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**GARY SMALLEY  
JOHN TRENT<sup>Ph.D.</sup>**

THE  
**LANGUAGE**  
OF LOVE

*The Secret to Being  
Instantly Understood*

*Foreword by Greg Smalley, Ph.D., and Kari Trent Stageberg, M.B.A.*

**GARY SMALLEY**  
**JOHN TRENT** Ph.D.



THE  
LANGUAGE  
OF LOVE

*The Secret to Being  
Instantly Understood*



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FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

*The Language of Love: The Secret to Being Instantly Understood*

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## FOREWORD

# Word Pictures for a New Generation

*Greg Smalley, Ph.D., and Kari Trent Stageberg, MBA*

IT'S A DISTINCT HONOR for us to write the foreword for this new edition of *The Language of Love*. This book was a unique collaboration between our dads, Gary Smalley and John Trent, and it has proved to be one of their most enduring works.

For both of our fathers, the ideas in *The Language of Love* were never just theories. They are life principles that were and are being lived out every day. This is true not only in their ministries, but also, most importantly, in their homes. As we thought and prayed about this foreword, we kept coming back to key moments in our lives when our dads used word pictures to change everything.



Although I, Greg, am sad my dad isn't here to see *The Language of Love* take on new life, I think he always knew its message would remain relevant long after he was gone. In fact, he's probably smiling in heaven right now. I heard him talk about and use word pictures from the time I was small.

He was a master at using this technique to communicate and solve problems long before it became a part of his professional identity.

As you'll see in this book, the goal of using word pictures is to get both the *brain* and the *heart* involved. It's one of the most effective ways I've ever encountered of helping another person truly understand what I'm trying to say, not just at a cognitive level, but also at an emotional one.

I won't recount it here because the story is told later, but I remember a particular time when Dad used the imagery of college basketball—a sport for which we shared a strong passion—to help smooth over a rough spot in our father-son relationship. I was only a teenager at the time, and his sport-themed word picture helped me understand the source of our conflict at a much deeper level. It completely changed my way of thinking and helped pave the way to a resolution based on mutual love, respect, and understanding. In fact, the insights I gained from that one conversation have benefited me numerous times over the years as a husband and father.

Time and again, as a young, upcoming professional, I had the privilege of seeing my dad use word pictures to help heal relationships. His ability to get to the heart of the matter was unparalleled. One time I accompanied him to a studio where he was participating in a live radio call-in. At one point he said, live on the air, “Just call in and tell me your problem, and I'll show you how using word pictures can help resolve it.”

*Are you crazy?* I thought. *How are you going to come up*

*with an illustrative word picture for each and every person who calls in, live and on-the-spot?*

But that's exactly what he did. Women would call in and explain what they were trying to convey to their husbands. Every time, and without hesitation, Dad would creatively envision a scenario that would connect with the male brain. A few weeks later, he received letters from several women explaining how their situation had changed for the better as a result of using the word pictures he had provided.

Sometimes Dad would even use *real* pictures to further illustrate his points. In my office today, I have a giant pair of cardboard lips. No, this isn't my homage to the Rolling Stones. My dad often used these lips as a prop when he was talking about the power of the tongue to build up or to destroy (see Proverbs 18:21; James 3). They're a great reminder to this day.

In short, using word pictures was a way of life for my dad. He saw the power of this approach and used it, taught it, and modeled it for his kids. It's a surprisingly simple concept that Christ Himself demonstrated in His parables. It has made a difference in so many people's lives. And it has undoubtedly informed the way I interact with my wife, my kids, and my colleagues.



For me, Kari, and the rest of the Trent family, word pictures have been an integral part of our home as well. How clearly I remember a fateful day when I was just six years old and



learned that horses could teach me more than how to enjoy a trail ride.

I had just been sent to my room for a time-out. A few minutes earlier, I had ignored my mom's direct request to not play with her china teapot. When she left the room, I decided my imaginary tea party was incomplete and needed the teapot anyway. As I reached up to grab it, I knocked it off the shelf, and the handle broke as it came crashing to the floor.

I was in my room, convinced that my parents were going to ship me off to live with the neighbors. Then my dad came in, carrying two of my plastic horses. I looked at him hopefully, praying he had somehow come into my room to play with me instead of punish me.

