

Marriage Can Be Forever— Preparation Counts!

A Learning Guide Based on the Bahá'í Faith

Susanne M. Alexander and Johanna Merritt Wu, PhD

Fully Revised Fourth Edition

***Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service
(Formatting does not match published book)**

***Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* (Fourth Edition)**

ISBN: 978-1-940062-31-0 (Trade Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-940062-32-7 (eBook)

Publisher: Marriage Transformation LLC

Printer: Ingram Spark; United States of America

<https://www.marriagetransformation.com>

susanne@marriagetransformation.com

+1-423-599-0153 (US Eastern)

First Edition: January 2003

Second Edition: August 2003

Third Edition: 2007

Fourth Edition: 2024

© 2024 by Marriage Transformation LLC, all international rights reserved.

No part of this book may be electronically shared, scanned, uploaded, or reproduced by any means, without the publisher's written permission. Violations are considered theft of the authors' and the publisher's intellectual property. Thank you for your respect for this legal copyright. Your adherence to this law grows positive spirit and respect throughout the world and brings us happiness.

If you wish to share the book, please direct people to an online bookstore or our website where they can purchase a copy. Brief excerpts may be quoted in study groups, newsletters, and media. The publisher welcomes inquiries about use and discount purchases for groups and distributors.

This publication provides useful and educational information about couple relationships. If you need expert assistance, please meet with a competent professional counselor.

Cover Design: Neda Rahimi (assisted by Maile Smits) and Steiner Graphics

Cover Photographer: Ronan Futura, ronanfuruta.com

Layout: Marriage Transformation, LLC

Note: You may purchase a PDF version of this book and extra sets of worksheets from the e-store at www.marriagetransformation.com.

Editorial Note: One of the authors and the publisher was raised in Canada and was taught both British and American spelling and punctuation rules. In addition, many quotations in this book were originally in British English and edited to be American English. Until there are global standards for these things, we trust that you will tolerate such variances as you might find different than expected. Thank you!

Table of Contents: Chapters

What Is It All About? Welcome to Preparing for Marriage! ... 1

“Building a ‘Fortress for Well-Being’, an Essay on Marriage Preparation” by David Bowers ... 8

A Couple’s Story—Background on Lindsay, James, and Their Families ... 11

Step 1 – Creating Your Foundation As a Couple ... 13

Chapter 1 Becoming Serious: Thinking of Marriage ... 14

Chapter 2 At the Center: A Focus on Service ... 26

Chapter 3 Creating a Strong Connection: Friendship in Action ... 42

Chapter 4 A Vital Building Block: Knowing Each Other’s Character ... 62

Chapter 5 Agreeing on Boundaries: The Physical Side of Relationships ... 85

Summary and Reflection ... 99

Step 2 – Understanding Your Interactions ... 101

Chapter 6 Minds and Hearts: Communicating with One Another ... 102

Chapter 7 So Many Possibilities: Expressing Feelings ... 129

Chapter 8 A Route to Harmony: Excellent Consultation Skills ... 152

Chapter 9 Powerful Attraction: Your Love for One Another ... 175

Summary and Reflection ... 189

Step 3 – Diving Deeper into Some Realities of Marriage ... 191

Chapter 10 The Goal: A Strong, Eternal Marriage ... 192

Chapter 11 Focus on God: Your Spiritual Life Together ... 222

Chapter 12 True Partnership: Equality in Marriage ... 239

Chapter 13 You Are Each Unique: Talents, Personalities, and Time Preferences ... 263

Chapter 14 Rocks on the Path: Responding to Tough Stuff ... 293

Chapter 15 Money In and Out: Earning, Managing, and Spending ... 322

Chapter 16 A Personal Consultation: Intimacy and Sex ... 350

Summary and Reflection ... 370

Step 4 – Considering Aspects of Family Life ... 372

Chapter 17 Family Time: Rearing and Educating Children ... 373

Chapter 18 A Blend of Lives: Creating a Home ... 398

Chapter 19 A Big Happy Family: Becoming Relatives ... 417

Chapter 20 An Even Bigger Family: Being an Intercultural Couple ... 438

Summary and Reflection ... 459

***Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!*, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service**

