

Relationships INcourage

Infusing into the heart the
courage to be strong, bold,
determined, and persistent

an eBook by
Kathryn C. Lang

Relationship INcouraged

*Simple ideas that will infuse relationships with the courage they need to take
that first step (and then the next)*

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Relationships – INcouraged

Relationships InCouraged – One Understanding Encouragement

I read that exact saying in a card recently. I had finally taken on the challenge to finish sorting through my mom's stuff – which happened to include a kazillion greeting cards. One of the greeting cards had an adorable rainbow and included that saying. I felt like – in that moment – I was connected with my mom once again.

She gave me some encouragement and some hope even though she hasn't been with me in over four years. Encouragement comes in a wide variety of forms and formulas. It includes words, images, sounds, sites, smells, and tastes – sometimes in combinations and sometimes alone. Encouragement can be small but will grow to something powerful even from the tiniest seed.

My mom was a master at encouraging others. I can remember receiving daily cards and letters from her when I was off at summer camp. She sent packages and cards when I was away at college. The stacks of greeting cards and stationary that I have uncovered were the perfect reminder that I was not the only recipient of her encouragement.

I will also say that my mom struggled in finding her own encouragement – especially after she got sick for the last time. The hurts of the past crushed her heart and I often noticed her lost in a cloud of discouragement – it wasn't a cloud she shared but it was one that haunted her own being.

I learned from her how to be an encouragement to others but I have also gained some insight into growing up my own encouragement.

First – I have to understand encouragement – because it is more than just cheerleading from the sideline (although it can include that).

Second – I have to become encouraged in my own journey – because I will always struggle to be an encouragement when I am haunted by discouragement myself.

Third – I have to develop a habit of sharing encouragement because it will never have a chance to work if it is never given away.

Fourth – I have to learn how to recognize discouragement in myself and in those around me. Sometimes the encouragement comes from that recognition.

Fifth – I have to utilize the tools for dispelling discouragement because there are ways I can help grow it away.

I have always considered myself to be a natural born encourager – much like my mom. I seemed to know when to make the right phone call or to send the right letter or just to say the right thing. More importantly, I made it a habit to follow through with what I thought needed to be done.

Several years ago, my friend Steve described me as “God’s cheerleader.” I didn’t like hearing that. I didn’t want to be a cheerleader. I wanted to be a couch. The more I mulled over his suggestion, the more I realized he was right – but I am not just a cheerleader or a coach or even a fellow player – there are so many elements to encouragement that it is an ever moving and twisting process and I have to move and twist to keep up.

Understanding exactly what encouragement is and can be will go a long ways towards helping me keep up.

1. Define encouragement – because it may not be what you think it is. The definition of encouragement may even change from one person to the next or one situation to the next. We are looking for the deep down definition or the heart of what is encouragement.
2. Recognize encouragement – learn to see it in action. Different people prefer different methods and different methods from different people – so it can be a challenge just to pin down encouragement at times.
3. Avoid the Nagging edge – because there can be a fine line between encouragement and nagging at times. Encouragement can serve as a reminder or a reminder can be a nagging deterrent – and the difference between the two is smaller than an eyelash.
4. One size fits all – this isn’t true for clothes and it definitely isn’t true for encouragement. Every person will need unique encouragement because every person is unique.
5. Quiet encouragement – because sometimes the still and quiet can be the best encouragement. Utilizing no words (and not even any actions) can be the right encouragement at the right time.

It is a learning process – even for those of us that are natural born encouragers.

The more I share about growing encouragement, the more I learn about encouragement. It is big and changing and ever expanding. Encouragement has no limits or boundaries. The most consistent thing I found when it comes to encouragement is that when I give it I get it. I find encouragement multiplies and spreads making it multiply even more.

When I begin to understand encouragement and all of its shifting and changing elements then I will be in a better position to give encouragement the wings it needs to fly.

I ran track in high school and somehow I got talked into running the two mile. For those who are wondering, that is a LONG way to race. Not as far as a marathon, mind you, but still a nice little clip – especially when you aren’t all that serious about running in the first place.

I remember one of the first times I ran the two mile, how quiet it would be on the far end of the track, away from the crowds, with nothing but the sound of feet on track and breaths desperate to keep up with the pace. We would come around the end of the track and there would be a few people there, cheering us on, and I would feel a surge of adrenaline rise up in me. The more the roar of the crowd rose, the faster my feet seem to move. Then I would hear my dad – who had

been coaching me some on the weekends – he would always tell me to kick it in right at the end of our run – to dig down and find that extra ump necessary to propel me across the finish line.

The encouragement made a difference – but it was more my dad’s belief that I would have it in me to “kick it” than all of that roar of the crowd combined.

Each person will find encouragement in different ways and each need will present with different encouragement focuses as well. The more I understand encouragement the more I will be in a position to provide encouragement.

1. Define encouragement. There is a reason I refer to it as InCouraged – despite word’s objections every time I right it. Writing it out as I N reminds me that the process of encouragement is about instilling courage in others. The word breaks down to “en” which means into and “courage” which according to the Strong’s Concordance means to be strong, bold, determined, and to persist in.

When I invest in the words, the actions, and the attitudes to encourage another heart then I am literally investing in the elements that will infuse into that heart the courage to be strong, bold, determined, and persistent. That’s some pretty powerful stuff and also some pretty important stuff as well.

2. Recognize encouragement. Not everyone sees encouragement the same way. My dad and I are not allowed to sit next to each other at ball games – or I should say that my dad will not sit next to me at ball games. I am too loud in my encouragement and it makes him uncomfortable. He sees what I do as noise, but I have had others tell me that they heard my words of hope and encouragement and that it helped them take that next shot, or step, or swing. It is like me hearing the sound of the crowd as I would run around the last turn of the track.