What he actually did, however, was even better.

"Kari, can I tell you a story?" he asked in his gentle but serious voice.

I nodded cautiously. His tone was so different from his usual joyful tenor that I couldn't help but sit up straighter and lock my full attention on him.

"Here is a little horse and a mommy horse," he said, holding up the set. "They live in a beautiful field, and the little horse can run anywhere it wants to as long as it stays inside the fence.

"But one day, the little horse decided it wanted to get some grass on the other side of the fence. So it waited until the mommy horse wasn't looking, and then it tried to jump over."

All of a sudden, I realized he was talking about me and the teapot.

“The little horse made it over, but it damaged the fence—and the mommy horse’s trust—in the process.”

There was more to the story, but I don’t remember it. All I remember was thinking in that moment, *Wow, I never want to make my mom not trust me again.*

In fact, the story was so effective that it became an on-going word picture in our home. The little horse even grew into a teenage horse and an adult horse, and it’s now a married horse when I go to my dad for advice on how to better love my husband, Joey.

While I’ve watched my dad use countless word pictures to help couples, families, and even businesses understand and relate to one another, it’s his continued use at home and in his daily life that has created a legacy my sister, Laura, and I try to emulate every day. Later in this book, I’ll share the most powerful word picture my dad ever used with me.

Both Greg and I feel strongly that if you want someone to “get” you when you’re trying to convey how you’re feeling, you need to use a word picture. This updated version of *The Language of Love* will show you how to do just that.

We also hope that as you read this, including the stories our fathers tell about their successes and failures in communication, you’ll be encouraged by their imperfection, genuine hearts, and the truly powerful tools outlined in the upcoming pages. May this book be as big a blessing to you and your most important relationships as it has been to us and ours.



VERSION 2.0

## A New Update for a Timeless Tool

*John Trent, Ph.D.*

WHO DOESN'T LIKE UPDATES? Okay, I know some people *loathe* them, feeling they're just profit driven, a shining example of built-in obsolescence.

*I love updates.*

If it's the right kind of update, you get something new. Something filled with incredibly cool features. And it makes you *faster*, which makes you seem even smarter. I think you'll find all that in this update of our book.

You'll find "cooler" features in this updated book and in the supporting materials at [www.encouragingwords.com](http://www.encouragingwords.com). All this can help you understand more quickly the power of a word picture. And it will help you be better able to carve out the very word picture you'll need to make a difference in your own life and the lives of others. Plus, you'll benefit

from years of feedback and instruction that have poured in as this concept has been taught at seminars, to graduate counseling students, and to workplace and military teams. We've also heard from hundreds of people who've shared with us their stories of how words can, in fact, mend, change, and strengthen hearts and lives.

But for all the helpful updates and additions to this updated book, there is something missing that I wish wasn't the case.



When my friend Gary Smalley and I wrote our first books individually, we each wrote them by hand. Then Gary and I teamed up to help families. The first book we wrote together was called *The Blessing*. I typed it on an IBM Selectric. Believe me, that loud electric hum and the cool spinning typing ball were a *huge* upgrade from handwriting.

But that was *nothing* compared to the upgrade that happened next. It took place right before we wrote the first version of this book, *The Language of Love*.

At that time, our ministry had (and mine still has) a great friend in Jim McGuire. Back then, Jim was working toward becoming the head of IT for American Express. He would leave there to become the head of IT at eBay. And he recently ended a long and distinguished career as head of IT for Charles Schwab. In other words, he's a tech pro's pro.

Throughout his career, while he worked on every kind

of computer and server, Jim was a huge Mac fan. And for as long as we've been close friends, he and his wife, Pam, have been huge fans of helping families.

Which meant that in 1989, Jim showed up at my house with an incredible new upgrade. He was convinced I should junk the typewriter I was planning to use to write the book Gary and I were starting. He thought he'd found something transformational that could help me capture the words we wanted to share far more quickly. Something that would allow me to edit sentences without having to type the whole page over.

When he put that “something” in front of me, it was jaw-dropping. Space age. Inconceivable.