Pause to Reflect: A Practical Look Before the Sacred Choices Ahead ... 461

Step 5 – Committing to One Another; Involving Our Parents ... 479

Chapter 21 Looking Ahead: Envisioning Marriage Together ... 480
 Chapter 22 Making Your Choice: To Marry...or Not to Marry ... 495
 Chapter 23 To Your Parents: Requesting Consent to Marry ... 508
 Chapter 24 Rough Waters: When Parental Consent Is Challenging ... 523
 Summary and Reflection ... 535

Step 6 – Moving Forward: Wedding and Marriage ... 537

Chapter 25 Connecting During Engagement: Almost Wedding Time ... 538
 Chapter 26 The Big Day: Creating Your Marriage Ceremony ... 547
 Chapter 27 An Adventure: Looking Forward to the First Year Together ... 560
 Summary and Reflection ... 574

Appendices ... 576

- A. Spiritual Revelation: A Glimpse of the Bahá'í Faith ... 577
- B. A Spiritual Selection: Bahá'í Prayers for Marriage and Family ... 578
- C. Knowing One Another: Defining Some Virtues ... 584
- D. Courses of the Ruhi Institute ... 588
- E. Behind the Scenes: About the Authors ... 589

A Final Note ... 590

Table of Contents: Worksheets

Worksheet 1	Relationship-Learning Activities ... 24
Worksheet 2A	Making Service and Time Choices ... 36
Worksheet 2B	A Helping Hand—Being of Service ... 39
Worksheet 3A	Qualities of Friendship ... 53
Worksheet 3B	What You Each Bring to a Relationship and Marriage ... 55
Worksheet 3C	Initial Assessment of Harmony ... 58
Worksheet 4	Virtues Exploration ... 82
Worksheet 6A	Communication Patterns and Preferences ... 120
Worksheet 6B	Communication Agreements ... 127
Worksheet 7A	Identifying Your Feelings ... 144
Worksheet 7B	Expressing Your Negative Feelings ... 148
Worksheet 8A	Assessing Consultation Behaviors and Skills ... 165
Worksheet 8B	Using Consultation to Build Understanding and Make Unified Decisions ... 171
Worksheet 9	Married Couples and Love ... 187
Worksheet 10A	Learning About Marriage—Interviewing Married Couples ... 208
Worksheet 10B	Your Preferences and Expectations of Marriage and a Marriage Partner ... 211
Worksheet 10C	Assessing Maturity Before Marriage ... 218
Worksheet 11	Exploring the Topic of Religion ... 234
Worksheet 12A	Marital Behavior and Equality ... 257
Worksheet 12B	Equality and Household Tasks ... 259
Worksheet 13A	Understanding Individual Differences and Behaviors ... 278
Worksheet 13B	Tracking Your Time ... 286
Worksheet 13C	How Do You Spend Your Time? ... 289
Worksheet 14	Responding to Human Difficulties ... 314
Worksheet 15A	Current Assets and Liabilities/Debts ... 341
Worksheet 15B	Understanding Monthly Incomes and Expenses ... 344
Worksheet 15C	Distinguishing Necessities and Luxuries ... 347
Worksheet 16	Consulting About Intimate Feelings and Sex ... 364
Worksheet 18	Experiences in Sharing Living Space ... 414
Worksheet 19A	Parents' Marriage/Relationship Examples ... 432
Worksheet 19B	Learning from Parents ... 435
Worksheet 20A	Understanding Diverse Experiences ... 452
Worksheet 20B	Exploring Diversity in Your Relationship ... 455
Reflection A	Trends in Your Relationship and Current Status ... 470
Reflection B	Fears About Commitment ... 475
Reflection C	History of Longer-Term Commitments ... 477
Worksheet 21	Vision and Commitments If You Marry ... 492
Worksheet 22	Exploring the Choice of Marrying ... 506
Worksheet 26	Planning the Marriage Ceremony ... 557
Worksheet 27	Your Marriage Goals ... 572

CHAPTER 2

At the Center: A Focus on Service

Chapter Themes

- Keeping service at the center of your lives
- Service within a marriage and family, as well as to others
- Maintaining family unity while also serving beyond the family

A Couple's Story

James and Lindsay are seeing each other less often lately, as they both have very busy schedules. In addition to working full-time, the mayor has asked James to serve on a youth advisory council, his friend Vafa wants him to help with major work on his car, and the Assembly has invited him to train as a junior youth group animator. Lindsay is working hard on her studies, is tutoring a fellow university student, and has been asked to serve on the community Holy Day committee. The literacy center where they both volunteer wants more hours from them, often at different times. They are still attending the weekly study circle, but that's almost the only time they get to see each other.