Encouragement – at its core – is anything that lifts up, stirs up, cheers up or in some way motivates or inspires the hearts encountered. Encouragement is ALL about the positivity and the positive – even a coach that is correcting a player will get more from that player if encouragement is applied.

3. Know the Nagging Edge. It can be a thin line between encouragement and nagging – especially when you live in a house full of men. I know they are capable of getting up out of bed (and some days that is all I am encouraging them to do) but by the fifth time in their room I know I have moved from encouraging them to do what I know they can do to nagging them to get it done.

I think the best way to recognize the line is to know that if I am trying to get something out of the effort then I am probably already over into the nagging side of things. Encouragement is about the other person and not about me.

4. Realize one size does NOT fit all. Despite what some may say, NOTHING is one size fits all. I have ordered more than one garment that was described in this crazy manor and although it did

technically fit my five foot frame, it did NOT look like it looked in the catalogue. I have to do some hemming and trimming to make it fit right. Maybe that is a better way to say it.

One way of encouraging is not right for all people.

I read a book about romancing my husband and the writer made the suggestion that I live little notes around his car or dressing area. I stayed up one night and cut out little hearts and wrote short notes on each one. I filled his lunch box (since I got up each morning to make him lunch) and then I went out and stuck the hearts around his car. He left for work but came back after a minute or two and threw away the hearts he found in the car. I cringed a little wondering how he would react when he opened his lunch later.

It wasn't that my husband was being rude; it was that what I considered encouraging only served to him as a reminder that he was not where he should be in his life.

5. Practice quiet encouragement. I have learned this from that experience with my husband – and from several similar encounters with him over the years. Sometimes all he needs (and all her really wants) from me is an attentive ear. I close my computer or turn away from my desk and make him the focus. I don't comment on what he is sharing – although I may nod along or repeat what he just said so that he knows I am engaged in listening – but for the most part I am quiet. Sometimes making the choice not to say anything is the encouragement that is needed.

The more I invest in understanding encouragement the more I will be prepared to offer the right words, actions, or attitudes to infuse the hearts I encounter with the courage they need.

Foundations for Understanding Encouragement

Learning how to instill courage can provide a great weapon to those who will receive. Courage makes it possible to go up against giants. Courage makes it possible to stand strong even in the midst of the storm. Courage makes it possible to step out even when I don't know where the step is leading.

I need to be INcourageD if I am going to get through and I know that I am not alone. We all need to receive the courage to keep on going – sometimes we need the courage just to get up and start going.

When I take the time to understand encouragement and the power that grows from it then I will be in a better position to offer encouragement to those that I encounter.

Paul was a great encourager, but he was also great about sharing the secret to encouragement with all those that he met. He wanted to not just share encouragement but to pass on the ability and the desire to share encouragement.

In Hebrews 3, Paul talks about how we need to be invested in encouraging each other every day because it is through encouragement that we avoid the trappings of sin. So not only is encouragement providing boldness and persistency, but it serves as a sin blocker as well.

That is an amazing reason to grow encouragement every chance we get.

Paul talks more about encouragement in Hebrews 10 when he says that we need to consider HOW we can encourage each other – or how we can spur each other on in this journey to live out love and possibility focus. He reminds us that it happens together – in relationships – which is why we should never give up meeting together. We are stronger when we are in this together and we are more encouraged when we are moving forward in relationships.

Besides, encouragement is catching and ever expanding – which means it never runs out and only becomes more available as it is shared. Proverbs 11:25 – according to the NIV translation – puts it this way: “A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” Or, according to the Kathryn translation – when I am willing to infuse courage in the hearts I encounter then my own heart becomes infused with courage.

In Thessalonians 5:11, Paul again reminds us to be an encouragement to each other – he says to encourage and build up on another as we have been doing. Encouragement emboldens each of us to be more – to be the God design we are called to be. It incites the spirit to reach towards that impossible dream dwelling in the heart.

I need to be investing in courage and when I recognize that courage is the willful act of giving to others the courage then need for this journey then I begin to break through any barriers that might have hindered the process before.

Encouragement is not dependent on attitude, reactions, or emotions – although the choice to provide encouragement can affect them. Encouragement is a conscious decision and a commitment to think of others.

Relationships InCouraged – two Becoming Encouraged

Each day offers a unique set of challenges, whether that day comes up in the random schedule of summer or the set schedule of the school year. It seems that no matter how many times I write out my schedule, the rest of the world refuses to recognize the schedule and comply with my design.

So, it can be easy for me to get annoyed or to even slip into the despair of discouragement – unless I am fully invested in encouragement. Encouragement is not hiding away – it is standing in the streets yelling for my attention just waiting to be joined with me on this incredible journey. It has even been known to sneak up a behind me and tackle me with its joyous exuberance.

I will never have to look hard to find encouragement and growing up encouragement in my life becomes even easier when I invest in building and maintaining an encouragement well.

Several years ago, I began keeping a record of the positive and inspiring things that others said about me (or prayed over me). I wrote out what the evangelist said when he prayed over me and

my husband – how I was a tornado and I needed to keep things stirred up. Not everyone would appreciate that prayer, but it inspired me to keep on doing what I felt I was supposed to be doing (and I have).

I have also started the habit of printing out the positive things that people send to me through emails or private messages. I include the date and the person so I can hold on to that specific encouragement that the words provided. If I find the words especially inspiring then I will even put it in my purse so I can have it with me at all times – because you never know when you are going to need a little extra encouragement for your day.

Some of these I have posted on my “Wall of Inspiration” so that I can look around while I’m working and see the support and encouragement that others have offered and I can be renewed for the journey. Others have been placed in my study folder so that they are with me when I am focused on the why and what of this journey.

That path to encouragement will be unique for each person because there is not two of me and there are not two of you – because we are each unique the way we can be encouraged and the way we seek encouragement will also be unique.