*It was an Apple Macintosh SE. Model M5011. It had a screaming 1 MB of RAM. An incredibly huge 20 MB hard drive. And . . . wait for it . . . a sweet nine-inch monochrome (meaning black-and-white) screen. All this weighing in at a measly 17 pounds!*

For 1989—believe me—that 1 MB of computing power was *fast!* Forget that your smartphone today likely has more than a thousand times as much computing power. Back then, this desktop was an update beyond belief! It was heaven for your fingers—the ones wearing out from using a typewriter and smeared with white paint from “whiting out” all your mistakes.

Gary and I did, in fact, get this book written far quicker than our first book. And this book helped more families than we ever dreamed it could. (And we had dreamed and prayed big prayers!)



More than a few years have passed since Jim showed up with that upgrade to help in writing the first version of this book. And on March 6, 2016, my good friend Gary Smalley passed away after a long illness.

Gary was, hands down, one of the most loving, important figures *ever* in Christian counseling, marriage ministry, and writing. Being totally objective, if there were a Mount Rushmore for people who “lived it out” at home, and who helped *thousands* of marriages and families be more loving and lasting, Gary’s likeness would be carved right up there.

All this means that I don’t have Gary, my fellow “Otter,” to help me update our books. But we talked about this when my daughter Kari (named after Gary’s oldest child and daughter, Kari) and I went to Houston to see Gary and Norma toward the end of his life. His name will always be on this book and any future edition. And you’ll notice, throughout this book and any of our other joint projects that may get updated, that I’m going to keep saying “we.” Gary’s voice and love are still a part of me and the books we did together. You’ll hear his words still coming through loud and clear.

I am grateful I can still talk to Norma, Gary’s wife, and with his son Greg, now the head of marriage ministry at Focus on the Family. (I also stay in touch with Michael Smalley and Kari Smalley Gibson, who are carrying on Gary’s ministry.)

And I’m incredibly grateful for my wife, Cindy, and her

continued love for me and our family. Our daughter Kari Trent Stageberg works with me at StrongFamilies.com. And our younger girl, Laura Trent Morris, is a trauma nurse and wonderful daughter, sister, and wife. Both of them work alongside their husbands, Joey and Chris, to change the world for Jesus.

*Finally, I'm grateful for one more thing that hasn't changed.*

The same Jim McGuire who showed up with a 17-pound Mac in 1989 showed up again a few days ago at the time of this writing.

*This time with a 2017 iPad Pro.*

It's space gray. Two hundred fifty-six GB (1 GB is 1,000 MBs). It has a 10.5-inch LED-backlit multi-touch retina display showing off thousands of colors with beyond-crystal-clear resolution. It processes *everything* so fast, it's what you find when you look up the definition of *screaming*. It's got incredible cameras and speakers. And all that weighs in at a whopping *1.03 pounds*.

As I hold my new iPad and type these words, I think back to how Gary and I stared at that first Mac that Jim McGuire had set in front of us and marveled at the future in our hands. Here again, another Apple arrived just in time, just like the last time, to help me finish this updated version of a timeless communication tool.

*Version 2.0 of The Language of Love for a new generation.*

And remember, at encouragingwords.com you'll find additional resources, including another 101 word pictures that others have used successfully. You'll also find a section



on how word pictures can be used, unfortunately, to harm others. For those of you who have experienced verbal abuse, you'll gain insight into why such "pictures" have been so lastingly hurtful. You'll also find a study/discussion guide to help you go deeper into the themes of this book on your own or in a small group.

My prayer today, as it was years ago when Gary and I would pray together, is that this book will prove timeless for you as you learn to handle well one of God's greatest communication tools. May the Lord cause your words and word pictures to explode with help and hope for all those you seek to love like Jesus, helping you grow closer to them than ever before, *starting today*.

**JOHN TRENT, PH.D.**

President, StrongFamilies.com  
and Gary D. Chapman Chair of Marriage and Family  
Ministry and Therapy, Moody Theological Seminary





## CHAPTER 1

# Don't Just Say More of the Same

“WE DON'T TALK ANYMORE!”

“That's ridiculous!” I (John) said. “We talk all the time!”

“But not about what we *need* to talk about. What's important to *me*. What's important for us!”

“Then drive with me to my softball game! If it's that big a deal, you can talk to me on the way to the game about anything you want!”

But Cindy, my wife, wouldn't go to that game. And soon, to any game.

I was convinced she was just “emotional” or purposely not explaining what she meant.

