

The
Short
List

In a life full of choices, there are only four that matter

Bill Butterworth



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The Short List: In a Life Full of Choices, There Are Only Four That Matter

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“In *The Short List*, Bill uses his delightful storytelling abilities to introduce us to the most important character qualities in our lives. Everyone needs the encouragement this book will provide.”

LEE STROBEL—Author of *The Case for the Real Jesus*

“Bill Butterworth always brings a smile to my face. In *The Short List* I laughed and was inspired to the very end to put my priorities in order of importance.”

JIM BURNS, PhD—President of HomeWord

Author of *Confident Parenting*, *Creating an Intimate Marriage*, and *Teaching Your Children Healthy Sexuality*

“Successful people live by a few values that guide both their daily steps and their lifelong legacies. Bill’s book will change how you look at faith, relationships, and what is truly important.”

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“I know of only one person better at telling parables than Bill Butterworth, and that’s the Savior to whom Bill is clearly devoted. This book is important, not only for its relevant content, but also as a model of effective communication.”

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“Four simple truths are on the Short List; hundreds of life applications flow from them. The basics of life are illustrated in this book with beauty and brevity.”

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“In *The Short List*, Bill Butterworth draws us in to the earth-linked humanity of ordinary life. We laugh because we feel understood. And then, without warning, we well up with emotion because Bill taps into something deep, something rare. And that’s when we learn that we’ve been changed for the better.”

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Author of *Before You Live Together* and *Before You Get Engaged*

To Dad

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And finally, my dear wife, Kathi. In countless ways, you live out the Short List every day of your life. I am so blessed and inspired to have you as my sweetheart.

INTRODUCTION

The Lesson from My Son's First Words

It was a warm, sunny summer day when my fourth son, Joseph, was born on August 30, 1985, in Anaheim, California. Being our fifth child, my wife, Rhonda, and I were certain he was our last. We had two middle names picked out and couldn't decide which one to give him so we decided to give him both. When Joseph Morgan Lindsey Butterworth entered the world, things were already really hopping. Five kids, nine years and under, are a handful for anyone, and our household was no exception.

In 1985 I was thirty-three years old. It's a good age . . . you're old enough to finally get some respect, yet young enough to still be filled with idealism and energy. Our family was living in southern California, having relocated there in 1981 from south Florida. We had moved in order for me to take a position as a counselor, primarily responsible for helping troubled marriages and family crises.

Four years into my life as a counselor, I decided to try my hand at writing a book. Very diligently and with a schedule that would make an accountant cheer, I systematically wrote one chapter a week for fifteen weeks until I was finished. It was a book about family life, my attempt to approach life like my writing idol, humorist Erma Bombeck, did in her books. After plenty of publishers' rejections and lots of haggling, *Peanut Butter Families*

Stick Together: Family Life Can Be Smooth or Crunchy was released in 1985. Suddenly I was whisked into the world of a book tour; radio, television, and newspaper interviews; and most significantly, increasing numbers of invitations to speak to various sorts of groups.

Another element of my vocational life had been a part-time speaking career. I came to California virtually unknown, but through the persistence of taking any and every opportunity given me, I was speaking on weekends at businesses, conferences, retreats, churches, PTAs, banquets, bowling alley openings, and bar mitzvahs. It was slow at first, but gradually my speaking schedule filled up. With the release of my book, I was becoming a bit in demand. Of course, this pleased me immensely.

Meanwhile, on the home front things were booming as well. That August, Joseph was born. (Anyone with lots of children can see where this story is headed.) Everything was happening at once. Five vibrant, healthy children wanted time with their dad. There's nothing wrong with that, right? It was exactly what I wanted as a child growing up with my own father. It makes perfect sense to anybody.

But my career was also starting to take off. Because the book was selling, I was being invited to speak at places where I had always hoped to be invited. In retrospect, it was a personally fulfilling time. I was educating and encouraging people all over the country. It felt good, like a calling. Yes, that was it, a calling to strengthen and encourage people all over the United States. I liked the way that

sounded as it rolled off my tongue. Certainly my family was proud of my strong commitment to hard work.