I don’t have all the answers, but I have some a few suggestions that should keep me going for a bit. I’m always looking for new encouragement growth opportunities, so be sure to give me a shout out and let me know your idea.

Here are some things that can be used to begin growing up encouragement.

1. Be a good steward – I am most encouraged when I am healthy, my schedule is balanced, and my home and life are orderly – and these only come when I make the choices that put me in a position of being the good steward over all aspects of my life.
2. Create an inspiration wall or journal. You need a place to keep a record of the things that inspire or encourage you. It could be a collage of images, or a folder of songs in your music player. The key is to HAVE a way to keep encouragement readily accessible.
3. Quiet time. Learn how to tune out and to unplug in order to refresh and refill encouragement. The quiet releases the imagination to discover its own way and that is always a good thing.
4. Enjoyment investment. Make time to laugh, to play, and to enjoy the things of life and in life. I have to find the time and space to enjoy the journey or I will not want to be on the journey in the first place.
5. Understand the encouragement well – or it may be better to describe it as a reservoir. The encouragement pours out of you into the world, but if you do not keep the reservoir filled then you will become exhausted and depleted in your encouragement efforts.

Everything becomes a little easier and a little brighter when accompanied by encouragement. It is a valued guest to have along for this journey. I enjoy sharing encouragement, but I learned long ago that if I am going to share something I need something from which to draw.

I need to be encouraged at some level so that I can share encouragement with others. I need to store up encouragement in all its marvelous forms so that encouragement can take root in my life and grow up into fruit producing possibilities that I can share. I have to invest in becoming encouraged so that I can build up relationships *IN* encouraged as well.

Encouragement can make the way for turning a dream into a reality, for going from a problem to a possibility, and for going on even when I want to stop. I have been in a place where I was surrounded by people that took encouragement and where I wasn't getting any in return – not from the people around me and not from any other place. I was isolated and alone and it took its toll on my life.

I became withdrawn from others. I began to avoid engaging people. I even bowed of chances to go out dancing. I was definitely I was not an encourager for anyone anywhere.

I had to get away from that place – literally and mentally – so that I could begin to break out of the dry spell that had crushed me under its weight. I needed some encouragement.

I visited a friend that I hadn't seen in a while and the weekend was just relaxed, fun, and without any obligations. I heard nothing but possibility sharing the whole time I was there – and I knew by the end of the weekend that I would never go back to that dry place again.

I have been on the verge – because the world wants me in that dry place. That dry place will keep me from stepping out of the box. That dry place will hold me back from pursuing my dreams.

I have determined to set up some protection by creating a well of encouragement for my life.

1. I practiced being a good steward – because being a good steward makes way for breathing space and breathing space creates room for encouragement to flourish. It may not seem that being a good steward of my home would affect my encouragement and my ability to be an encouragement, but it does.

This past weekend, I determined to get up and start using my timer to get things done – 20 minutes of writing, 20 minutes of studying, and 20 minutes of cleaning. I repeated the process several times and made a massive dent in my word count for the week, my studies for the week, and in sorting through the half dozen boxes of stuff I had cleared from my dad's house.

That was when the call came – about unexpected company coming to visit and to see my house for the first time ever. Any other weekend I would have panicked, but I had already been practicing good stewardship so I was prepared.

It was an encouragement to visit and it was an encouragement to have gotten so much accomplished.

2. Create a record for inspiration. I have an inspiration wall and an inspiration journal. I print out some of the comments I have received, and I write out those that are spoken to me or over me. When the going gets tough (and there are always moments when the going gets tough) then I have a way to see the inspiration that has been handed to me over the years. It stays fresh and inspiring when I keep a record of it.

3. Quiet time makes encouragement wells overflow. Sitting in the quiet of the morning and allowing my imagination to float on the morning breeze as the sun trickles through the leaves gives me strength to take on the rest of the day. The quiet gives my mind room to roam and also space for my hope to grow. A quiet moment is also the perfect time to review and reignite past inspirations.

4. Enjoyment investment – and for me that means laughter. Laughter makes it all a little better. It is one of the reasons that I enjoy silly shows like “Girl Meets World” because I can laugh without worrying about who might hear what. I can just be joyful and joy filled – and that alone is enough to make any encouragement well fill up and overflow.

I like visiting with my friends and my family because more often than not those visits erupt in laughter. We joke together, share stories together, or just act silly together which sets off a domino effect of laughter and fun.

Pure enjoyment – just to enjoy – is vital to developing a wellspring of encouragement.

5. Understand the encouragement well – because it is not designed to give me refreshment and inspiration. The encouragement well is designed – like most wells – to provide nourishment to all those that encounter the well.

IF I try to hoard the encouragement, the then well becomes stagnant and the contents worthless.

At the same time, a well that is not replenished will run dry and a dry well serves no one. If I do not find a way to receive encouragement – to tap into my own flow of encouragement – then I will end up in a dry place.

I have lived in that dry place – where encouragement has been run off by despair and there is no hope in sight. I can still feel the weight of that time and it is not a pleasant feeling even now – three decades later. I protect my heart and mind from that dry place by taking steps to become encouraged in my journey.

Foundations for Becoming Encouraged

It still amazes me how quickly I was entangled in the snare of despair. I don't remember ever taking a leap into the pit, but I do know that little by little I gave up my encouragement connections until I was standing alone.

It was there – in that alone space – that despair got its hold. I know that it was the Grace of God igniting my natural need for encouragement that got me through. Even in those moments of deepest dark, I would go out and look up at the stars in the sky and dream of something better. I believe now that dream provided the minute spark that spread through my life and drove me to walk away.

One spark – that was all it took to give me the courage to break away for the hold of despair.

One spark – that was enough to give me the boldness to step away from the expected into something completely unknown.

One spark – that was enough light to drive away the darkness and give me the breathing room to see that more was possible.

