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CHAPTER 1

LOVE LANGUAGE #1:
WORDS

Gemma didn't say much. She didn't have to. Her actions spoke for themselves. When she took the field, she worked harder than anyone else. Which was shocking, because she was the best player.

But when Gemma spoke, everyone listened. The whole team respected her. Meghan said, "I remember one game when I was struggling, so distracted by this fight I'd had with my friend and this massive history project I had due the next day. I wasn't playing well. At half-time Gemma pulled me off to the side and quietly said, 'You're better than this, Meghan. I know you can beat your player.' Just the way she said it, so confident in me, it made me believe in myself. So I stepped up and played solidly the rest of the game."

Gemma's words had that effect. The team made it to the state finals that year. Gemma was only a sophomore then, but she told the team, "We're faster and smarter. We can beat this team." And they did.

Maybe if she'd been one of those players who talks constantly or blames others for every little error, the other players would have tuned her out. Instead they listened. They took her words to heart.

We're all native speakers of one language: selfishness. From the time we were little kids, we saw ourselves as the center of the universe. It comes so naturally to us to think and talk about ourselves incessantly.

But in order to grow in our relationships, we have to learn a new language: Words of Affirmation. We have to speak life-giving words, positive words, true and confident words that build others up. Many of the people in our lives crave *words*, and it's up to us to learn how to speak them.

"The tongue has the power of life and death,"¹ a wise man once said. Bold claim, right? But think of how you've experienced that to be true in your own life.

Can you recall a time when someone said something really hurtful to you—personal, mocking, or cutting words—that made you feel small and doubt yourself? Sadly, we often remember those words our whole lives.

In contrast, can you also recall a time when someone said something really kind and memorable to you—something personal and encouraging from someone who saw potential in you, maybe potential you didn't even know you had?

Then you know the life-and-death power of words. **The right words spoken at the right time by the right person can inspire you to do and be more.** It's this potential for good that makes Words such a powerful love language.

words of affirmation: *noun*

- 1. TRUTHFUL WORDS**
- 2. SPOKEN OR WRITTEN**
- 3. FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER**
- 4. TO UPLIFT OR ENCOURAGE**
- 5. TO MAKE THE RECIPIENT FEEL LOVED**

My goal for you is that you will learn to both *receive* and *give* love in all five love languages. It seems fair to assume that anyone who takes the time to read this book wants to become a better person and have deeper relationships. Learning the five love languages will help you do both.

The good news is that all these languages can be learned. For some people, Words is their primary love language (especially if they grew up with a really verbal parent), but all of us need to be able to speak it, and all of us enjoy hearing positive words. So how can we best develop this language?

LISTENING AND RECEIVING

We'll spend more of the chapter focusing on how to give Words of Affirmation, but a quick note before we do.

You have to know how to receive Words of Affirmation too.

When someone you know, respect, and love says something specific *to you about you*, listen closely.

- When a teacher affirms, “Of course I marked things for you to work on, but I’m so impressed by the level of original thought in your writing.”
- When a coach says, “Our entire team relies on your determination. Your will to win sets the tone for the whole game.”
- When a mentor says, “I’m seeing so much growth in you. Last fall you were struggling with _____, but you’ve conquered that and are in a completely different place now.”
- When a parent says, “I really enjoy hanging out with you. You’re an interesting conversationalist.”
- When a friend says, “I knew I could call you. I knew you’d be there for me.”

Rather than blowing off those Words of Affirmation with a self-deprecating comment or some sarcasm to deflect the attention away

from you, accept the words. Soak them in. Listen for the specific feedback you're receiving, and accept the love you're being given.

THINKING AND GIVING

Think about the power of your words. For people whose primary love language is Words, compliments and encouragement aren't just empty gestures or polite conversation techniques. They're soul food.

People don't just hear this:

- "Well done!"
- "You look really good."
- "Wow, I'm impressed with you."

They also hear what you mean behind those words:

- "You have value."
- "I love you."
- "You're important to me."

The real power of words lies in their ability to fill people's love tanks. Through specific, intentional things you say, you can fill people up.