Of course, the clincher to the whole deal was the money. I was being paid a good salary as a counselor. Add honorarium checks for speaking, royalty checks for writing, and checks from the sales of audio- and videotapes, and you have an enticing financial bottom line.

By mid-1986, I was awaiting the release of my second book, *My Kids Are My Best Teachers: The ABCs of Parenting*, accepting invitations to speak all over the United States and Canada, and still counseling Monday through Friday in southern California. *I'm on top of my world*, I thought. Perusing my calendar, I discovered I was booked for thirty-eight of the year's fifty-two weekends! That should have been a warning to pull in the reins. But the taste of success is intoxicating, as many of us can say from experience. It's difficult to pull away from the table when the banquet is so incredibly lavish.

At this time my typical week was comprised of a nine- or ten-hour weekday, except on Fridays, when I would leave the office earlier to catch a bus from the Disneyland Hotel to Los Angeles International Airport. Then I would board a plane to fly somewhere to speak Friday evening, all day Saturday, and Sunday morning. Late Sunday afternoon or early evening, I would board another plane for the return flight home. Back on the bus from LAX to the Magic Kingdom, I'd find my little silver Honda Civic parked at the hotel, get in, and drive to our home late Sunday evening.

Most weekends the kids would already be asleep before I arrived home. I remember feeling guilty about not being able to see them awake. But when you're on the fast track, you learn to stuff that guilt down inside, along with a mixture of other assorted emotions that would keep a therapist busy for years. To further complicate matters, as well as proving my power over guilt, I would usually arise early Monday morning in order to get to work before everyone else. In that way, I could make up the work I missed by leaving early on Friday afternoon. I felt as if I was always playing catch-up.

My busy work schedule meant that I would often go days at a time without seeing my kids. When I helped tuck them in on Thursday evenings, it often would be the last time I would see them with eyes open until our evening meal on Monday. But interestingly enough, my life never struck me as imbalanced. "This is how everybody lives," I rationalized to my wife, my friends, and myself. Down deep inside we all knew that maintaining this pace was a recipe for disaster.

Following the normal patterns of child growth and development, our newborn, Joseph, took off in the world of infants. He learned to crawl; he learned to walk—he just seemed a little slow in the talking department. His sister, Joy, and his brothers, Jesse, Jeffrey, and John, all talked by the time they reached a year old. Even after four kids, we didn't understand that kids begin talking according to their own schedules. Whereas the other four had "goo-gooed"

for months, leading up to the use of actual words, Joseph was marching to his own drummer. But then, one particular day, it was as if a power switch went on in his brain. Almost as if he awoke in his crib and thought, *Today is the day I will begin to talk!*

I'll never forget it as long as I live. It was Monday evening at the dinner table. I had been on one of my weekend junkets to who knows where. I was looking forward to seeing the kids and being updated on all that was going on in their lives. We gathered at the dinner table in our regular places. Joseph was in his high chair, located right between his mother and me.

This was the moment. Suddenly deciding that today was the day for his inaugural speech, Joseph turned to his mother and broke the silence with a crystal-clear exclamation:

“Hey, Ma!”

Before we could rejoice over this major accomplishment, Joseph turned and addressed me:

“Hey, Bob!”

I felt like I had been struck by a stun gun. My son had spoken, but did he say . . . “Hey, Ma! . . . Hey, Bob!”?

His mom and I looked at one another blankly. She broke the silence by saying somewhat facetiously, “You’ve been on the road too much.”

Returning sarcasm for sarcasm, I retorted without missing a beat, “Never mind that. . . . *Who’s Bob?*” I learned there was no “Bob,” but I couldn’t figure out if that made it better or worse!

Dinner proceeded as usual, and I quietly listened as my older children filled me in on all the events of their lives that I was missing because I was “so successful” at my job. After the meal, with the dishes cleared and cleaned, my wife and I talked about Joseph’s memorable words.

“He called me Bob,” I mumbled.

“Oh, relax,” she replied. “It was a very innocent thing. He doesn’t think you’re Bob. You’re his daddy.”

