



# Commit: Make and Honor *Promises*

Get ready to garden with this collection of tips, plans, and practical how-to advice.

Guiding principles for marriage  
(and for class discussions) -

## Seek the light

Our lives are packed with a mixture of both joys and complaints/discontents/sorrows.

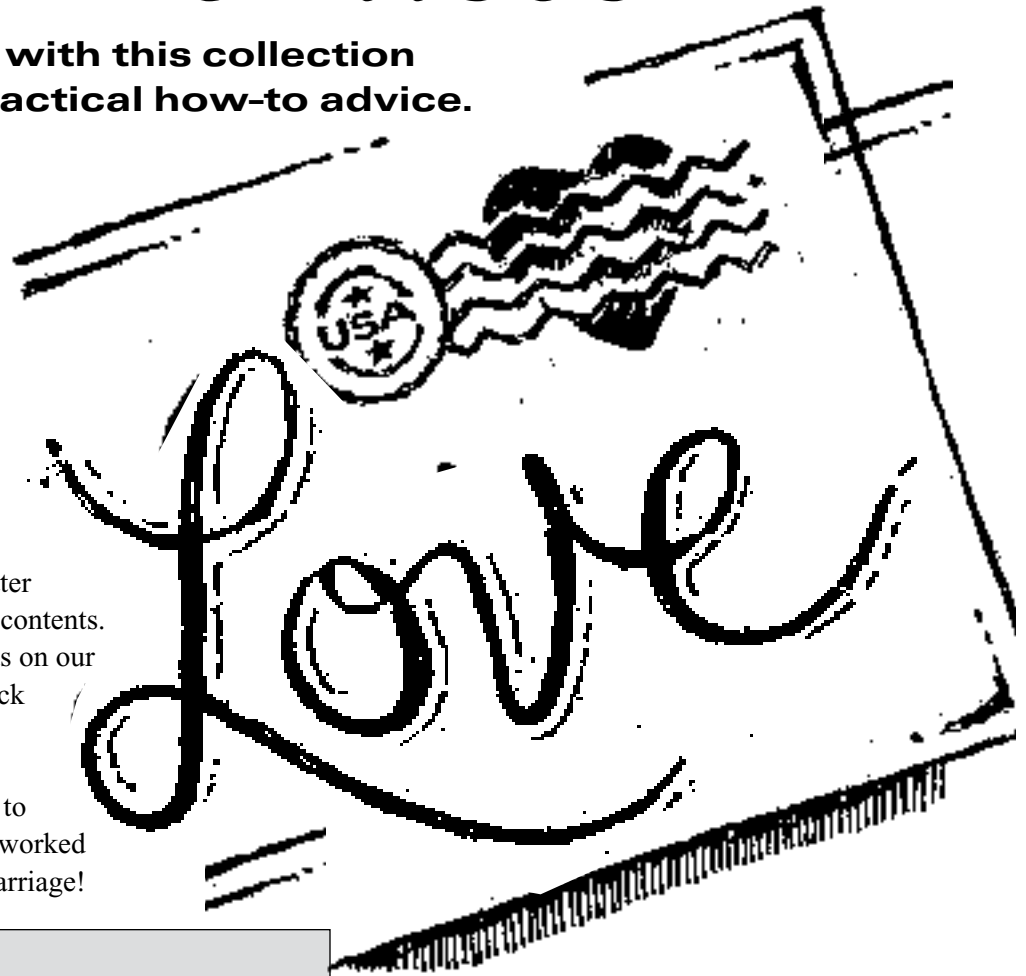
We may think that we'll build a better relationship by dealing with our discontents. Often that isn't true. When we focus on our discontents, we are likely to get stuck in them.

The surest way to make progress is to notice what you've done that HAS worked and to focus on the good in your marriage!

### Reflection:

Take a minute and respond to these questions:

- What has brought you joy and brightened your lives?
- What has helped you work together?



**Key Point:** More truth will be found in the light than the darkness.

## Notice your feelings

Different ideas and stories may help us feel more peaceful and happy or more tense and angry. Notice how you feel. If we dwell on tense and angry feelings, we will get more and more tense. We will find it hard to learn.