Lindsay and James meet for dinner and consult about what to do about their situation.

"I know one thing for sure—I miss you," says Lindsay. "Maybe we can help each other for a few minutes instead of just others," Lindsay laughs. "I wonder if we could set some priorities. I know we both value being of service to others, but we also need to include some time for ourselves, and make sure we spend time with our families and friends, too."

Together they consult about the service choices they are currently making and the ones they are being invited to take on.

"Since you don't like working on cars very much, does Vafa have someone else who could help him?" asks Lindsay.

"Yes," James agrees. "But that's also time with a close friend."

"What about instead of you serving on the Holy Day Committee, we both train to work with junior youth?" suggests James. "We could even invite Vafa to join us? That way we are both doing an important service, getting to know each other better, and spending time with a friend.

"Yeah, and not to get too far ahead of ourselves, but it also offers us a way to see if accompanying junior youth is an activity we want to commit to for the long term, even once we're married, if that's where we end up," says Lindsay.

Both Lindsay and James reluctantly decide that they can't continue to serve at the literacy center, but they decide to recruit others to take their places. James is going to do more fact-finding about the mayor's council to see whether he can contribute but be in a less time-consuming role. And they agree to set up a time for dinner with his parents.

"I like how this consultation went," says Lindsay as they finalize their plans. "It feels like we are respecting our relationship and our need for time with family and friends, as well as trying to be of ongoing and real service to others."

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

“I agree,” says James. “It’s a good balance. And I’m sure we’re going to consult and try to find that balance throughout our whole lives.”

Reflecting and Consulting on the Story:

1. How are Lindsay and James consciously integrating service into their lives? How does their spirit of service affect their relationship?
2. How do they evaluate the best ways to spend their time?
3. Why could it be important during courtship to strive as a couple to build a spirit of service and engage in actions that are of service to others? How could this spirit of service then potentially influence the quality of a marriage and family life?
4. How is their consultation a form of service to each of them?
5. How do Lindsay and James use consultation as a tool to help them refine their choices for how to be of service to others?

Guiding Quotations

1. “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. ... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. ... Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, #CXVII)
2. “Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, #CXXX)
3. “O Lord, my God! Give me Thy grace to serve Thy loved ones, strengthen me in my servitude to Thee, illumine my brow with the light of adoration in Thy court of holiness, and of prayer to Thy kingdom of grandeur. Help me to be selfless at the heavenly entrance of Thy gate, and aid me to be detached from all things within Thy holy precincts. Lord! Give me to drink from the chalice of selflessness; with its robe clothe me, and in its ocean immerse me. Make me as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones, and grant that I may offer up my soul for the earth ennobled by the footsteps of Thy chosen ones in Thy path, O Lord of Glory in the Highest.
“With this prayer doth Thy servant call Thee, at dawntide and in the night-season. Fulfill his heart’s desire, O Lord! Illumine his heart, gladden his bosom, kindle his light, that he may serve Thy Cause and Thy servants.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá,
<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/prayers/bahai-prayers/>)
4. “Thou canst take unto thyself a husband and at the same time serve the Cause of God; the one doth not preclude the other. Know thou the value of these days; let not this chance escape thee. Beg thou God to make thee a lighted candle, so that thou mayest guide a great multitude through this darksome world.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #64)
5. “... [A]ll effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, #55)