“But that’s just the point,” I countered. “I’ve been so busy working a forty-five to fifty-hour week, plus all those weekend trips I’m making. . . . That little guy doesn’t have any reason to know that I am his daddy.”

At that point in my life, I recall falling into a deep funk. I was so shaken by my son’s words, I couldn’t think of anything else. I couldn’t focus on what was going on around me. In the midst of all that fuzziness, it was a time of deep and profound introspection.

Of course, Joseph just kept on developing in the speech department. Like most toddlers, he began to favor certain words, using them with great frequency throughout the day.

Joseph had three favorite words. If he wanted more to eat, he would simply bellow out the word “More!” If he wanted more to drink, in the same fashion he would yell, “Dink!” And, believe it or not, he began to call me “Bill!” Granted, it still wasn’t “Dad,” but we were moving in the right direction.

For many days I sat in my stupor at the dinner table, consumed with thoughts of how to right this wrong I had

brought upon my family, while my youngest son would scream in my ear, "More dink, Bill!"

Joseph gave it his best shot. He tried every possible inflection, every possible accent. "*More* dink, Bill." "More *dink*, Bill." "More dink, *Bill!*" Nothing worked. I was tearing myself apart inside and didn't have time for anything else.

Eventually I began to verbalize some of my feelings to my wife, who was more than willing to listen to me as I wrestled with my issues.

"I'm thinking of starting a club," I rambled in a mixture of anger and sadness one night. "I'm going to call it the 'Flashlight Fathers.' It's for all those dads like me who leave for work so early each morning and come home from work so late at night that they never see their children awake. Their only contact is when they sneak into their kids' rooms while it's still dark and shine a flashlight on the faces of their little ones. Once the fathers see that each kid's breathing pattern is normal, they convince themselves that everything is all right, and they're off to work."

Once again, there was silence.

"It's a very prestigious group, the Flashlight Fathers," I went on. "Do you know why? Because we are all eminently successful not only at our jobs, but also in our parenting."

More silence.

"Think about it," I explained. "I never feel more successful as a parent than I do when I watch my child sleep. The kid doesn't mouth off, doesn't disobey, doesn't show

disrespect. . . . He just lies there and breathes . . . the way so many of us think it was intended.

“Maybe it’s time to rethink what I’m doing with my life,” I eventually concluded.

And that is precisely what I did.

That night was an epiphany for me. No one will ever convince me that Joseph uttered innocent little gibberish to his mom and me. I believe it was the only way God could get my attention. I was so caught up in helping everybody else in the world that I thoughtlessly neglected my own family. To this day, I am so grateful to Rhonda for holding everything together and for her and the kids hanging in there with me during that difficult time.

But this led to an even greater question in my mind.

How will my children remember me?

Certainly they’d have agreed that Dad was a hard worker. Dad was a good provider. Maybe even that when Dad was around he was pretty fun. But what was I passing along in the greater scheme of things? What was I leaving behind?

That was the precise moment I decided I wanted to leave a legacy of lasting significance for my children and everyone who knew me.



I began a personal search for what I considered to be the most important things in life. After all, they were the things I wanted to be remembered for. And in order for me

to be remembered for these things, I needed to actually live them out while I had days left here on earth.

What are the most important things? Contrary to what today's culture tells us, they are not found in external, measurable stuff. No, the most important things are found deep inside a person. When they possess us and we possess them, they affect our lifestyle.

You and I know them as character qualities. Famous leaders are often said to have them, but they don't have sole dibs on them. You can't bid on them at an auction or buy them at your neighborhood drugstore. But ultimately, they are more valuable than money or real estate or stock portfolios or mansions or luxury cars or diamonds or anything else that a person can accumulate.

With God's help, I've recorded my personal findings on those important things in this book. It's as if God knew that I would be asking these questions before time even began, so He graciously assembled Scriptures to provide the answers I needed.

So what are the really important things in life? The answer could be a grocery list of character traits, but I have reduced it down to the Short List.

Take a look and see if you agree with my choices. Even if you don't, at least I've accomplished one thing. . . .

I've got you thinking about it.