In contrast, if we consistently choose to learn from peaceful and happy feelings, we are more likely to find good ideas for strengthening our relationships.

### Reflection:

Take a minute and respond to these questions:

- Describe how you felt when you responded to the question in the section above regarding what brought you joy.
- Do you think you are more likely to work together toward a richer life together by starting with what is really working for you?

**Key Point:** Notice and act on feelings that uplift and enlighten.

## Speak from peace

When we're feeling angry, disappointed, hurt, and resentful, we are likely to say and do things that aren't fair AND that hurt the relationship. When we are upset, it is good to calm ourselves before expressing ourselves. By breathing deeply and thinking peaceful thoughts, we prepare ourselves to share in a helpful way.

Instead of attacking and destroying our partner with angry accusations, we can work together to build a stronger relationship when we speak from peace.

### Reflection:

Take a minute and respond to these questions:

- Reflect on the last time you had an argument. What worked well? What was not so productive?

**Key Point:** Speaking from peace is most likely to be productive in moving your relationship forward.

## Weed your own garden

It is human nature to notice mistakes and weaknesses in others. At the same time, we tend to excuse our own mistakes because of stress or pressure.

Yet the way to strengthen a relationship is to weed our own garden while appreciating our partners' flowers.

If we celebrate our own garden while mocking our partner's, we create all kinds of problems. We are more likely to work well together if we concentrate on removing the weeds from our own garden while appreciating good things in our partner's garden.

### Reflection:

Take a minute and respond to this question:

- Can you think of a time when you were tempted to find fault with your partner but chose instead to "weed your own garden"—in other words, find ways to be a better partner yourself?

**Key Point:** We are responsible for changing ourselves rather than our partners.

## Manage expectations

Often our expectations of marriage are unreasonable. Many of us expect to feel close and happy most of the time and to always work well together. That isn't common.

Sometimes when we start working hard on our relationship, we expect things to get better quickly. We can become frustrated and disenchanted when we don't see a lot of progress. This could cause us to give up.

The law of the harvest requires that only patient, wise effort over time will result in a good crop. You cannot pick juicy ripe tomatoes a week after planting a seedling. You cannot grow a strong marriage in even a month of earnest effort. It takes time. But that patient effort over time can result in an incredible harvest.

### Reflection:

Take a minute and respond to these questions:

- Can you think of a time when you have patiently worked at something and been richly rewarded for your efforts? How can that apply to your marriage relationship?

**Key Point:** With every rose come the thorns. Rather than resent the thorns, we can enjoy the roses.

## When your soul speaks, take great notes

Just as we would take a picture of an amazing flower in our gardens, so too should we make a record of sweet truths that settle in on us. The record might be a sentence or two describing our

discovery. It might be a few words celebrating the goodness we have seen or experienced, or a journal entry recording the things we appreciate about our partner. It might even be a doodle or sketch that reminds us of what we felt.

When you suddenly see blessings in your relationship, strengths in your partner, or feel love, closeness and compassion for your partner, make a record of the thought and feeling.

### Reflection:

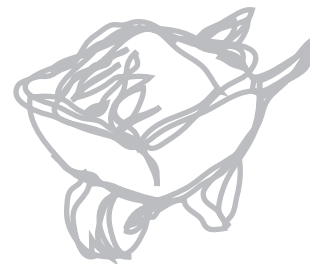
Take a minute to respond to this question:

- How do you currently feel blessed by your partner? Write it down.

**Key Point:** Taking time to note good feelings and experiences can increase their power in our lives.

## Making and honoring promises

We start our gardens with great visions and bold enthusiasm. But weeds, bad weather, pests, and distractions threaten our hopes and dreams. It takes more than initial enthusiasm to get from a vision of possibilities to a healthy reality. It takes steady commitment and effort. If we are unwilling to deal with problems and differences, we will never enjoy a bountiful harvest. Each of us can commit regular time and energy to caring for our garden.



# 1. Commitment requires deliberate planning and effort

## Cultivate your relationship

Imagine that you want a lovely garden with colorful flowers and delicious vegetables in your backyard. You go to the seed store and are inspired by the pictures of magnificent gardens. You buy an assortment of the very best seed. You head home with grand visions of lush gardens.