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

6. “An individual must center his whole heart and mind on service to the Cause, in accordance with the high standards set by Bahá’u’lláh. When this is done, the Hosts of the Supreme Concourse will come to the assistance of the individual, and every difficulty and trial will gradually be overcome.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #1334*)
7. “There is certainly no reason why you should not go through life with a companion; Bahá’u’lláh strongly upholds the institution of marriage, and it need not hinder the service of an active Bahá’í if he married the right person.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to Canada, p. 94*)
8. “Service is the magnet which draws the Divine Confirmations. Thus, when a person is active, they are blessed by the Holy Spirit. When they are inactive, the Holy Spirit cannot find a repository in their being, and thus they are deprived of its healing and quickening rays.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance, #405*)
9. “He hopes that from now on you and your dear husband will be able to serve the Faith unitedly and devotedly together, as that is the highest form of Bahá’í co-operation in marriage.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. I, #905*)
10. “The Guardian will pray for the solution of your problems. He will pray for the healing of your son, and for the happiness and unity of your family. The true basis of unity is service, and he hopes all the members will arise with renewed effort to teach the Faith.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #2334*)
11. “... [H]e indeed feels rejoiced at the happy news of the settlement of your domestic differences with Mrs. ... and particularly to know that you have jointly undertaken a most successful teaching tour ... This bond of common service to the Cause which is so closely uniting your hearts and has proved such an effective solution of your personal problems, he hopes, and indeed will fervently pray, will be further cemented by the passing of years and through your increased and joint participation in the teaching work...” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #2319*)
12. “Bahá’ís should seek to be many-sided, normal and well balanced, mentally and spiritually. We must not give the impression of being fanatics, but at the same time we must live up to our principles.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #1309*)
13. “If the friends always waited until they were fully qualified to do any particular task, the work of the Cause would be almost at a standstill! But the very act of striving to serve, however unworthy one may feel, attracts the blessings of God and enables one to become more fitted for the task.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #1711*)
14. “Surely Shoghi Effendi would like to see you and the other friends give their whole time and energy to the Cause, for we are in great need for competent workers, but the home is an institution that Bahá’u’lláh has come to strengthen and not to weaken. Many unfortunate things have happened in Bahá’í homes just for neglecting this point. Serve the Cause but also remember your duties towards your home. It is for you to find the balance and see that neither makes you neglect the other.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance, #737*)

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

15. "... [Y]ou should not neglect your health, but consider it the means which enables you to serve. It—the body—is like a horse which carries the personality and spirit, and as such should be well cared for so it can do its work! You should certainly safeguard your nerves, and force yourself to take time, and not only for prayer and meditation, but for real rest and relaxation. We don't have to pray and meditate for hours in order to be spiritual." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #1777*)

16. "While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to 'enter into wedlock' that they may 'bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants' and to 'engage in crafts and professions'. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá'u'lláh extols those 'that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.' This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, 'commingled with their mother's milk', and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed center of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus." (Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action, #35.34-#35.39*)

17. "The importance of 'doing', of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of 'being', of increasing one's understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one's life." (Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action, #315*)

18. "The urgency of the present hour must not obscure the special joy that comes from service. The call to service is an uplifting, all-embracing summons. It attracts every faithful soul, even those weighed down by cares and obligations. For in all the ways in which that faithful soul is occupied can be discovered deep-rooted devotion and a lifelong concern for the well-being of others. Such qualities give coherence to a life of manifold demands. And the sweetest moments of all for any enkindled heart are those spent with spiritual sisters and brothers, tending to a society in need of spiritual nourishment." (Universal House of Justice, *Ridván 2024*)

19. "To follow a path of service, whatever form one's activity assumes, requires faith and tenacity. In this connection, the benefit of walking that path in the company of others is immense. Loving fellowship, mutual encouragement, and willingness to learn together are natural properties of any group of youth sincerely striving for the same ends, and should also characterize those essential relationships that

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

bind together the components of society. ... You...are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual's spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one's energies are being channeled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal. ... [D]ivine assistance is promised to all those who arise to serve humankind in response to the galvanizing call of Bahá'u'lláh." (Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #27.5; #27.7; #27.8)

20. "... [E]very aspect of a person's life is an element of his or her service to Bahá'u'lláh: the love and respect one has for one's parents; the pursuit of one's education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one's behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one's marriage and the bringing up of one's children; one's activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá'í community, whether this be in such simple matters as attending the Nineteen Day Feast or the observance of Bahá'í Holy Days, or in more demanding tasks required by service in the administration of the Faith; and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God. The concept of the Youth Year of Service should be viewed in this context, as a special service that the youth can devote to the Cause, and which should prove to be a highly valuable element in their own spiritual and intellectual development. It is not an alternative to, or in conflict with, the carrying out of the other vital tasks enumerated above, but rather a unique service and privilege which should be combined with them in the way that is best suited to each individual case." (Universal House of Justice, European Bahá'í Youth Council, December 7, 1992)
21. "... [W]hatever its immediate effects, service to the Beloved is, in itself, a source of abiding joy to the spirit." (Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #34.5)
22. "... [T]he unity of your family should take priority over any other consideration. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, we must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it. For example, service to the Cause should not produce neglect of the family. It is important for you to arrange your time so that your family life is harmonious and your household receives the attention it requires." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, #2160)
23. "... [T]he courses of the [training] institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #51.9)
24. "... [T]he training institute...strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general,