CHAPTER ONE

The Lesson from Little League

One of the greatest moments for any parent is when his or her child signs up to play Little League baseball. It borders on patriotism—a love of country coupled with a love of one of its favorite pastimes. It does entail parental responsibility: a parent’s commitment to his or her child is measured by that adult’s ability to attend each and every one of the games, practices, and important fund-raisers. There’s something about selling doughnuts, magazine subscriptions, or washing cars that says “I am a good parent.” (Do you notice who is doing all the fund-raising? It’s not the kids!)

More than anything, Little League is an opportunity

to show our sons and daughters how much we really love them.

For me, Little League was an opportunity for my kids to show how much they loved me.

Like many families today, we have had a Rand McNally approach to our history together. Our first three children—Joy, Jesse, and Jeffrey—were born in south Florida, while we were living just north of Miami. John and Joseph, our fourth and fifth children, were born in Anaheim, California, after we moved to Orange County.

By the time our gang hit Little League age, we were firmly entrenched in the town of Fullerton, just north of Anaheim. Joy played some Little League but gravitated

more naturally to a Boys & Girls Club basketball league. She eventually grew to be six feet one inch tall in high school and played on a team that would go all the way to the California state finals.

Jesse fell in love with baseball. As a proud member of the West Fullerton Little League, he began as a T-baller and made his way up the ranks as high as he could go.

Until he turned ten.

When Jesse was ten, we moved.

Not just down the road or a few blocks away. We moved from southern California to northern California. Earlier that year (due in great part to the “Hey, Ma! . . . Hey, Bob!” incident) I had left my job and launched my

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For me, Little League was an opportunity for my kids to show how much they loved me.

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own career as a full-time speaker and writer. My wife and I quickly determined that we could live wherever we wanted as long as it was somewhat close to an airport. Real estate prices in Orange County, California, were high, so we looked around to see if there were any other places on the West Coast, preferably in California, that had more affordable housing. After a few months of searching, we found the perfect place: Grass Valley, California.

The name had nothing to do with the “medicinal” grass California is famous for and everything to do with a delightful, small, sleepy town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. An hour’s drive northeast of Sacramento, less than two hours south of Reno and Lake Tahoe, Grass Valley was idyllic indeed. And to top things off, the town seemed to be inhabited primarily by retirees who weren’t driving real estate prices sky-high.

So our baby boomer family found a house large enough for dad and mom, five children, a dog, a cat, a bird, and some fish. We bought it for less money than what we had gotten for our tiny cracker box back in Fullerton.

Of course my wife and I didn’t realize we were only one of *hundreds* of baby boomer couples who discovered Grass Valley virtually at the exact same time and descended upon it. For residents who had lived in this quaint little burg for years, the changes were myriad.

Including sign-up day for Little League. For a town that had put a handful of kids on ball fields in years past, it

was overwhelming when literally hundreds of kids showed up to play.

There was a great deal of learning and growing and stretching and flying-by-the-seat-of-their-pants as the league radically expanded. But one thing about Grass Valley Little League remained the same. . . .

It was Little League on a budget.

I detected it pretty much right from the start. Coaches were abundant, but playing fields were at a premium, requiring practices to be scheduled for any possible hour the sun was up and the team wasn't in school. Equipment was a little sparse, but somehow enough balls, bats, catcher's masks, chest protectors, and shin guards were provided for each team.

Jesse was relatively unscathed by Little League on a budget until the fateful day the coach made an all-important announcement: "Come early to the next practice so we can pass out the uniforms."

Ah, the uniforms. For most kids, they're the tangible connection between their Little League team and the Major League Baseball team that shares their name. In southern California, the Fullerton Little League took this connection seriously. The year Jesse played for the Fullerton Little League Dodgers, for example, he was beside himself with glee since the Dodgers were his favorite team. A "veteran" with several years under his helmet, Jesse knew that his Little League Dodgers uniform would be an *exact replica* of the uniform worn by his adult heroes. And when I use

the words *exact replica*, I am not exaggerating. Many of us parents were convinced that they were actual Major League uniforms that the equipment manager at Dodger Stadium left in the dryer too long. They were that authentic looking.

