can overflow to children, friends, families, communities, in fact everything we do.

A second suggestion is to evaluate your marriage at least once a month. When I heard that I thought "Ugh, once a month! Evaluations!" So I pondered it a bit. Well, we all hate to be criticized. No-one likes to think they are wrong. Somehow I had evaluation and criticism tied together. But it is essential to take some time to see our marriage from the eyes of our spouse. So I have slowly begun

to get the courage to ask my husband if there is anything he would like to change about what we do. It's a simple question and it helps discover what his concerns might be. One of the little things that annoys him immensely is when I pile up dishes without washing them. It seems perfectly ok to me as I know I will do them later. It's such a little thing, but it niggles at him, so I am trying to learn not to leave dishes around. It's often the little things that cause the biggest problem in the long run.

I found the trick with this is not to get defensive. Often I have discovered an issue where merely a slight adjustment or change in what I do or how I schedule something can solve the problem. I don't have to fight, or argue or defend myself. That's not the point. It's about finding out the issues and solving them before they become a big crisis and of course the opportunity is for your spouse to then ask you the same question.

A third suggestion is to schedule times each week to spend with each other. Little *"I love you's"* are like spending gold on one another. They all add up and they make a difference. People with busy schedules often fail to schedule time for each other, or find themselves too tired to spend any quality time and that is a mistake and I can vouch for that. Marriages don't always go up in a box of fireworks, sometimes they just limp into non-existence. The suggestion that I read is that there be two evenings set aside each week to spend time with each other. Now I found two evenings just really, really difficult to schedule, so I am starting small with just one evening a week. If it's possible in your life, the suggestions are to have a full-fledged date night or date time every week. We somehow need to re-establish our priorities in life and the best thing you can do for your children is to build a good marriage. And we need to reconnect as husbands and wives. It is an essential part of preventive maintenance; like fuel in the tank or like filling up the window washer thing with water.

My husband and I have for the last twelve months or so been working through a fairly major house renovation and oddly it has brought us closer together, because we have had to talk about things, to share about things and in the process we have shared dreams and goals and hopes for the future - and all of those things have rekindled our love and our hope for our marriage and our family. The ideas are simply there to try and give you a launch pad to get creative with your own marriage, your own relationship and find what works for you. But the big message is - it needs communication, it needs evaluation and it needs time spent together, doing things you both enjoy, dreaming and hoping together for the future. So God bless your marriages, God bless your homes and families and may Mary and Joseph watch over you in all you do.