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

involvement in other processes that seek to transform society.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Framework for Action*, #52.3) (See Appendix D for more about the institute courses.)

25. “The Bahá’í teachings on sexual morality center on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution.” (Note #134 appended to *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

Learning from the Quotations:

1. What is service? What might a life of service look like? What are examples of activities that are considered service?
2. What could be some indications that a person’s mind, heart, and intentions are aimed toward service?
3. What are some of the key guiding principles for making choices related to service?
4. What are some elements of living a coherent life?
5. What would help service become a “fixed center” in someone’s life? The framework for other life choices?
6. How do the quotations describe the motives that are important in service?
7. Is it possible to live a life of service and be in a strongly supportive marriage based on friendship? Would marriage and family restrict some choices of service? Why or why not? If so, in what ways?
8. In what ways could marriage and family be regarded as ways to serve God?
9. Based on the quotations, how might a family build unity through their choices for service?
10. How could engaging in service activities together be beneficial to a marriage?
11. What might be ways to balance service to the Faith and duties to the home? Balance well-being and service?

Authors’ Perspectives

Please carefully study the quotations above before reading these perspectives.

The joy of service is embedded in the Bahá’í teachings and in the culture of Bahá’í community life. **Bahá’ís are asked to follow the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with their every thought and action focused on selfless service to others.** This intentionality leads every Bahá’í to consider how their relationships, professional life, and community activities relate to and can improve the lives of others. To follow this powerful example requires daily effort to develop virtues such as respect, kindness, and compassion. Living a life based on prayer and meditation, coupled with resistance to being self-centered, can also follow from this orientation. A service-oriented intention includes awareness of the people around you—their joys, hurts, and needs—along with a willingness to respond with loving care. [Information about the people mentioned and quoted in the book is in “What Is It All About? Welcome to Preparing for Marriage!” in the front section of the book.]

It may be unfamiliar to think of **service in the context of relationships and marriage.** The family unit, with marriage at the heart of it, can serve humanity as a building block for global society. Marriage partners also serve each other and their family members.

When service is at the center of your shared lives, you orient toward contributing to one another and the world. The activities you choose will assist you to explore whether you have similar service-oriented intentions and interests. If different types of service appeal to each of you, you will have the opportunity to assess how you respond and adapt to this. Some couples serve well together, and some are more harmonious in their relationship when they serve in different areas. You may learn that you

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

approach service differently, and you might consult on any implications of this. Consider, too, what would help you maintain a balance between service within you as a couple (and your family as it grows) and service outside your family, so that unity within the family is protected.

Courtship might include **thoughtful service to one another, both out of sincere love as well as to determine whether this will be part of the culture of your marriage**. You can see if service is a natural flow between you, or if a service orientation is difficult. Service within a relationship could include, for example, listening to each other about a difficult topic, serving a cup of tea or coffee, encouraging exercise, allowing the other person some time alone, cooking a healthy meal, or doing a chore. You might also consult about how service within marriage and with children could contribute to fostering unity within the family.

A loving relationship includes this sweet desire to contribute to each other's happiness and create a connection. If bringing happiness to your partner doesn't seem to come naturally to either of you, it may be helpful to spend time with a married couple who is good at it. Within marriage, a thoughtful and mutual service orientation toward each other, your children, and extended family members can help build enduring unity.

Your courtship may also include participating in Bahá'í courses or **offering service through study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, or devotional gatherings**. Globally, the Bahá'í community's training institutes offer courses to help individuals learn the spirit and skills of service. (See Appendix D.) Community-building efforts and **social action projects that contribute to society** can also assist you to orient your heart and soul toward contributing to others. These often address needs such as children's education, the treatment and education of women, building infrastructure, fighting racism, and medical access. Following in the footsteps of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, these activities, as well as the general intentionality to be part of the world's improvement, can become a key part of the culture of your relationship and marriage.