Grass Valley was far removed (in more ways than just miles) from Fullerton, but my little guy didn't know that. Jesse could hardly sleep the night before the next practice. He was excited about the endless possibilities of what a Grass Valley Little League uniform might look like. Looking back, I guess I should have warned him, but frankly, even I wasn't prepared for what would be offered up as "team uniforms." It wasn't pretty.

We arrived at the practice field early and joined the scrum of excited kids swarming around the coach. The coach barked a command to his boys, our first clue to what the uniforms might look like.

"Get in a single line over here to my right, boys!" he ordered. "That's it. Everybody get in line, and I'll pass out the T-shirts!"

T-shirts?

The full-dress Grass Valley Little League uniform is a T-shirt?

The dawn of understanding had yet to radiate in my little boy's head. As a matter of fact, he interpreted the coach's announcement differently. With an exuberant smile, Jesse turned and gave me the "okay" sign with his thumb and forefinger. "Dad, they even give us T-shirts to

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**“Dad, they even
give us T-shirts
to wear under
our uniforms!”
my son said
with naive
excitement.**

wear under our uniforms!” he said with all the naive excitement a youngster his age could muster.

But finally the truth sank in. When Jesse put all the pieces together, he tried to stay strong, but if I recall correctly, I think his lower lip began to quiver, ever so slightly.

Yes, Little League uniform day just about reduced my son to tears.

“Can you talk to the coach, Dad?” Jesse pleaded with me, somehow hoping that my words could miraculously make more fabric appear.

“Sure, Son,” I responded. I wanted Jesse to feel better; besides, I wanted an explanation too.

“Coach, can I speak with you for a second?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah, but make it quick,” he growled back.

He wasn’t going to make this any easier, but I courageously plunged ahead. “A T-shirt? Is that all the kids get for a uniform?”

The coach looked agitated beyond his normal agitated state and immediately became defensive. “Well, you have to go to a store and buy him a hat, but, yes, that’s it for the uniform.” He scowled at me and couldn’t resist one last zinger. “Are you one of those new guys that moved here from southern California? One of those ‘my son is used

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to wearing an official Major League Baseball uniform that shrunk in the dryer' kind of guys?"

It was clear to me that despite the advances since the Civil War, there were still tensions between the North and the South. I, therefore, avoided answering and slunk back to my son. "That's all they provide," I told him. As I recall, Jesse needed some time to process this major blow to his baseball career. Initially, it rattled him, but he recovered nicely.

There was another jolt ahead from Little League on a budget, however. And that jolt was headed right toward me.

It was the first game of the season. After weeks of nothing but practice, the time had come to actually play for real. My son's team looked resplendent in their official T-shirts, hats from Kmart, and assorted blue jeans, warm-up pants, and real baseball pants. One player wore a multi-colored pair of pants that looked like they came from MC Hammer's closet.

Prior to the start of the game, something transpired that I had never seen before. Honestly, I couldn't figure out what was going on. The teams were seated on their benches, the families and fans were seated on the bleachers behind home plate. The two opposing coaches, grown men dressed in jeans, golf shirts, and Kmart hats, stepped up to home plate. There they shook hands with each other and passed on encouraging words, "Let's have a good game!"

That was cool. I didn't have a problem with that custom at all. It was the next move that threw me. Once the

ceremonial handshake was completed, they turned and faced us. Searching diligently throughout the crowd, they each began saying, “I’ll take you” and “I’ll take you, sir,” while pointing to specific adults seated in the bleachers.

For some reason, this was making me nervous; I swallowed hard. *Why are they doing this?* I asked myself silently. I couldn’t figure it out. “What are they doing?” I whispered quietly to my daughter and younger sons.

They responded enthusiastically. “Dad, they’re picking umps!”

I let that thought settle in for a moment and then blurted out loud, “They don’t have umpires?!”

“Nope,” my kids replied. “They can’t afford to pay ’em, so they pick ’em right out of the crowd!”