When you get home, you open the seed packs and mix the seeds together. Then you step onto your back porch and throw the seeds into the backyard. You go back inside the house to wait for your garden to grow luscious vegetables and vibrant flowers.

After two months, you step out into the backyard to admire your garden. What do you think you will find? (Note: Unfortunately, this is exactly what many people do when they get married.)

Cultivating a great garden requires commitment—commitment at the beginning and commitment in the day-to-day work that makes a garden grow. Some people will be discouraged by weeds and pests. But those who make and sustain a commitment will enjoy a lovely garden.

Commitment is really a choice. We choose to do what is necessary to make a relationship strong or we fail to make that choice. The state of our marriage garden depends on making the choice to care for it.

### Reflection:

Take a minute to respond to these questions:

- What are you currently doing to renew your commitment to your marriage? What more would you like to do?

**Key Point:** Commitment requires deliberate planning and effort.

## 2. Commitment means thinking and acting in ways that strengthen your relationship

Sometimes we expect marriage to be like an instant garden—a great harvest with no effort. Or we think of marriage as being like a perfect date: lots of happy conversation, good food, exciting and fun times, and unending affection. But marriage is more like the reality of gardening. It includes lots of challenges and struggles.

### Consider this story:

John Glenn is a hero for several reasons. He is a hero because of his pioneering space accomplishments, both as a young man and as a mature man. He was also a successful politician. But one of his greatest accomplishments may be his marriage.

John and Annie grew up together. They played together as children and dated through high school. John described Annie as “pretty, with dark hair and a shy, bright smile.” They were in band, glee club and YMCA/YWCA together.

But there were also challenges. Some classmates teased Annie for her severe stuttering. But John didn’t see her stuttering as a problem. “It was just something she did, no different from some people writing left-handed and others right-handed. I thought it was cruel and thoughtless to laugh at someone for something like that—especially Annie, whom I cared for—and I told them so” (p. 37).

Annie’s stuttering made it almost impossible for her to shop alone. She would have to write a description of what she wanted and show it to a clerk because she was not able to ask for it. Any public appearance was painful for Annie. Yet John lived a very public life.

At one point when John was preparing for a space launch, he got a message to call Annie. Vice President Johnson wanted to visit their home. Annie refused. John was worried that his place in the space program could be in jeopardy.

This is a situation where most of us might have fared poorly as husbands. We might have called our wives and said “Look, I’m risking my life for the country—can’t you simply step out of your comfort zone and meet with the vice president?” In our hearts we might have demanded, “Why must you think only of yourself?” We often tolerate imperfections in our partners only until they inconvenience us. Then we expect them to change.

But John Glenn was different. “Annie wouldn’t have refused to see the vice president without a really good reason. I called her, and she said John - son wanted to bring in network television cameras and some of the reporters who were camped outside. She said she was tired, had a headache, and she just wasn’t going to allow all those people in her house. I told her whatever she wanted to do, I would back her 100 percent” (pp. 252-3).

Years later John Glenn was considered as a running mate for Jimmy Carter. Reportedly he was not chosen in part because of Annie’s stutter. “It shocked us and it hurt” (p. 335). But, out of the political race, John Glenn joked that he was free to mow the lawn at home.

At one point Annie took an intensive course to help her overcome stuttering. After the three weeks of grueling training, she called home. John described the conversation:

“John,” she said on the line from Virginia, forming her words slowly and carefully as the muscles worked, “today we went to a shopping center and went shopping. And I could ask for things. Imagine that.”

I had never heard Annie speak that many words without a single pause. It was all I could do to reply, “That’s wonderful!”

“I think so, too,” she said slowly. “It’s a start.”

Annie grasped the gift of speech and held it tight. Our lives were transformed. “John,” she said when she got home, hiding an impish smile, “I’ve wanted to tell you this for years: Pick up your socks.” Our phone bill increased as she started calling friends around the country. She had never been able to read children’s stories to Lyn and Dave (our children) when they were little. (pp. 325-327)

John Glenn might have been irritated many times by Annie’s stuttering, her quietness, and the impact they had on his life and career. But he wasn’t. Instead he loved his Annie. He helped her. He saw past her impediment.