If you are in a long-distance relationship, you can share with each other what you are doing in the area where you live and support each other with encouragement in your separate endeavors. You can be creative in being of service to one another, whether it is lifting each other's spirits, sending a gift, or contributing ideas to solve a problem at work. When you can be together, you can spend part of your time involved in community service and thoughtfulness toward each other. Additionally, some service activities can be carried out online, and both of you may be able to participate in these while physically distant. (examples: co-tutoring an online study circle, planning and hosting a devotional gathering...)

Finding balance and living a coherent life can sometimes feel like a challenge. Many people have an abundance of tasks they want to accomplish—often including the realm of community service, along with professional and personal life, home maintenance, staying healthy, and making time for socializing and recreation. Without clergy and with relatively small numbers, Bahá'ís currently seem especially called to take on many community service responsibilities. As you consult about your courtship activities and potential life as a married couple, you will likely find it helpful to explore what balance and coherence mean for you, and how you can achieve a well-rounded life. Balancing, prioritizing, and consulting about your choices will help you make mutual decisions about how you use your time. Remember that a relationship, a marriage, and family unity are very high priorities. Consulting about your use of time and making service choices will likely be a lifelong conversation, as your preferences, availability, and the needs of your family and community change.

You may not have found your stride yet with community engagement and regular acts of service. **During your courtship, you can assess your compatibility in part based on the amount of time and energy you want to commit to purely recreational endeavors compared to structured activities of service.** If you do not find alignment on these intentions and desires, you may want to consult about whether you will be able to find harmony in marriage.

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

You will notice as you serve that whatever you learn to do can be applied in other aspects of life, and the **opportunities for service, as well as your own development, will grow and expand throughout your lives**. If you learn to serve others thoughtfully and sincerely, you will likely enhance your capabilities as marriage partners, parents, community members, and even as employees or employers.

Relationship Coaching

- Observe each other while involved in as many different service activities as possible, as this is an excellent way to learn about one another’s character.
- As you engage in service-oriented activities, notice where your preferences and skills help you each contribute best and what types of service to others might appeal to you after marriage. Identify which activities are enjoyable for both of you and which ones are not.
- Seeing one another’s attitude of service, both between you and toward others, helps offer insights about character and personality. Engaging in service efforts can deepen a connection between you. From these activities, you will build mutual understanding about your service orientation and how that is manifested in your life choices, friendships, profession, relationship, and marriage.

Suggested Learning Activities

Activities are included to help you more deeply reflect and learn about this topic.

1. Pray, meditate, reflect, and write in your journals about your views of service, your experiences with it, and what service you would like the two of you to engage in during your courtship. Consider as well what expectations you hold about service within marriage or with a marriage partner.
2. To observe your attitudes toward and skills for service, as well as to help you learn more about each other, engage in a variety of service opportunities. Carry out one or all of the ones below in the next few weeks. (This may overlap with the activities you carried out in Chapter 1 activities.):
 - a. Spend a day—or a significant portion of a day—running errands for or with each other.
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about being of service to each other?
 - Could you see yourselves continuing to do this activity after marriage?
 - b. Identify a service to perform for one of your parents or family members and carry it out together.
 - What did you observe? How did the person respond to your service?
 - c. Do a service activity that one of you particularly wants to do and the other would not normally do.
 - What did you do?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about the experience?

Some longer-term examples of shared service might include:

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

- d. Serve on a spiritually-focused service committee together.
 - After a few weeks, evaluate—how enthusiastically and effectively are you serving?
 - Are you able to cooperate with each other as well as engage with and enthusiastically support the activity?
 - What would you prefer to do differently?
- e. Join a community service or community development project together, for a day or a few weeks (or longer).
 - Reflect afterward: How well did you cooperate with each other and with those involved?
 - How enthusiastically and effectively did you serve on the project?
 - What contributions did you make?
 - If you had it to do over again, would you do anything differently—in the project or in choosing it?

3. Complete Worksheets 2A and 2B to better understand and make your service and time choices.

Consulting About Your Relationship

Please remember to authentically share your thoughts and feelings and draw on the virtue of truthfulness as you consult.