I knew that walking away would not be easy – it caused me some embarrassing moments and some painful conversations – but it also made a way for my impossible dreams to sprout their wings – something that would have never happened under the rule of despair.

It is amazing how peaceful things became for my journey once I settled into that spark of encouragement.

Isaiah 40:31 provides simple instructions for finding the encouragement that I need. It says that I need only to focus on God – to find my hope in Him. When God is my focus then my strength is renewed. When God is my focus then I will soar like an eagle. When God is my focus then I will not lose the energy to keep going – I will walk and not faint.

David knew a LOT about being in that pit of despair. He was anointed to be the next king, given the daughter of the current king as a wife, and then hunted down by the king to be killed. David spent many years hiding out from the king in a literal desert, so he knew all about the dry places.

In Psalm 9:9 – David reminds me that it may look bad, but in times of trouble God is with me and He will never forsake me.

In Psalm 44:22 David reminds me to give my troubles over to God because it is God that will sustain me.

In Psalm 28: 7 – 8 David reminds me that God is my strength and God is my shield – and as long as I continue to put my trust in Him then it will work out for me.

In Psalm 121: 1 – 8 David reminds me that my help comes from the Lord and that the Lord is the creator of all things. He will not sleep and he will keep me safe and standing on solid ground.

In Psalm 46:1 David reminds me that God is the place I need to turn for my refuge and God is the provider of my strength.

Each one of these passages offers me a bit of encouragement – and sometimes that one bit is all I need to begin to soar with the eagles. It is an encouragement to me to know that David walked through so much and still had the words to give praise and thanksgiving despite how things looked around him and David did this because David knew the truth – the world will lie, but God is always true to fulfill his promises.

Relationships InCouraged – Three Sharing Encouragement

I do not remember I time when I was not invested in encouraging others. One of my first “encouragement” memories happened when I was probably four and we had just moved to our new home. My mom was busy redecorating – putting her own unique creative spirit to work – and I was eager to help. She was not quite as eager to have the help of a four year old.

Instead, she distracted me by giving me a piece of wallpaper – which was putting up – and sending me on my way. I’m not sure what she expected from a four year old and wall paper, but I am certain it was not what I did next.

I promptly went outside and found a tortoise meandering its way across the yard. It was a dull, dingy brown thing and I knew more than anything that it needed to be “spiced up.” I took that bright yellow, flowered wallpaper and decorated the shell of that tortoise. It was the prettiest tortoise you have ever seen and I knew that it felt better as it continued on its way across the yard.

I encouraged that tortoise with my efforts, or I meant to be an encouragement. I hate to think what I my efforts really meant for that poor guy. Not only humiliation when the other tortoises saw him – no that would be nothing compared to what might have happened if say the hawks flying over got curious as to why that bunch of flowers was walking across the field.

The lesson I still take away from that first encouragement attempt is that just because I think it is good doesn’t mean I need to share it. I have had to learn that some things are better left unsaid or undone. No matter how much I think you need yellow flowered covered wallpaper for your home, it may not be what works for you in that moment (or ever).

The more I practice sharing encouragement, the better and more focused I get at sharing encouragement. There are few things I have found that seem to encourage most everyone no matter where they may be in their journey – either in some combination or sometimes just one.

1. I share words of praise. I compliment what someone is doing or what they have done or where they are going. I focus on a positive element and highlight that positive.
2. I share an attitude of praise. I give a hug or a pat on the back or sometimes just a smile – a physical attitude to let the person I am seeking to encourage know that I appreciate the efforts being made.

3. I have a heart of thanksgiving. I invest my energies into thinking about the ways I am grateful for having that person in my life in that moment, in the past, or with expectation towards the future.

4. I developed a habit of unspoken prayer. I take time out to pray for those that I want to encourage because I know that lifting someone up in prayer can be the most powerful encouragement possible even when they don't know the prayers are happening.

5. I created a mindset of being relentlessly giving – because it takes me out of a place of expectation into a focus of encouragement.

Sharing is an art that includes what I have to give but also takes into account what you need to receive. It had some beautiful wallpaper – or maybe it would be safer to say I had some trendy wallpaper – and I saw a dingy tortoise. Despite what I had to offer, he did not need to receive that wallpaper.

I think often about that tortoise and I pray that he is still walking around sporting his coat of many colors – maybe a little muddier and worn from the years but still unique from all of the others tortoises. Maybe he walked a little taller because he stood out from the crowd.

I want to continue to share with the same enthusiasm I had as a young girl. I want to be willing to help and even when my help may not be wanted I want to take what I am offered and pass it on to someone else – without question or expectation of return. That sharing can become more difficult over the years because we get rejected, or we get hurt, or we get used because of our willingness to share – but if I continue to foster it and nurture it and give it time to heal then I will have a habit of sharing encouragement that endures – hopefully like my wallpapered tortoise.

I spent some time as a swim coach when I was younger and I found myself encouraging my swimmers for life more than for the meets they needed swim. It was important to me that they take away from our encounter more than just a better way to do a flip turn.

Because of my practices as a coach, I have some HIGH expectations for the coaches and leaders that work with my boys. When I see them going off the rails, or at least going off the rails I have designated, then I have to remind myself that those coaches and those leaders are not me. They do things different. I have to be okay with their different or else I have to be willing to step up into the position myself.

I'm not willing – so I am becoming much more accepting.

I think that developing the better skill for sharing encouragement has a lot to do with accepting. I have to know how to accept you where you are and I have to be willing to accept what I can do to help meet you where you are.

I don't always LIKE accepting like that –but I keep practicing and the more I practice the better I get.

1. I share words of praise. When I was coaching my swim team, I would share with the swimmers the amount of time they took off their laps. I never talked about what place they came in because I wanted them to be focused on becoming better than they were before and not be concerned about being better than someone else.