How do you feel about that kind of power? That might depend on your own primary love language. For some people, it feels awkward at first to say Words of Affirmation. For others, especially those who grew up in really verbal homes, it might feel more natural. But not only can you learn this language, you can also become fluent in it.

WARNING: SKIP THE FLATTERY

Flattery is not a dialect of the Words love language; flattery is the language of manipulation. Flatterers have an agenda. Ultimately they want to get something from the person they're flattering. Flattery

lacks one key ingredient: sincerity. You can tell when someone's faking—it's so obvious. Right after the fake compliment comes the request, like this: "Mom, you're the best mom ever! Can I go over to my friend's house tonight?" (Cue the eye rolls.) Twisting Words of Affirmation to get something is wrong, and it wrecks trust. The person being flattered realizes you aren't being honest with your words and becomes suspicious of you. That person starts to wonder, *Can I even trust what this person says?* Most people don't like to be friends with flatterers.

Unlike shallow flattery, Words of Affirmation run deep. They're rooted in intimate knowledge of the person you're affirming. While flattery makes people feel suspicious or defensive, sincere words make people feel safe and known.

// WARNING: BAN HARASSMENT // Students can be brutal to one another. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Remember that old saying? It's a lie. Words do hurt, sometimes worse than a physical injury. While a broken bone may heal completely, hurtful words may stay with us for life. **Words leave the mouth, travel to the ears, and lodge straight in the heart—often forever.** We have to be very careful with what we say.

Every love language has an opposite. Just as a love language has the potential to do immense good, the opposite of a love language has the potential to inflict serious harm. The opposite of using Words of Affirmation as a love language is using words to put someone down. The severe form of this is harassment, which is when one person or group calls another person names and puts them down again and again.

Legally, harassment encompasses a lot more than just mean words. It can also include physically harming another student or his property, interfering with a student's education, creating a threatening educational environment, disrupting the orderly conduct of the school, making a threatening phone call, or sending a threatening text or email.

Everyone deserves to feel safe, which includes not experiencing harassment. If you are being harassed or know of someone being harassed, tell someone. Today.

Reporting is not the same as tattling. Tattling is for the purpose of getting someone in trouble. Little kids are experts at this tactic. Reporting protects someone's safety and is essential to a healthy environment.

DIALECTS

Back to positive words. Words of Affirmation is one of the five basic love languages. Within that one language are several different dialects. (Think of London, Sydney, Dallas, Boston, Charleston—people in these places all speak English, but they don't sound anything alike. Right, y'all?)

Words of Appreciation

Through words of appreciation, we express sincere gratitude for some act of service rendered. We say “thanks” to someone specific for something specific. This means so much to the people who serve us silently, often thanklessly, day in and day out.

Your parents, for example. How many meals have they cooked for you over the years? Loads of laundry? Personal sacrifices? Putting your needs before their own? And yes, they do that because they're your parents and they love you, but can you imagine how much it would mean to them to hear some genuine thanks?

- “Mom [or Dad], thanks for coming to my concert.”
- “Thanks for buying my favorite cereal.”
- “Thanks for letting me use the car.”
- “Thanks for working hard so we can go on vacation.”

It doesn't take a ton of creativity or thought or effort. Just a little observation and a sincere sentence or two of thanks.

Same goes for your teachers, coaches, pastors. Your coach could be making a lot more money doing something else but sacrifices countless hours to invest in you. Your teachers work in a culture of bureaucracy and complaining yet find the energy to dream up a new project for your class.

Not often do they hear even a passing "thanks"—so think about what your words of appreciation could mean to someone who serves you.

Words of Encouragement

To *encourage* literally means "to inspire courage" in someone, to make someone feel more hopeful or confident. All of us feel insecure or lack courage about something. That insecurity and fear can hold us back from doing what we'd like to do.

Maybe you see some latent potential in a friend or sibling, and all that person needs is a little dose of encouragement from you.

- "You should try out for the play. I could totally see you in that role."
- "Have you considered running cross-country? You could do it."

Encourage them to explore their desire or give it a try. That might be the nudge they need to try something new.