Service Within Your Relationship and Family

1. In what ways are you of thoughtful service to each other now? When are you able to respond compassionately to each other's difficulties? What changes, if any, are likely in the service you will offer each other in the rest of your courtship? How might the types, intensity, amount, or degree of service to each other change after marriage?
2. What virtues help you when offering service to each other? (examples: compassion, sincere listening, flexibility, patience, thoughtfulness. An extensive list of virtues is in Appendix C.) What virtues do you draw on when offering service to your family? To your community?
3. What are some examples of services that you could offer to a marriage partner? To immediate family members? To extended family members?
4. What example of service would you want to demonstrate to your children, if you marry? If you already have children, what is your service-oriented example to them now? Is it the example you want for them?
5. How can children develop and demonstrate a service orientation? How might they participate in service to the family? Toward others?
6. Under what circumstances might you ask others to be of service to you as a couple? To your family? (examples: childcare, consulting about challenges, home repair, accounting...)
7. What would be a good balance in the amount of time you spend at home and outside the home engaged in community service? If that amount changes over time, what would indicate a need for consultation about changing the balance?
8. When you look at the time you spend on social and recreational activities, what indicates that this is part of living a coherent life? Or do you see indications of an imbalance? Are there important areas of

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

your life that need more attention? (examples: school, family, work, service, developing your spiritual life...). What would indicate a need to consult about changing the balance?

9. Would you struggle being married to someone who has few service intentions or activities? On the other hand, could you marry someone who regularly puts community service ahead of important marriage and family time? What would motivate them to do this?

An Outward-Looking Orientation

1. How easy or difficult is it for you to be aware of and tend to the needs of others?
2. When you assess your ability to serve others, what do you notice about what triggers self-centered or selfish responses in you? What virtues counterbalance these tendencies? (See Appendix C.)
3. In what ways do you agree or have different perspectives about the importance of service to the larger community and bettering the world? Do your perspectives change if you carry out this type of service together as a couple rather than as individuals?
4. Do you currently participate in service activities? Why or why not? What types of service have each of you been involved with over the last two years? If you are participating, how is that contributing to your courtship? If you don't already participate in them, what might be the value of engaging in some service activities?
5. In what ways do you live a life of service that might not be measured in the number of activities you do but instead in your intentionality and efforts? (examples: caring for an elderly neighbor, demonstrating incredible patience with someone who is struggling and needs your support, inconveniencing yourself to make sure you don't wake up your roommates when you come home from working late, tidying the kitchen or cleaning the bathroom without mentioning it or expecting reciprocity...)
6. What are your favorite ways to serve? What do you enjoy or love about being of service? What is frustrating, challenging, or stressful for you because of your service orientation or when you are involved in specific service activities?
7. What talents and abilities do you have that you could draw upon in service? In what areas do you excel that would allow you to be of unique service?
8. As you assess opportunities, responsibilities, available time, your talents, and what attracts your hearts, how do you respond when considering these types of service?
 - a. Needs of your Bahá'í or other religious community, including serving on administrative institutions, committees, or task forces
 - b. Needs of the neighborhood, village, town, city, region, or country in which each of you lives
 - c. Social action projects designed to contribute to the functioning and systems of society
 - d. Helping those who are close to you
9. If you marry, what would each of you want to continue from your current service activities?
10. What have you learned from being involved in community service? (examples: new skills, new attitudes, character development, how to get along with others, how fulfilling it feels to serve...)

Worksheet 2A: Making Service and Time Choices**Date:** _____**Purpose:** To determine spiritual principles of service; to reflect on how some time and service choices are currently affecting you as individuals and as a couple.**Note:** You will focus more on time preferences in Chapter 13.**Instructions:**

- A) Reflect individually on your general desire for and orientation toward service, including how you currently spend your time in a state of service.
- B) At the end of the worksheet, share and reflect as a couple about your individual responses.

Individual Reflection

1. What are some of the excellent time and service choices you think you are making individually?

As a couple?

2. Are you happy with your service toward one another? What adjustments do you want to request? Are there ways in which you would particularly appreciate your partner demonstrating their care or concern for you?

3. Are there time and service choices that either of you are making that seem to be causing distress rather than unity in your relationship? Why? List them below.