For more than a year of marriage, conversations like that

went on and on. We talked all the time about how we needed to communicate with each other. *But we never did.* Cindy grew more and more hurt and lonely. And I grew more and more angry and lonely.

And then the day came when things blew up . . . but in an amazing way.

That day, Cindy used a word picture to change my life—and our marriage.



I didn't grow up in a Christian home. My family (a single-parent family with three boys under the age of three when my angry, alcoholic dad bailed out) didn't go to church on Sunday. We went to the library.

My mom never remarried. She was a great person. She did her best to keep food on the table, especially with no extended family and three active, growing boys who were always hungry. But as the years passed, I started getting more and more angry and defiant. Kicked out of one grade school (the religious school Mom thought would help me). Suspended in high school. I was a high school kid in the '60s. And if you remember the '60s—you weren't there. Or at least I wasn't there for most of it.

But then, out of no place I'd been looking, Almighty God showed up. He was wrapped in the 6'4" frame of an ex-Chico State offensive tackle, an amazing person and Young Life leader named Doug Barram. He would show up at football practice. Go to my wrestling meets. By the end of high

school, Doug had led me, half the football team, and my entire family to Jesus.

Cindy grew up in a big-time alcoholic home. So much hurt and dysfunction strangled any joy from her past. She desperately wanted her family to get help. In searching for anything that could give her hope, she followed a boyfriend to church. The boyfriend quit going. Cindy stayed. She soon came to know and love Jesus, and over the years she's led several family members to Him as well.

Many incredible changes took place in both Cindy's and my life after we came to know Jesus. They just didn't seem to make any difference in our marriage.

Our courtship, on the other hand, was perfect. We never argued. We talked about everything. We prayed together. We figured married life was going to be a dream.

But then we got married. And in no time, we grew more and more like the worst versions of who we'd been *before* we'd come to faith.

Cindy used to accuse me of staying up at night to learn new ways to frustrate her. That wasn't true. I didn't have to take lessons or read up on how to be crummy at communicating. It just came naturally.

I could do frustrating. Really well. I could do angry. All the time. I could do rolling my eyes. And spitting out hurting words. I could do lots of things I didn't want to do and hadn't done in courtship.

What I couldn't do—or didn't know how to do—was listen well to Cindy in a way where she felt heard. Valued. Or

speak to her in a way that reached her heart. I didn't know her, even though I was living with her every day. I didn't explore her because I had no clue what that meant or how to do it. And after more than a year of that kind of growing apart, things were about as bad as they could get.

Until the morning Cindy served me a word picture for breakfast.

Cindy's dad was a plasterer—when he wasn't plastered. As a swimming pool plasterer in Arizona, he would be up really early most days in order to beat the heat. That meant Cindy and her mother were up early as well, cooking breakfast for him and, later, also for her brothers who followed him into the trade.

Cindy kept up the early rising and making breakfast for me when we got married. I came to expect it. But one morning, after another bad night, I walked into the kitchen, and there on my plate *wasn't* breakfast.

There was a book.

No bacon or eggs. No muffin or toast. Just a large book sitting on my plate, in front of the chair where I sat. In fact, it was one of my counseling books. A huge textbook on advanced psychopathology.

Did I forget to mention that I was in my doctoral program *in marriage and family counseling*? Or that I was also working *full-time at a church* on the ministry team? And yet if you came home with us, where it counted, you'd see our relationship was worse than on the rocks.

But then Cindy rocked my world with that book.

“So what’s this?” I asked, picking up the book and not even trying to conceal my contempt. “*This is breakfast?*”

“No.” Cindy said. “*That’s me.*”

She let her words hang in the air.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

If Cindy was trying to make some point, I really didn’t get it. Actually, I was so prideful and blind at the time, my first thought had been—because it was a book on really bad emotional disorders—that Cindy had finally realized how ridiculous she had been acting for months. She was finally getting ready to apologize to me.

Instead, however, she did something much worse. She explained what she really meant.

“You know how last semester you were taking this class?” she said. “And you were reading this book almost every night? Taking notes on it? Really digging into it? Trying to learn all that was there? Not just for a test, but because it might help you help someone someday?”

I nodded my head tentatively.

“But what happened to that book now that you passed the course? Now that you’re on to another semester?”