With my boys, I have always tried to focus on the positive of their actions. I say things like “I appreciate that you mowed the lawn. Next time, can I show you where my flowers are so that they are not mowed as well?” That was a true story and I could have gotten upset because they mowed the flowers. Instead I made the choice that the boys were of more value than the flowers and I praised their efforts.

2. I share an attitude of praise. Sometimes it can be much more of a challenge to have an attitude of praise than to speak the words – because the attitude is hard to fake. I have to really be in appreciation to show it in my attitude.

I live in a house full of men. Some days I have to walk away from them and get a breath before I can have an attitude of appreciation. Those days when they have put away the groceries – but NOTHING is in its right home, or they cleaned up for the company but forgot to deal with the bathrooms – or pretty much any room that the guests would be in – but hey, the hall looks great. A deep breath and a smile can help me adjust my attitude to one of gratitude and that adjustment makes it possible for me to share an attitude of praise.

3. I have a heart of thanksgiving. I have seen this principle at work in my husband on more than one occasion. When I invest in thanksgivings about my husband – in my mind and with others – then his attitude and demeanor shift a little – without me having ever said a word directly to him.

I remember this happening once when I was in a women’s bible study. We were talking about encouraging our husbands and without my knowing it my husband sent the group a letter thanking them for what the group was doing in our home and in his life. My heart of thanksgiving for him had poured over on to him.

4. Develop a habit of unspoken prayer. I go through spells where I invested time every morning in specific prayers over my family. I go through a litany of prayers about the boys – their gifts, their friends, their future spouses. I go through a litany of prayers for my husband – his work, his play time, his friends. I am almost always lifting up their spiritual walk.

When I am invested in prayer for my family then I have a hard time thinking negative thoughts about my family. This also works for that problem person in my life – and I have had more than one. The more I lift them up in prayer the more I find that I think positive things for them and I speak possibilities over their life if I speak about them at all.

Prayer changes my focus and makes way for amazing encouragement.

5. Create a mindset of relentless giving. I confess that I have struggled with this on more than one occasion in my life. I question motives and I doubt sincerity – partly because I have been burned in the past.

I encountered a group of givers and sharers on a platform called Blab not long ago and they have helped me release some of that doubt. I determined to share my words by giving away all of my eBooks – some of which had only been available through purchase on Amazon. Be sure to stop in at my website right now and peruse the eBooks and download as many as you would like www.KathrynLang.com/ebooks

Every now and then I will get a little nervous that someone is taking without giving back but then I remember that it is not about getting back. I give not because you have something to give me. I give because I have something of value to give and I want you to have it.

Most of these sharing practices work most of the time – but there will be those times when someone doesn't want to be encouraged for whatever reason. Those are the times that discernment is so valuable and that discernment only comes when I make the choice to invest in the relationship in the first place.

Foundations for Sharing Encouragement

I like it when someone encourages me. It makes me feel better about what I'm doing or where I'm headed. It makes me feel stronger and bolder for my journey. I think that is one of the reasons that I like being able to encourage others.

I have discovered some things about encouragement as I have grown up from my tortoise wallpapering days – each person I encounter needs something and when I am in a position to give that something then I provide encouragement.

The other day, my dad needed help organizing his home for company. In the midst of all the doing, I found some framed photos that he often talked about and that I knew were important to him. I made a point of finding a prominent home for those photos while I was organizing.

He called to thank me but I could tell from his voice that the effort I had made had encouraged him.

The Scripture is full of examples of giving (and getting encouragement). One of my favorite encouragement Scriptures is Proverbs 31 – the whole thing. It talks about all the actions and attitudes the woman takes to be an encouragement to those around her. She is helpful and willing. She speaks positive words. She learns and shares. She reminds me that in all she does her ability to encourage others comes from her own life of peace – and that life of peace comes from her investment in the Word.

Read through Proverbs 31 with a focus on encouragement and you will unlock many of the tools that can grow up a habit of encouragement for your life.

One of those encouragement tools is the words that are spoken – because words have power. Solomon covers the importance and value of words all throughout Proverbs.

Proverbs 12:18 - words pierce like a sword, or they bring healing when spoken with wisdom.

Proverbs 15:4 – words bring healing or words can crush a heart.

Proverbs 18:21 – words have the power of life or of death.

Encouragement is vital to walking out this journey and we need each other to grow up encouragement – not only in you but in me – because when I share encouragement I receive encouragement.

Paul addresses the importance of encouraging each other in Romans 14:19 when he points out that we need to be doing the things that lead to peace and that lead to MUTUAL edification (which means building up or encouraging). According to Paul I need to be invested in the things that will encourage us both.

And when I invest in being an encouragement to you – when I make it a practice to share encouragement – then I grow up encouragement in my own life.

Paul also offers this reminder about encouragement in Hebrews 3:13 (this comes from the NIV translation) “Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

When I am invested in encouragement and when I am engaged with encouragement, then I put up a shield that will help protect me from the doubt and deceit that tries to crowd me.

Relationships InCouraged – Four Recognize Discourage

I have been taking a stand to be an encouragement and to share encouragement and I have literally been hit on every side. The world does not want me encouraged and the world definitely does not want me sharing encouragement. The world thrives on strife and strife thrives in discouragement.

The flame of encouragement must be taken down.

It may not be an actual conspiracy, but it sure feels that way when you are moving along at a fair clip and someone jerks the floor out from under you – not just a rug but the whole floor.

Somehow you manage to hold on and regain balance and keep going and the start swinging wrecking balls in your path. Now not only do you have to find a way to move forward without a floor but somehow you have to avoid the wrecking balls along the way.

I know that encouragement will get me through, but on too many occasions I have watched as others gave into the missing floor or the wrecking balls. Discouragement took the lead and it seemed from their perspective that all was lost.

I never realized how many people around me were under the heel of discouragement until I became aware of the symptoms that cover the lives of those that are surviving discouragement – because it is merely surviving. There is no living when discouragement is in charge.