4. Do you think/feel you have enough quality time with immediate family members? ____ With extended family members? ____ Comment: _____

5. Do you think/feel you have enough quality time with friends? ____ Comment: _____

6. How much solitude do you need to feel balanced? Is there a particular time of the day or week that you need alone time? What do you do with your solitude? What does it offer you?

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

7. What or who do you think may need more time from you?

Less time from you?

8. When you study guidance from Bahá'í/religious sources, particularly recent guidance from the Universal House of Justice, what does it lead you to consider about your time choices? What services are you motivated to engage in? Where do you think you need to create a more coherent life?

9. What motivates you to participate in service? In other types of activities?

10. What do you love about or what makes you happiest about your favorite types of service?

11. What is frustrating, challenging, or stressful for you when being involved in service activities?

12. What have you experienced in serving on administrative bodies, committees, or task forces, whether for a Bahá'í/religious community or a non-profit or civic organization?

Joys: _____
 Challenges: _____

13. Which time choices simply take up your time and do not bring joy or fulfillment?

14. What are you learning from acting with a service orientation? (examples: new skills, new attitudes, character development...)

15. Reflections:

a. Are you making wise or unwise choices with your time? In what ways?

b. In what areas do you excel where you might be able to be of unique service?

- c. What activities seem to be the best use of your time? Are there any that seem wise to cut back on or change?

Couple Reflection and Consultation

- 1. Share or summarize your individual responses above with each other and consult about your views on the topic. What are your insights from your consultation?

Worksheet 2B: A Helping Hand—Being of Service**Date:** _____**Purpose:** To prioritize and manage the time needed to engage in specific service activities, separately and together.**Note:** Many aspects of service are not measurable in this way; however, this examination will likely assist you to think about your commitments over a specific length of time.**Instructions:**

- A) Consult about your orientation toward being of service to others. Some activities address the challenges of others, and some are of a wider community nature. Assess what the effect of your efforts might be in each type of activity below and whether your orientation and skills are a good fit for the service opportunity.
- B) Together, read through and then select activities below that either or both of you would like to participate in. Put a checkmark in your column to designate your choice. Again, if the ones listed in the worksheet don't seem to be a fit for you, consult about alternatives and choose them. **Note:** Some people prefer short-term action, and some prefer to work toward systemic change that prevents future problems but also takes more long-term endeavors.
- B) Under the time column, consider the frequency of the activity or activities you choose and the time the activity would take. (examples: every Monday for 6 months; 1 week per year...)
- C) Write the specific actions you can do in each area you choose.
- D) After you have completed the chart, agree on at least one activity, and carry it out together.

Potential Activities	Her	Him	Time Needed	What Do?/Where Do?
Tutor/facilitate a spiritual study circle/group				
Host/assist with religious/worship meetings				
Teach children's classes				
Lead/Animate junior youth/youth group				
Help community soup kitchen/food bank				
Visit a nursing home/elder care center				
Serve on a religious committee				

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

Do community service				
----------------------	--	--	--	--

Potential Activities	Her	Him	Time Needed	What Do?/Where Do?
Visit elderly/sick people in their homes				
Watch children for family or friends				
Cook dinner for each other or family				
Participate in community clean-up projects				
Civic improvement project				
Arts/beautification project				
Clean or organize someone’s home				
Other:				
Other:				

Reflection and Consultation:

1. What are your motivations for participating in these activities?

2. What did you learn about each other from doing an activity?

3. What did you see as your contribution to others?

4. Were you able to interact with others respectfully and discern whether they wanted help, and if so, what it looked like? Were you able to be helpful? Why or why not?

Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!, Sample Chapter 2: At the Center: A Focus on Service

- 5. In looking at the various activities you listed, what are your observations about how participating in them could further your relationship and your commitment to serve others?

- 6. How important is it to you to participate in the same activities? In different activities?

- 7. How can you participate in separate service activities and still have time to focus on building your relationship?

- 8. What are other parts of your lives that represent your service orientation but that might not fit on a calendar or a specific time commitment? How do you feel about those? How might they strengthen your relationship or future marriage? How might they have a stressful effect on your relationship or a future marriage? (examples: regular care of a mentally ill sibling, being available by phone to counsel friends, giving out packages of supplies to unhoused people in your community as you see them...)
