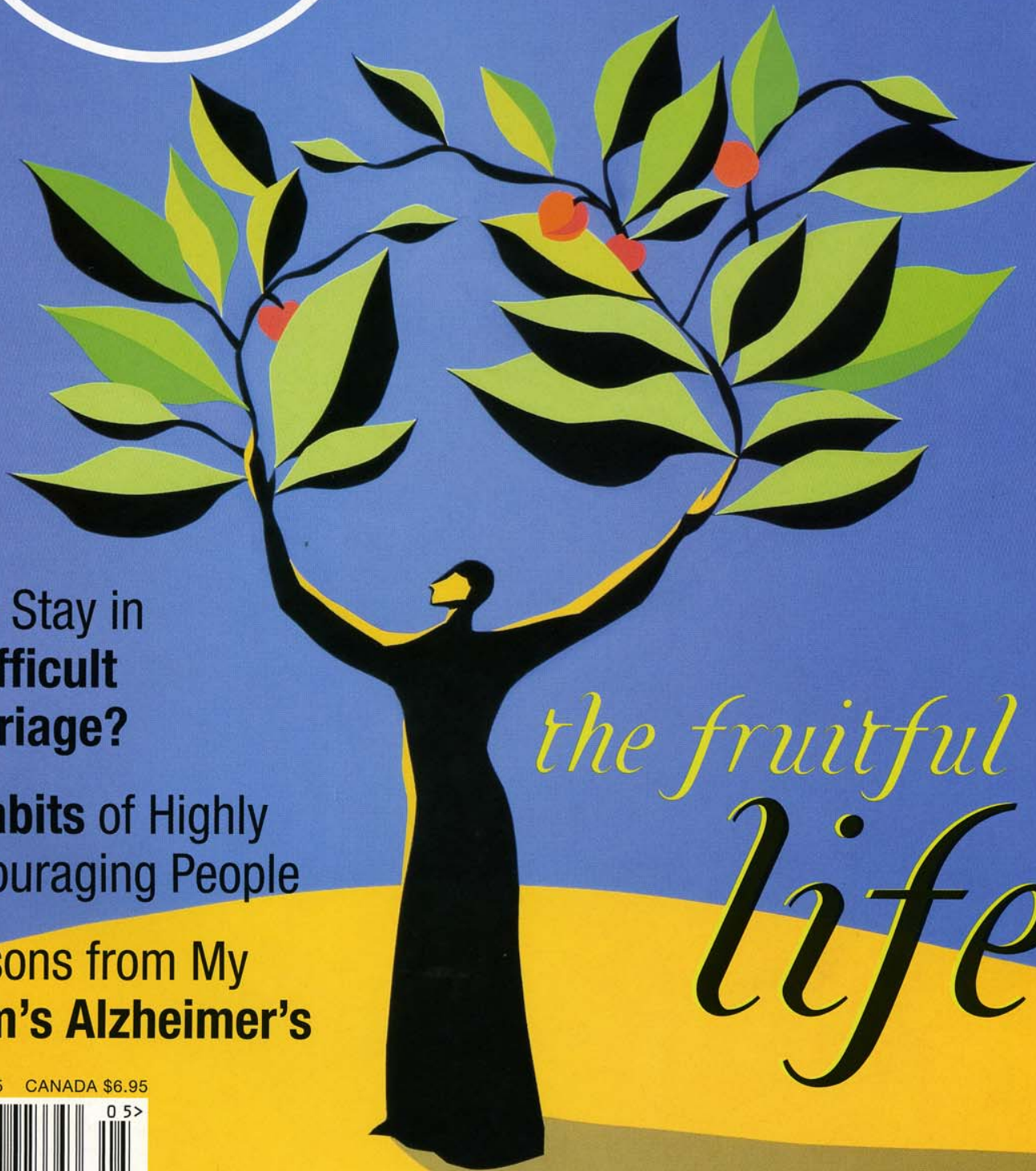


May/June 2005 Issue 147

DJ

Discipleship Journal®
HELPING YOU GROW IN CHRIST



Why Stay in
a **Difficult
Marriage?**

6 Habits of Highly
Encouraging People

Lessons from My
Mom's Alzheimer's

*the fruitful
life*

U.S. \$4.95 CANADA \$6.95



www.discipleshipjournal.com

PLUS: Small-Group Ideas | Your 2-Month Bible Reading Plan | Hands-on Help for Disciplers

Just What They Need:





Ways to Encourage Others

As I hurried toward the exit, I noticed the grieving woman standing alone in the corner of the sanctuary, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. I knew she had just lost her mother to cancer, but the lengthy church service had made me late for my son's baseball game. So, resolving to give her a call when it was more convenient, I pressed on with my urgent agenda. My good intentions slipped my mind, however, in the rush of the week's activity.

God addressed my behavior the following Sunday when the members of our Bible study took a personality test. I was categorized with a "Barnabas" disposition. Since I wasn't exactly sure who Barnabas was, this discovery prompted some research.

ILLUSTRATION BY PHIL @ I2I ART



by **Debora M. Coty**

Could I, too, be considered a "Son [or daughter] of Encouragement"?

My investigation revealed that Barnabas was one of the first converts to Christianity at Pentecost. He was known for his selfless generosity, his dedication to spreading the gospel, and his ability to settle disputes among believers. Though his name was Joseph, the apostles called him Barnabas, which translates as "Son of Encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

This description made me pause: Could I, too, be considered a "Son [or daughter] of Encouragement"? *Me*—the person so consumed with productivity that she often failed to put people before tasks? The person who overlooked a suffering woman who needed a friend's comfort?