PICTURE ME: I WAS THE SILENT KID WHO SAT IN THE BACK OF THE CLASSROOM, THE DARK AND BROODING TYPE. I WAS AN AVERAGE STUDENT AT BEST, AND I DIDN'T PARTICULARLY LIKE ENGLISH CLASS. I DIDN'T THINK I WAS A GOOD WRITER BECAUSE I WASN'T GOOD WITH THE MECHANICS, LIKE SPELLING AND COMMAS.

AND THEN I MET MRS. DOMINGUEZ. SHE WAS MY SOPHOMORE LIT TEACHER. SHE SAW SOMETHING IN ME. MY PAPERS DIDN'T COME BACK LOOKING LIKE THEY WERE BLEEDING, WITH RED INK MARKING ALL MY MISTAKES. THEY CAME BACK WITH LITTLE NOTES TO ME.

"TOM, YOU HAVE A GIFT."

"TOM, YOUR THOUGHTS ARE DEEP AND ORIGINAL."

"TOM, YOU ARE A WRITER."

THIS WAS A FIRST FOR ME. MRS. D. OPENED MY EYES TO A TALENT I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW I HAD.

I'VE BEEN ACCEPTED AT NORTHWESTERN FOR NEXT YEAR. GUESS WHAT I WANT TO STUDY? WRITING.

—TOM

Sometimes our friends feel us out to see how we'll respond. A friend might say, "I was thinking of running for student council, but I just don't know." Will you brush off the comment by saying, "It's just a popularity contest. It's not worth your time"? Will you discourage your friend by saying, "I don't know. That's a lot of work, and it's so hard to win"? Or will you speak some words of encouragement, such as, "I'd love to hear your ideas for why you want to run. Need a campaign manager?"

Words of Praise

To some extent, all of us are achievers. We set goals we hope to accomplish, and when we do, we like to be recognized. As the Oscars are to Hollywood, as the Grammys are to the music scene, as trophies are to winning athletes, and even the plaque at a local restaurant is to the employee of the month—so words of praise meet

the need for recognition in personal relationships.

Our culture is fluent in criticism. We excel at pointing out what's wrong in 140 characters or less. We've mastered the art of cynicism as well as the habit of sarcasm.

It takes more discipline and creativity to see what's right—and to say it. “You did really well at _____.” All around us are people who deserve a little credit: a friend who survived her parents' divorce without getting bitter; a friend who's overcome a serious health issue yet always thinks of others; an older brother who just finished college; a little sister who read the whole Harry Potter series despite her dyslexia; a boyfriend who comes back from an ACL surgery and makes the varsity team.

All around us are quiet heroes, champions who never make the headlines but who deserve a lot of credit. They need to hear our words of praise.

Words of Kindness

What we say matters a lot; how we say it matters just as much, if not more. Sometimes our words are saying one thing but our tone of voice is saying another. That's a double message. People usually interpret our meaning based on our tone of voice, not only the words we use.

If your friend says in a sarcastic tone, “I would love to go running with you on the lakefront path,” you won't hear a genuine invitation in those words. (“Ummm . . . no thanks,” you'd reply.)

On the other hand, you can hear even a hard message if it's delivered in a kind tone: “I felt disappointed that you didn't invite me to go running with you.” In this case, the person speaking wants to be known by the other person and is trying to build authenticity into their relationship. (The natural response: “I'm sorry, I didn't realize you wanted to go. Want to run together tomorrow?”)

How we speak is so important. An ancient sage once said, “A

gentle answer turns away wrath.² When a friend lashes out at you verbally, if you answer gently, the heat simmers down. You'll be able to hear what the person is saying, empathize, apologize if needed, or calmly explain your perspective. You won't assume your point of view is the only way to interpret what's happened. That response shows maturity. Mature love speaks kindly.

FORGIVENESS

In order to speak affirming words, we have to process our hurt and anger in healthy ways. Our words are an overflow of our hearts. If hurt and anger are festering in our hearts, then we will naturally come out fighting, verbally destroying rather than loving others.