Discouragement can be like that small fly – you know the one you just can't quite see – but it keeps buzzing your hear and driving you a little crazy. It becomes hard to concentrate on anything other than that nagging buzzing of the fly.

Discouragement can grow up into something that suffocates you and affects everyone around you. It weighs you down under a thick, dark cloud that blocks out the light and all possibility of escape.

Or it makes it feel that way. And did you know that someone in the dark – in that thick, heavy kind of dark, they can't start seeing the light just because you say there is light available. They have to find a way to get past the dark . . . to recognize the dark for what it is . . . so that they can then begin to reach for the light.

It starts with recognizing discouragement because in recognizing discouragement I position myself to break from the darkness that it creates.

1. Discouragement produces pessimism, a focus on inadequacy, and a need to find faults in others in order to feel better about self.
2. Discouragement causes a zone out reaction to life, a feeling of being trapped (because you are in a way), and an overall lack of initiative.
3. Discouragement crushes confidence, creates a loser mentality, and can even push into being loud and overbearing because as fears and frustrations mount.
4. Discouragement creates a stuck situation and traps the mind in the moment (or more likely in the past moments).
5. Discouragement drives a need for perfectionism and complete control and can result in a need for constant affirmation or any type of attention (including negative attention).

I had an “aha” moment recently about the discouragement. I had been trying to help a friend see what I saw – his blessings, his possibilities, and the strength he had shown in the past. He refused to see it – or it is more that he COULDN'T see it. That was my “aha” moment.

I was trying to show him the light but his reality was crowded by the dark. He barely even understood what I meant by light much less had the capacity to see it. I began to watch his words

and his actions and I recognized a multitude of the symptoms that show up when discouragement has a foothold.

Just knowing that he was battling such a fight against discouragement helped me to get into position to help him win that fight. The encouragement I had been trying to pour over him actually added to the heap on top of him because it couldn't penetrate the barrier of discouragement – that how strong its effects had become.

Whether discouragement is still just that small, pestering fly that is driving you to the edge of crazy, or it has become a mass of dark crushing the life out of you, until it is recognized for what it is I will struggle to be an encouragement for others.

I want to encourage everyone I encounter, but my enthusiasm for hope can be just as annoying to someone under the weight of discouragement as that buzzing fly. It is important for me to hold back my wave of rainbows and lollipops – at least until I look over the moment and see what others are facing.

I have lived with discouraged people around me and it can be a tough walk for a natural born encourager. I want to pour out the hope but my voice comes out more like the teacher in the Charlie Brown specials.

I have walked into discouraged situations and the message of positivity only served as a lightning rod that drew all the negatives in the moment and from around the room. That is a painful position to be in - and it doesn't take too many strikes before the encouragement well is depleted.

The more I learn to recognize discouragement the more prepared I can be to survive those moments.

I look for certain things when I am watching for the attacks of discouragement.

1. Pessimism – that attitude that springs from PLOM disease (you know, pour little ole me). It is the tendency to see the worst aspect of things in every situation or to expect the worst thing to happen.

I know of a man that can find the worst in any situation. He saw a news report about a man that had lived to be 105 and had confessed to smoking every day of his life. The pessimistic man shook his head – well imagine how long he would have lived if he hadn't smoked.

The pessimism that grows up in discouragement will be even more prone to find the negative. Instead of seeing the new job that he just got, pessimism will remind him that he will probably lose it just like he did the last one.

The pessimism wraps up tight with the spirit of inadequacy and the man begins to think that he will never be able to keep a job. In a last ditch effort to find some footing, the pessimism and inadequacies drive the man to find fault in others in order to deflect from his own faults.

Be on the lookout for pessimism.

2. Zone out. A person lost in discouragement gets lost in the circumstances around him. He will do whatever he can to distract from the need to take action and focus on an unimportant task, event, or even a distraction (like watching television). The zoning out and the lack of actions begin to eat away at the energy and the lack of energy steals the initiative leaving the person without the ability to take a step in any direction.

I knew a brilliant man that had an amazing life ahead of him. He had the right pedigree, the right training, and the right aptitude to do it all – but he had lived so long in a world of negatives that all he did was play video games. The discouragement had eaten away at his ability to move.

3. Crushed Confidence. Discouragement hides past victories and clouds out all possibilities so that all that the man can see is the potential failure. The words can't, never, and fail all begin to play a major role in the conversations because there is a belief that he can never do anything right.

Because of this negative mindset, the man begins to avoid all responsibilities. If he doesn't do anything then he can't mess it up. He may also begin to let his hurts and frustrations come out through loud and overbearing attitudes. A man crushed under the weight of discouragement gives in to a self-deprecating spirit that perpetuates the feelings.

4. Stuck. A discouraged man becomes caught in the moment – held down by fear – the fear to fail, the fear to success or the fear to change – they are all equally disturbing. It seems easier and more comfortable to let things stay the same even though he is not happy with the way things are.

Discouragement holds the mind captive so the imagination has no way to roam. It keeps new ideas for coming in or being formed. He holds the man hostage in the moment.

5. Perfectionism. Discouragement creates the illusion that the only way to make it is to make it perfect. If it is not exact then it is not worth doing. Perfectionism protects from mistakes (and against possible failure) because everything is just right.

A man trapped in discouragement will have a need to control it all and at the same time have a need for affirmation and attention (even if the attention is negative). I have found that in my own life, this negative attention is a great signal for seeing discouragement in my children.

Recognizing discouragement can be a major factor in learning how to offer encouragement and to grow relationships. Discouragement is a powerful force that can drive a man to hurt others or to hide away from life. Both are equally destructive – not only to the man but to all that he encounters.

When I learn to recognize discouragement then I can better deal with it and with those that are being crushed under its weight. It allows me to take better actions to begin to tear away at the hold that discouragement has so that so the light of hope can begin filtering into the life.