She didn’t have to say. I already knew . . . I was using it as a doorstop in my study.

“You tossed it aside. You don’t pick it up anymore. You used to read every page. But today you just use it as a doorstop. It’s not important to you now.”

And then without waiting for any comment, she continued, “That book is me ever since we got married. When we



were dating, you couldn't wait to pick me up. To read every page. To think and act like I was important to your future. But now we're married, and you've moved on to another semester. And I'm like that book holding open your door, while you walk in and do all the things that are really important to you."

I was a fighter. A linebacker. A college wrestler. But her words blew away all my defenses. I could not understand how a *picture* could take me apart emotionally.

My head dropped. I didn't just *hear* her words. I *felt* them. I saw, really saw for the first time, what she had said. She'd said similar things at least a hundred times, using everyday words. But I'd never really understood. Even when she would end up in tears, it didn't emotionally connect with me or move me.

But *one* word picture—in this case, the right one for me—and I not only "got it," but it stopped me in my tracks and turned my heart in a different direction.

As hard as it was, I thank God for that morning. For Cindy's being wise enough to do something *different* and not just say the same words, over and over, at different volume levels.

There is something very true in human relationships: *More of the same never brings change.*

I have said those very words to hundreds of couples I've counseled over the past 40 years. But I first learned what they meant *when Cindy chose to do something different in the way she talked to me.*

By the grace of God, after a long time, I finally lifted my head and asked Cindy two things that morning, sitting on that kitchen chair.

The first was, “Will you forgive me?” The second was, “So if you’re that book, what is *one* thing I could do with or for you *today* that would be like me picking up this book and reading it again?”

And so began our first real conversation. The first of what would become many talks about what health *could* look like in our home. What loving like Jesus *might* look like if we began trusting Him. About what our life together *should* look like if we were stepping toward each other, not away.

*All from one word picture.*

That was 40 years ago. Still today, I truly believe Jesus was in that room with us that morning. Cindy told me later it was totally unplanned. As she stood at the stove, she just felt strongly that she should go get the book off the floor in the study and put it on my plate.

She may not have had a name for it, but what she served up that morning was a *picture* instead of just everyday words. And as a result, I could finally see and feel and even find a way toward her and forward from where we’d been so long.

Neither Cindy nor I knew that morning all the clinical, historical, biblical, relational, and neurological reasons why emotional word pictures are so incredibly effective.

- > We didn’t know there were countless places and ways to come up with a word picture.

- > Or that most of the world's greatest communicators have used this tool to move hearts and, in some cases, entire nations, for good or for evil.
- > Nor did I realize just how often, or how powerfully, pictures were woven throughout Scripture to help us understand (and *feel* in our heart of hearts) that *Jesus really loves us* and to show us *how we can love as He does*.

And I certainly didn't know, on that "book for breakfast" morning, that a few years later, I'd meet a guy named Gary Smalley—someone who would become my best friend as we worked together for a decade, and someone who was already a Jedi Knight when it came to using word pictures in counseling and encouraging his own family and others.

You'll learn all that and more in the pages that follow, and now online as well at [www.encouragingwords.com](http://www.encouragingwords.com).

As we start this journey, know that your marriage doesn't need to be as "on the rocks," as Cindy's and mine was, to learn to use word pictures. Once you finish this book, you'll see all kinds of ways in which word pictures can help you every day and in almost every facet of communication.

For example, a word picture can be a great conversation starter. It will help you clarify your thoughts and feelings and express them in a way that's *heard* and better understood. It's also a great way to praise and encourage someone. In each case, it will help you plant the point you want to make in another mind and heart memorably and powerfully.

There will be times, however, when you *need* a word picture to praise, to encourage, to lovingly correct, or to build a bridge the two of you can use to step toward each other in the tough times.

There will be times when your friends need you to speak life and truth and blessing into their lives, and they're *not* going to hear it if you just use everyday words.

There will also come a time when your children or grandchildren will need you to share a word picture with them to keep their lives from going off track or to point them toward a special future.

Likewise, if you're serious about moving ahead at work, or simply doing life well with others, don't wait for someone to serve you a word picture for breakfast. Take the lead to learn this powerful way to keep from being a crummy communicator. *Don't just say more of the same.*