Many people mess up each new day with what happened yesterday. They insist on dragging into the present the failures of the past; in doing so, they pollute the present and the future. When bitterness, resentment, and a thirst for revenge grow unchecked in the human heart, words of affirmation will be nearly impossible to speak.

Enter forgiveness. Yes, the injury happened. Certainly it hurt and may still hurt. Forgiveness doesn't make it okay; it makes *you* okay. You can choose to release the hurt and anger so you are no longer consumed by them. You can choose to love people despite the harm they inflicted, while setting healthy boundaries to protect yourself in the future. Forgiveness allows you to live your life in peace.

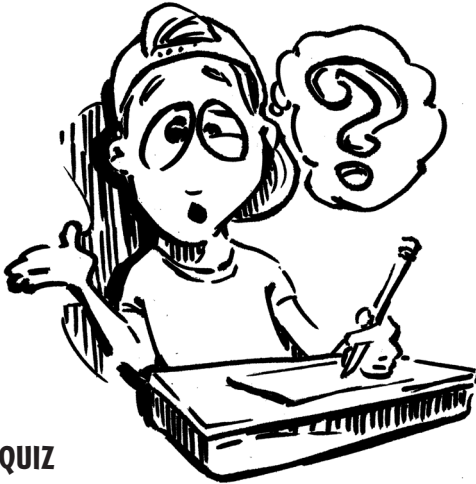
Sometimes the person will acknowledge her failure; sometimes she won't. Either way, you can choose to forgive and to release that person to God, who will make all things right in the end. You can refuse to allow the other person's choices to wreck your life.

And when you're the one who inflicted the wound, you can ask this loving question: "What can I do to make up for the pain I caused you?" You can't erase the past, but you can confess it, agree that it

was wrong, and ask for forgiveness. Only then does reconciliation become a possibility.

Unforgiveness will seep out in your words. Harsh, condemning words erode relationships. Words of affirmation enhance relationships.

Remember, love is a choice; love is an action word.



WORDS QUIZ

How word-savvy are you? Check the phrases that are genuine Words of Affirmation. Place an X next to lousy things to say.

- _____ "It wasn't the worst meal I've ever eaten."
- _____ "Absolutely, I think you should try out for the spring play. I think you'd be perfect in that role."
- _____ "Everyone, you're all so amazing! You're the best people in the history of the world!"
- _____ "I'm reading a book that tells me to compliment people, so I just wanted to tell you that you're decent at baseball."
- _____ "Sure, you look fine."
- _____ "That blue shirt looks fantastic with your eyes."
- _____ "Thanks for listening. You're such a good friend."

- _____ “Do you realize how natural you are with kids? Have you ever considered being a teacher? I think you’d be really good at it.”
- _____ “Thanks for driving me to all my rehearsals, Mom. I know they’re at weird times.”
- _____ “Well, at least you get credit for trying.”
- _____ “You’ve become such a dangerous attacker. I’m so glad you’re on my team.”
- _____ “I’m so proud of you. I know you hate public speaking, but you gave a solid presentation.”

PAUSE & PROCESS

1. To what degree have you received Words of Affirmation from your parents?
2. Do you find it easy or difficult to speak Words of Affirmation to your family? Why?
3. How freely do you express Words of Affirmation in other relationships?
4. What are words that have been spoken to you that made you feel loved?
5. Of the five love languages, most people have one favorite that makes them feel most loved. Identifying your primary love language can feel confusing, because everyone likes all five languages. (Who doesn't like to hear kind words, for example?) Personal application: Are Words your primary love language—do they make you feel especially good or loved?
6. Make a list of your primary relationships—not every single friend or acquaintance but those closest to you (two to ten names). Is Words the love language of one of your people?
7. Review the dialects of Words (appreciation, encouragement, praise, and kindness). If one of your people is nourished by words, then script something to say that would make that person feel loved.
8. Practice speaking the dialect of appreciation to someone who's rarely thanked, such as a parent or teacher. Say something simple, kind, and truthful to that person today.
9. Unforgiveness seeps out in your words. Are you harboring unforgiveness toward someone? What can you do to address it and release the person?