I have been in the trenches with discouragement on more than one occasion, and knowing my enemy has allowed me to come out of the battle a little less worse for the encounter. Learning to recognize discouragement can be a valuable weapon in this fight.

Foundations to Recognize Discouraged

Dealing with discouragement that is attacking my life is tough enough – but dealing with discouragement in the lives around me is even more of a challenge because the discouragement they are enduring is contagious – and I mean highly contagious. Even preparing this, I invested extra time so that I would not be overrun by the very thing I was seeking to detect.

Jesus warned us that the enemy would do everything possible to drag us down. In John 10:10, Jesus is trying to prepare His followers (and that does include you and me) for what would be coming at them. Jesus knew that the world would persecute, deceive, and imprison His followers and He wanted to build them up for the attacks that would be coming.

Jesus told them to remember that the thief (the enemy) comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy.

It is the goal of the enemy and of the world to drag me down and cover me over with discouragement because when discouragement covers me then the enemy wins – every time. I have to remove the discouragement – even just a little – if I am going to move from the place it is trying to hold me.

Jesus goes on to provide a tool for getting moving – even if it is just that little bit. He gives me some hope to grasp hold of when he says (and this is still from John 10:10) I have come that you may have life and that you may have it more abundantly.

Discouragement doesn't want me to think about this promise. Discouragement wants to mute this promise. Discouragement knows that this one promise contains the power to dispel it forever – because Jesus himself came to this earth so that I can have an abundantly life.

Jesus made the way and the discouragement is one of the most powerful tools the enemy has to keep me from walking out that promise.

Paul had some tough times in his walk. He was beaten (more than once), stoned (more than once), imprisoned (more than once), and ship wrecked (more than once). If anyone had a right to have a cloud of discouragement over his head, it was Paul.

In Corinthians 4: 8 – 9, Paul debunks discouragement. Paul says that we are afflicted in every way – but that does not mean we are crushed; we are perplexed about the path, but we do not

despair because we know the journey has been prepared; we are persecuted by man and the world but we are not forsaken by God; and we are struck down by the enemy but not destroyed.

Paul defeated discouragement because he knew the forms it would take and he was prepared for the battle with the weapons of hope and possibilities that come from the promises of God.

Discouragement is a dream crusher and a possibility killer. It makes it impossible for the man to think outside of the normal or ordinary – or even just to think at times. Understanding discouragement is a valuable part of growing encouragement and protecting against the attacks that discouragement is waging.

Relationships InCouraged – Five Dispelling Discouragement

I have faced a few storms in my life – I have faced a few storms this week. Some were worse than what you may have faced and some were not as bad as what you have come up against. Comparing our struggles is like comparing our successes – it is impossible to come out on the right side of things.

Your journey is different from mine and mine is different from yours. My journey is different from yesterday even. I have to stay focused on the moment and in the moment to keep on pushing through.

That is one of the ways that discouragement gets a foothold in a life – by getting a person to turn back and focus on what was or what might have been. It is impossible to move forward when you are focused on what is behind.

Discouragement knows that and discouragement takes advantage of that. It will do all it can to replay that moment over and over until that moment is all there is.

I had this discussion with someone leading a church group I was attending. She said it was important that we get up and share our mistakes and past struggles so that others could understand that we knew where they were coming from. “They need to know you can relate to them.” She explained.

I didn’t agree – and I still don’t.

In 2011, our home was drastically damaged by the tornadoes that tore through the community. Two months into the renovations, I made a trip to Tuscaloosa, where the same band of tornadoes had devastated the community. Sharing my woes with those people would not have made them think I understood, but more likely that I had lost my mind for thinking I had a woe in the first place.

Although I do know that we all want to feel we are not alone in our struggles, the more time I give to those past struggles the more they become the focus of my mind. And the thing that is the focus of my mind is the thing that will drive the cart.

I do NOT want my past driving anything – except maybe as far away from me as the east is from the west.

It is not that I'm hiding my past but that I know that reliving my past – which is what happens when I tell the story again – will tear open old scars best left alone.

That is me – and that is how I walk this life out. Others will have different opinions and different experiences because we are all different. If you take nothing else away from our time together take away these two things. First – we are all different so no to journeys, not two experiences, and not to processes will ever be the exact same. Second – we are all going through something that is cringe worthy.

I may not know what struggles you face, but I know you face struggles because you are living in a world that wants to hold you down and crush you. Once I accept the realization that you are dealing with something then I can begin to recognize if discouragement is digging into you as well. When I see discouragement acting in someone's life – or trying to come at me – then I can take the steps to dispel discouragement before trying to move forward.

1. Be accepting – I don't need to know where you are right now, where you came from, or even where you are going – I just to accept you as you are without a requirement of explanations or excuses.
2. Be respectful – make a point to engage in purposeful listening and to not interrupt the concerns with a pre-determined answer.
3. Be comforting – I can relate to where you are or even empathize with your journey even without understanding it all. I just need to be willing to come along beside you and be there.
4. Be attentive – make an effort to show attention praise and affirmation, hugs or high fives, or other deliberate and positive actions.
5. Be approving – not necessarily of actions or behaviors but always approving of the person.

Because I don't have to have been where you are to know you are struggling, I can be an encouragement for you no matter where you are. Even if I don't fully understand the struggle, I can recognize discouragement for what it is and then I can offer my hand.

Discouragement works the same no matter what moment or situation it uses to slither its way into a life. Once I see discouragement for what it is then I am in a position to begin helping.

The deeper the discouragement had growing its roots, the harder it can be to dispel it – but discouragement can always be dispelled. The only way that discouragement wins is when we all give up fighting.

Nothing seems to put a halt to progress or pursuit of purpose quite as fast as discouragement – it can be a little discouragement or big discouragement or anything in between. It seems that when discouragement gets in the mix it slowly begins to sap at all of the energy and before I know it there is not motivation to do ANYTHING let alone to pursue actual purpose.