I found this revelation to be particularly disconcerting. I began to have a panic attack of personal conscience. *How can they do this?* I asked myself. *How can they put a parent in such a pressure position? We love our kids, and we want their team to win. Therefore, would we ever call our kid out if it was a close call? If I was behind the plate and my son was the batter, would I ever call a strike? Worse yet, if my son was the pitcher, would he ever throw any balls? No, they would be strikes right down the old pipeline.*

This was a horrible predicament, my own personal morality tale. For the entire next week I paced around the house, frantic about the game on Saturday. “I know they’re gonna pick me. I know they’re gonna pick me,” I muttered, sounding the mantra of a tormented man. I had no idea

how it was going to go down, but I wanted to be ready for whatever came my way.

Saturday arrived, a day that must have been prearranged by God as one when all my worst nightmares were to come to pass. We watched the teams warm up, take batting practice, take fielding practice, then take their positions on the bench. The two coaches came to home plate, shook hands, offered each other “good game” wishes, and then turned to face the crowd.

“I’ll take you. I’ll take you, sir,” they began in earnest. After they chose two fellow adults, a coach fixed his focus on me. He pointed my direction and said very clearly, “I’ll take you, sir.”

Fortunately, I had seen that finger point at me a thousand times over the last seven sleepless nights. Without missing a beat, I leaned forward from my seat on the bleachers and responded to the coach with unmistakable crispness.

“Ich kann nicht verstehen was mitt mir los ist, aber Mutti sind immer noch kaput, suzammen.”

That’s right, I answered in German. And if you don’t speak German, I believe I said something like, “I cannot understand what is wrong with me but Mommy is broken, together!”

The coach looked at me like the proverbial deer in the headlights, his blank stare scaring me. Then he snapped out

“

I had seen that finger point at me a thousand times over the last seven sleepless nights.

”

of it, turned ever so slightly to look at my kids and asked, “Your dad doesn’t speak English?”

My kids glanced over at me with a telling look. “This is the moment we’ve all been waiting for our entire lives!” was my first interpretation of their expressions. Followed by “We could get him into so much trouble right now!”

I thought I saw just the slightest sly grin appear.

Inside I was actually screaming, *Help me, kids! Love me, kids! Bail me out here, kids!*

Well, thankfully, my kids didn’t hang me out to dry. When the coach asked them if I spoke English, they paused for maximum effect and then shrugged their shoulders, as if to say, “That’s a really good question, Coach!”

The coach couldn’t hold up the game any longer. “Well, kids, I can’t have someone out on the field who doesn’t speak English. Tell your dad we won’t need him.” And with that the coach began scouring for another adult in the crowd.

I was free from my moral quandary! Actually, I was off the hook, not only for that game, but for the entire season! Of course, my poor kids were interrogated by their friends and classmates. “Your dad doesn’t speak English? What does he do for a living?” To which they would honestly reply, “He’s a speaker.”

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The Lesson from Little League

Yes, my kids showed a lot of loyalty on that sunny Saturday, as well as a lot of concern and compassion for their old man. Let me add that I definitely don't condone lying as a way to get out of anything. My quick thinking in German wasn't the best example to set for my kids. But despite my ill-advised scheme, they taught me a lesson that day—choices are a part of how we love.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction: The Lesson from My Son's First Words

1. Do you know the first words you said as a child? Do you have a fun story about one of your relatives or friends that revolves around a baby's first words?
2. Have you ever been impacted by the words of a child? Has a child ever said something to you in complete innocence that made a big difference in your life?
3. How do you want to be remembered by those closest to you? What do you consider to be the most important things in life? Could you put them in four words?
4. What was the most significant truth you learned from this chapter? What difference will it make in your life?



Chapter One: The Lesson from Little League

1. Do you have a humorous story from your childhood or youth that is built around “love”?
2. How would you have defined love when you were younger? How would you define it now? If your definition has changed significantly, what has been the catalyst for that change?
3. How does this story help us understand the concept that God loves us, even when we are unlovable?
4. What was the most significant truth you learned from this chapter? What difference will it make in your life?



The First Important Thing: Love

1. Faith, hope, and love—the greatest of these is love. Would you agree with that assessment, or do you see one of the other two qualities as more important?
2. Have you personally experienced a relationship in which love continued to grow? What were some of the signs that love was maturing?