John Glenn’s accomplishments as a pilot and an astronaut are remarkable. His strength of character is commendable. Yet his greatest accomplishment may be the kindness and tenderness he showed his wife, Annie.

Did anything in the story stand out for you? Make notes of anything that helped you understand and appreciate healthy marriage and strong commitment.

Glenn, J., & Taylor, N. (1999). *John Glenn: A memoir*. New York: Bantam Books.



**Reflection:**

Take a minute to respond to these questions:

- What first attracted you to the person to whom you are married? What did you do in the early days of your relationship that made your relationship exciting and positive?
- What have you done to help your marital garden grow in the last few months or years? What else do you feel inspired to do?

**Reflection:**

Take a minute to respond to this exercise:

- Think of any examples of commitment you have seen in your own relationship or in the relationships of people you know. List some examples. Discuss/share them.

**Key Point:** Commitment is the willingness to keep investing in our marriages even when times are hard.

### 4. There are practical ways to strengthen commitment

Read over this list of ways to show commitment, mark those that speak to your soul--things that either you do well or that you would like to learn to do well.

**Key Point:** Commitment means thinking and acting in ways that strengthen your relationship.

### 3. Commitment is the willingness to keep investing in our marriages even when times are hard

The hard work of taking care of a marriage can seem like a big sacrifice. Yet, if we think of it as investing in a great garden—working today for a lovelier tomorrow—it doesn't seem so much like a sacrifice. It is working toward a great marital harvest.

Things I already do well	Things I would like to do better	
		I make time to do things with my spouse.
		I try to honor occasions that are important to my spouse (anniversaries, etc.)
		I don't flirt with anyone except my spouse.
		I have worked with my spouse to establish traditions that bring us close.
		When I promise my spouse that I will do something, I do it.
		I put effort into making our time together special.
		I look for and remember the good qualities in my partner.
		I make a point of remembering our good times.
		I keep confidences.
		I don't share details of my intimate relationship with anyone outside the relationship.
		I speak kindly of my spouse in private and in public.
		I don't speak poorly of my spouse to others.

**Reflection:**

Take a minute to respond to these questions:

- Think of a time when you have done well at one or more of the following:
  1. Make the relationship primary.
  2. Make couple time a priority.
  3. Build in rituals of connection.
  4. Set limits on intrusions.

Write a short description of what you did.

- What additional thing do you feel inspired to do in one of the four areas above?
- Picture your garden as it can one day be: If you continue to show commitment to your marriage, what do you picture your relationship being like? Imagine yourself years from now in a relationship that has matured and grown.

**Key Point:** There are practical ways to strengthen commitment.

## 5. I would like to notice and appreciate the ways my partner has shown commitment

**Reflection:**

Take a minute to respond to this exercise:

- List times or ways that your partner has shown commitment to you and your relationship. (Do not list failures. Think of times when your partner has done something difficult in order to invest in you and your relationship.) Share these with your partner or group.

## Each of us can work toward a bountiful harvest

Future lessons will provide many more ideas for developing a healthy marriage garden. You may find many more ways to build toward the garden of your dreams in the lessons ahead.

**Reflection:**

Take a minute to respond to this question:

- For this week, what would you like to do to bring more light and commitment to your marriage garden? List one thing you would like to do. Make a specific plan and rehearse it in your mind—that is, visualize or “pre-live” the experience.

For example, you may decide to be more cheerful or helpful in the mornings. Picture specific things you will do. Imagine the likely response. Prepare yourself to handle any difficulties. In your mind, practice carrying out your plan several times.

**Teaching Resources:****Teaching tips and teaching outline**

Select the major points you want to emphasize. Build a session using the stories, exercises, and group discussion that your time allows.

**Resources you might use:**

The children’s book *Fanny’s Dream* tells a story of commitment in a sweet and gentle way. Highly recommended. It could be read to the class at the conclusion of this class.

## Supplemental Stories:

### I Know Who She Is

*Speaking – A nurse in a medical clinic*

It was a busy morning, approximately 8:30 a.m., when an elderly gentleman in his eighties came in to have sutures removed from his thumb. He stated that he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 a.m.