I remember being trapped under that weight several years ago – the specifics aren't as important as the soul crushing darkness that had surrounded me. I struggled to get up and move from room to room content to sleep because at least when I was asleep I didn't have to face the struggles or the failures or the unknown. I was just asleep.

I did try to tap into my secret stash of encouragement, but in that moment it seemed that discouragement had barred the doors and had a guard watching for good measure. I saw no way out. I saw no way forward. I just saw no way – PERIOD.

I stayed in that darkness for more weeks than I want to admit. One morning – and I suspect it was after discouragement got comfortable in his new home and left that secret door unguarded – because I just stood up and decide I had had enough. I got dressed for the day. I engaged the sun. And then I began to engage other people.

I know now that what I had faced down was discouragement – and I know that the prayers I managed to mumble in the depths of that darkness connect with the prayers of the warriors I know where holding me up – even though at that time nobody suspected discouragement was a part of the situation.

Discouragement comes in so many forms and it can be subtle in its invasion. I have to know its many forms and then recognize the attack so that I will be in a position to dispel discouragement back to where it needs to go.

1. Be accepting – I don't know how you got here or why you got here. I only need to know that you got here and then we can move from there.

A friend posted something on social media – not a lot of details but more of a general “I'm struggling declaration.” Many of the posts that followed were inquisitive because we all want to know how bad someone else is doing so we can feel better about our own journey. Right?

I sent her a private message with two specific requests. “How can I pray for you?” and “What else can I do to help you out?”

I didn't need to know the details because the details were not going to change my responses. I would still pray the way she needed and I would still offer my help.

Sometimes a heart willing to accept is the very thing I need to get through or to begin to get through the discouragement.

2. Be respectful of the time being invested, the opinions being offered, or the thoughts being shared. I need to be willing to listen with intent on hearing and not with a preplanned response waiting to be unleashed.

I sat down with my husband to hear his situation. I sat down with the intention of hearing him. He had only gotten a few sentences in when I KNEW I had the answer. The moment he stopped to take a breath – not the moment he stopped talking mind you but the moment he stopped to take a breath I jumped.

Despite my eloquent speech, he stared at me with stunned silence. “Why can’t you just hear me without interruption?”

That was the day I determined to respect what he had to offer without thinking about the answer.

3. Be comforting. When my mom died, a lot of people made attempts to comfort me with sad looks and even some tears. It was my good friends that do the most to comfort me. They came over, sat with me, and just enjoyed a cup of coffee. It wasn’t about fixing the situation or healing the hurt. It was merely about offering me a hand and then coming along beside me for the walk.

4. Be attentive. Show affection (when appropriate and in ways that are appropriate). My older boys are NOT big on hugs and kisses from mom anymore – occasionally the oldest will be in a hugging mood, but not the middle son. He will be affectionate in other ways, like a high five.

How the affection occurs is not as important as having the affection occur.

5. Be approving. This is not about condoning actions and behaviors but about approving of the heart of a person. I can approve of you without approving of what you are doing.

My friend had to deal with an uncomfortable situation in his family. His son was doing things that went against the values of the family and he was hurting others in the process. The dad didn’t reject the son, but he did reject the actions. “No matter what you do, I love you and when you are ready I will be here.”

He was and when the son hit rock bottom it was dad that came along beside him to help him up.

Discouragement crushes the heart and the spirit and then tells the man that others will not ever want him because of his crushed heart and spirit (and what they led him to do). Discouragement is a liar. When I take a few steps to dispel discouragement then I begin to reveal it for the liar it is.

Foundations for Dispelling Discouragement

I used to take a lot more things personal when it came to negative attitudes or sharp comments – until I learned more about discouragement. Once I began to grasp hold of what discouragement was and what it did in the heart and minds of the people it ensnared, I changed my tune.

I am not the first to face down discouragement – discouragement has been causing chaos since the dawn of time. David dealt with a LOT of discouragement and did his fair share of discouragement dispelling.

In Psalm 42, David is lamenting over all that he is going through and how tough things are and then he makes this declaration right at the end. “Why are thou cast down, O my soul? And why are thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.” This is from the King James Translation.

David knew that breaking through the discouragement would only come when he turned his focus back to what mattered. Complaining wouldn't fix it. Thinking about what might have been or what had been wouldn't fix it. Only God could fix it.

In Psalm 37, David starts out with the right focus – the only focus that matters – fret not because of what others are doing.

All too often it is the action (or inaction in some situations) of others that make a space for discouragement to squeeze in. That negative review or snide comment gets repeated over and over until it begins to settle in as the truth and that is the moment that discouragement settles in as well.

That is what was happening in the time of Nehemiah. God had blessed the Jews – even though they were still technically in captivity. The blessing included all that was needed to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. The locals were not impressed and they came out to taunt the Jews as they worked. They called the Jews feeble. They said what the Jews built up they would tear down. They threatened to kill them.

Nehemiah armed the workers and then he stood with the workers and he offered reminders that God would do the fighting for them and that stand Nehemiah took helped to overcome the words that had been heaped on the Jews.

Discouragement is tricky and more than a little slippery. Discouragement will take any opening and make it work. If I want to build up encouragement and build relationships INcourage then I have to knock discouragement out of the game.

First – understand encouragement

Second – become self-encouraged

Third – share encouragement

Fourth – recognize discouragement

Fifth – dispel discouragement to where it belongs

The more I learn about discouragement and about encouragement the stronger I will be for the fight.

This is a war – and if I am going to be positioned to win then I need to arm myself for the battle.

How are you armed for the battle?

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“Words have power – and I work to share words that ignite hope and possibility in those they encounter.”

Kathryn Lang continues to grow her career as a wordsmith. She shares words in talks, teachings, columns and stories to provide the hearts that hear with some fuel for hope.

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