Learning to Love

Because she pulls no punches, my beautiful, devout wife, Erin, will freely admit that for a long time, I was terrible at marriage.

Let's quickly look at the famous verse in 1 Corinthians. For this exercise, we'll substitute my name for the word "love," and I'll give a short analysis on how the particular trait applied to me during our first few years (fine, 10 years) of marriage.

– Scott is patient (No)

– Scott is kind (Nope)

– Scott is not jealous (Eh, I wasn't terribly jealous)

– Scott is not pompous (I was the worst)

– Scott is not inflated (If this is a weight-gain reference, I pass)

– Scott is not rude (Very rude)

– Scott does not seek his own interests (I only sought my own interests)

– Scott is not quick-tempered (I am even-keeled to a fault, so take that!).

There is more to the verse, but I'm bumming myself out, and you get the gist. Sure, I might have been selfish, but at least I doubled down by also being insensitive and supremely passive-aggressive. (Back off, ladies … I'm taken!)

A quick anecdote: Years ago, my wife made a simple request in the hope of finding a lifeboat on the sinking ship that was our marriage. Like thousands of other nagging (and caring) wives, she wanted me to read the very well-reasoned best-

seller "The Five Love Languages" by Gary Chapman. And so, like thousands of other dumb husbands, I told her that I most definitely would read it. And then it sat on our end table for months, collecting dust.

(For those who don't know – hello, fellow husbands – "The Five Love Languages" simply breaks down how people prefer to be loved. They are: gifts, acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time and touch. The message of the book – or so I was told – was to find out your spouse's love language and do that. Because doing the dishes for somebody who only wants your quality time is pointless. Apparently.)

Being a non-Catholic at the time, I didn't fully understand the Sacrament of Marriage and its lifelong bond. Luckily, my wife most certainly did, which meant she was stuck with me for better and, as it was playing out, for worse.

But we faked it well. I'm not sure many knew it, but she was mostly miserable, and I was mostly content in my aloofness.

And while I went through the motions and converted (more out of duty than a blossoming love of the Faith), it was several years before my heart followed through and an actual conversion took place. It is no coincidence that as I dug into the teachings of the Church, my Faith grew stronger – and so did our marriage. And while our life is far from perfect, we're at least making an effort to be the spouses God wants us to be.

I thought about these ups and downs a few weeks ago, about how far we had come, as we sat together at a conference hosted by our diocese. The keynote speakers were marriage and family experts – and OSV authors – Greg and Lisa Popcak. We followed them around like groupies, from their keynote address to their two breakout sessions.

I was furiously taking notes and finding myself nodding in agreement at the practical advice they were dishing out. But

during their session entitled “Radical Love: Living the Catholic Difference in Relationships,” my nodding stopped as they described me – thankfully, the old me.

“Husbands and wives love their own comfort zones more than they love each other.”

Read that again and let it sink in.

Greg Popcak told a story about a couple he was counseling. He told them to write down the ways that made them feel loved. The husband was spinning his wheels doing acts of service that his wife couldn’t have cared less about. It turned out she wanted his time and his intimacy infinitely more than she wanted, say, the laundry done and the kitchen cleaned. The husband told Greg Popcak, “It took 25 years to learn that I was loving my wife in ways that were meaningless to her.”

(This was all starting to sound too familiar.)

So spouses, the Popcaks said, make a love list.

(Uh boy.)

Erin and I gave each other a silent look of acknowledgement that can only be forged over years of arguing about the same thing. Stinking “Love Languages.” But there was no escaping it this time.

And so after years of avoiding it, we were all made (sorry kids, blame Mom) to sit down and write our love lists. My family knows me well enough that they only half-jokingly said my list was going to contain two things: 1. Be quiet, and 2. Go sit over there. I like peace and quiet and am not a big fan of snuggling. My wife and kids, however, apparently love the invasion of their personal space.

All three of my children who are able to write put some version of “snuggling with mom and dad in their bed.” Now, I’m on the record as being pro-kid. Individually, they’re mostly

great. But in the morning, when I'm trying to sleep, I'd rather have spiders in my bed than my kids.

That said, there were things I could fully support.

Grant wrote, "To just rest and stay home." Preach it, son. Preach. It.

Jacob wrote, "Kisses and hugs from dad and not mom." I might not be a snuggler, but this kid (and his baby brother) are my kryptonite. Bring it in.

Olivia wrote, "When the boys don't touch my stuff." Me too! I'm looking at you, Dominic, you 11-month-old adorable kleptomaniac.

And while some of them weren't super practical – sorry, Jake, I know you like to be loved by having us buy you chocolate and baseball and football cards, but too bad – we had a great discussion; everybody laughed, and everybody understood.

As far as Erin's list goes, there were no surprises. "Hugs" was first, followed by "snuggling." The children get it honestly.

So what happens when love languages collide? Compromise.

Again, here's what Greg Popcak said. "Husbands and wives love their own comfort zones more than they love each other."

My comfort zone is generally on the chair, feet kicked up, family across the room. Personal space.

But maybe I'll join them on the couch tonight.

Confessions of a Catholic Dad is a feature from Take Out magazine. To get the newest columns, subscribe here!