Still, the test said I possessed Barnabas qualities. Instead of sloughing it off as a misdiagnosis, I determined to prove myself worthy of being called an encourager.

Encouraging others is not only for those with "Barnabas" personalities or gifts. The Bible clearly speaks to *all* believers: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11). How do we carry out that command? My journey toward becoming a Barnabas has led me to the following six approaches that uplift believers and nonbelievers alike.



Provide materially.

We can encourage others tangibly by meeting their physical needs. Members of the early church excelled at this form of encouragement (Acts 4:32-35), and Barnabas is singled out as one who sold property to provide for the needy (vv. 36-37). By keeping my eyes open and listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, I have encountered countless opportunities to follow his example.

I once observed that the hard-working mother of four young sons wore the same threadbare sweater to church each Sunday. Tight finances barely kept the growing boys in clothes. The Lord led me to mail her (anonymously) a small sum earmarked for a sweater, accompanied by a note extolling her example as a Christian mother. My heart flooded with delight when I saw her the following Sunday, face glowing and shoulders a little straighter beneath a new blue sweater.

Drop a line.

One of the best—and easiest—forms of encouragement is sending cards to those who are hurting or discouraged. You can purchase inexpensive packages of cards and jot notes that say, "God loves you!" and "I care."

Although phone calls and emails are certainly welcomed, people especially appreciate cards because they can soak up the message privately without feeling pressured to respond immediately. And people can reread cards as often as needed.



Reach out and touch.

Touch is another way to communicate affection and support: a 30-second shoulder massage to a weary spouse; a gentle touch to the arm of a friend as she vents her frustration about her job search; brief hugs to an elderly neighbor to say, "You are special to me." Your first efforts at using touch to uplift others may feel awkward and may elicit surprise or confusion from those you are attempting to encourage. But if you don't give up, tactile communication will eventually feel more natural. (Use discretion with the opposite sex so that your actions won't be misinterpreted.) Your relationships with family and friends may even deepen through the warmth and support your touch of encouragement provides.

Listen up.

Perhaps the most effective way to encourage someone is to listen actively. Active listening includes inviting body language, thoughtful comments or questions to clarify what was said, and follow-up responses motivated by genuine concern. This differs from passive listening, which is characterized by poor eye contact, few questions or comments (a sign of apathy), and a quickness to change the subject.

In my work as an occupational therapist specializing in upper extremity rehabilitation, I encounter patients suffering from physical pain, debilitating injuries, and depression due to life-altering circumstances over which they have little control. Many are also experiencing ⇒





financial hardship. I am unable to solve their profound problems. The Lord asks me only to listen, offer gentle encouragement, and reflect the hope of Christ to these people who may never meet Him in church.

Those in less devastating circumstances deserve the same consideration. By making an effort to listen actively to others' worries, regardless of how big or small, we allow the Holy Spirit's encouragement to reach people. When I show genuine concern toward others, they are often more open to hearing about what God is doing in my own life, which brings Him glory and honor.

Empathize.



We have all experienced sorrow, pain, discouragement, or loss. These experiences can become our richest resource for encouraging others who are going through similar difficulties. Paul tells us in 2 Cor. 1:3-4 that God never wastes a hurt. He comforts us in our affliction so that we will in turn be able to comfort

others.

Having had six miscarriages, T can honestly feel the pain of a woman who has just lost her precious, unborn child. Praying *for* her and *with* her is a unique ministry that God has prepared me for by my own losses.

My friend Betty also gave me an opportunity to practice encouragement through empathy. She still talks of how much the gift of roses from my garden meant to her after the death of her beloved dog several years ago. I knew from personal experience how heart-wrenching the loss of a pet can be, so I had treated Betty's bereavement with respect and empathy. Betty has since made a special effort to encourage others in the same way.

Give of your time.

True encouragers must be willing to be used whenever God places unexpected opportunities in our paths—even when it interrupts our busy schedules.



A planner by nature, this is a daily struggle for me.

Interruptions grate against the schedules and deadlines that are ingrained in my lifestyle. I must remind myself that the good Samaritan in Lk. 10:30-37, our example of helping a neighbor in need, willingly stopped mid-journey and altered his itinerary to assist a stranger. Although the wounded man was his cultural enemy, the Samaritan forked over a bundle of unbudgeted money and rerouted his trip to ensure that this man received sufficient help.

Time can be the most difficult but most uplifting gift we can give. Offering others our undivided attention and physical presence greatly affirms their personal worth,

I was touched when my childhood friend Amy, whom I hadn't seen in 10 years, drove 400 miles to surprise my husband and me on our wedding anniversary. This colossal effort on her part, as a single mom with a full-time job, made my spirits soar. I still bask to this day in the memory of the deep love and encouragement her sacrificial visit conveyed.

Great is your reward.

Does encouragement carry a price tag? Yes. It can cost us time, physical and emotional energy, money, and our own urgent agendas. I've discovered that becoming a Barnabas requires me to renew my commitment daily and to remain ever open to the Holy Spirit's promptings. Yet the cost is worth it. For just as kindness begets kindness, encouragement begets encouragement. The encouragement we pour into the lives of those around us will spill over into the lives of countless others, even as it buoy our own spirits. Proverbs 11:25 states, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed." When we encourage others, we cannot help but be encouraged ourselves. (D)

about the author



DEBORA M. COTY is an occupational therapist, piano teacher, and freelance writer. She also directs the children's drama ministry at her church and plays in two tennis leagues. One of her favorite books is Christy by Catharine Marshall. She read it nine times as a teenager and named her daughter after the title character.