I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him. I saw him looking at his watch and decided that since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound.

Upon examination it was well healed, so I talked to one of the doctors and got the needed supplies to remove his sutures and redress his wound.

While taking care of his wound, we began to engage in conversation. I asked him what sort of appointment he had that morning, as he was in such a hurry.

The gentleman told me he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I then inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

As we talked, and I finished dressing his wound, I asked if she would be worried if he was a bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was and that she had not recognized him in five years now.

I was surprised, and asked him, "And you are still going every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?"

He smiled as he patted my hand and said. "She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is."

I had to hold back tears as he left. I had goose

bumps on my arms, and I thought, "That is the kind of love I want in my life."

True love is neither physical, nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be.

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### Winter in Minnesota

Bill Doherty (2001) has compared marriage to living in a place with cold winters:

"I think of long-term marriage like I think about living in Minnesota. You move into marriage in the springtime of hope, but eventually arrive at the Minnesota winter with its cold and darkness. Many of us are tempted to give up and move south at this point. We go . . . for help. Some [friends or helpers] don't know how to help us cope with winter, and we get frostbite in their care. Other [friends] tell us that we are being personally victimized by winter, that we deserve better, that winter will never end, and that if we are true to ourselves we will leave our marriage and head south.

The problem of course is that our next marriage will enter its own winter at some point. Do we just keep moving on, or do we make our stand now—with this person, in this season? That's the . . . question. A good [helper], a brave [friend], will help us to cling together as a couple, warming each other against the cold of winter, and to seek out whatever sunlight is still available while we wrestle with our pain and disillusionment. A good [helper], a brave [friend] will be the last one in the room to give up on our marriage, not the first one, knowing that the next springtime in Minnesota is all the more glorious for the winter that we endured together.

Doherty, W. J. (2001). *Take back your marriage*. New York: Guilford.



## **Commitment that triumphs**

Cheryl came home from her classes at the university to find the phone message from her mother: “Something has happened to Scott. Please call as soon as you can.” Scott had left for military service in Vietnam not too long after he and Cheryl had married. Cheryl dialed her mom’s number. Her mom answered with a “hello” laced with tears and an emotional quiver: “Honey, I’ve gotten a telegram about Scott. Its . . .”

Cheryl: “Mom, just tell me one thing: Is he alive?”

Mom: “Yes. He. . .”

Cheryl: “Then everything is going to be O.K.”

In fact, Scott had stepped on a land mine. He lost both legs at around the knee. It was months before he arrived in California for further healing and rehabilitation. Cheryl was there. Practically speaking, she and Scott began planning and adjusting their next steps in life. How long would his rehab take? Should he go back to school? Should she go back to work? In all their discussions there was no question regarding their commitment to each other and to the future. His injury didn’t alter their relationship. They simply met the new circumstances with an unshaken belief in each other’s ability to meet every challenge.

The contrast of their approach to the future was never more stark than the day Cheryl was visiting Scott in the amputee ward in the California veteran’s hospital. Another woman came in to see her injured husband. She walked down the long aisle lined on either side with beds of men with missing limbs. She passed men who had lost one arm.

She passed men with no legs. Finally, she found her husband. It was her first visit. He brightened. She said not a word, but stared for a long time. Suddenly, with a decisiveness that was breathtaking, she took off her wedding ring, placed it on the dinner tray beside his bed and wordlessly walked away. He never saw her again. The divorce papers arrived weeks later.

We do not know the whole context of that couple’s situation. We do know, however, that adversity reveals the wholeness of commitment or how fragile it can be. Perhaps even that assessment is not the whole truth of the situation. Perhaps it is not the degree of commitment that is at stake, rather, adversity reveals who we are and how we approach life.

Scott and Cheryl have raised 8 children. Scott is a hero in the neighborhood. He speaks in public schools. He certified to teach shop in high school. Cheryl works at the elementary school library. It is not that their lives have gone on, it is that they have gone on with their lives. It is not that Scott’s missing legs are not a reality. They are. However, this loss has not affected what matters most in their relationship.

[Family life educator Terrance D. Olson knows Scott and Cheryl, but has changed their names to protect their privacy.]

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