

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.  
Taking Inventory

My first job was exciting. I was sixteen years old. It was in Café del Rey Moro in Balboa Park (today, the restaurant in that location is called The Prado). I was a bus boy. I was thrilled to have the job, and I worked hard. For some reason, I like waiting tables. Perhaps that's one of my many idiosyncrasies!

I was fascinated with food preparation. It just so happened that the chef's assistant quit, and I asked the chef if there was any chance I could be his replacement. He agreed. I paid attention to everything he taught me. I worked hard, and I loved learning to cook. Before long, that is exactly what I was doing.

I liked almost everything about the job. The part I hated was inventory. I am not by nature a bean counter. And although we didn't count the beans individually, we counted *bags* of beans, *cans* of beans, and *boxes* of beans. We also counted bags, cans, and boxes of a whole lot of other stuff. It's not that I'm a bad counter or bad in math. It's just that counting bores me, and at age 16, I wasn't a pro at handling boredom!

For better, for worse, I did learn how to take inventory. It was a part of the job, and a part of learning how to grow up involves understanding that not all parts of all jobs are pleasant.

Years later, I would learn that taking inventory can be pretty darned important. It may even be essential to becoming complete and whole as a human being. What if we were to use the days surrounding Valentine's Day to take inventory? We could do this as individuals, couples, or as a whole family. What might make that effective?

St. Paul's most famous passage is from 1 Corinthians 13—the one that talks about love. The center of the passage provides a place where we can take inventory. Paul says, "Love is patient and kind. It isn't jealous, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Love doesn't insist on its own way. It isn't irritable or resentful. It doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing; it rejoices in the truth. Love hopes all things, bears all things, and believes all things. Love never ends."

How might we use this passage for inventory? I could ask, "On a scale of one to ten, with ten being best, how would I rate myself in terms of patience, kindness, jealousy, irritability, and so on?" I might discover that I'm not particularly jealous, and I certainly aspire to be kind, but I have been struggling with irritability. For that matter, I have been short of patience as well.

Once I get the inventory straight, I could then ask, what would it take for me to score a nine or ten in each of the categories where I need improvement? A little searching might lead me to discover that my irritability is directly linked to my impatience. In other words, because I am impatient—because I try to rush things, because I don't give myself (or others!) enough time—I get irritable. And the more irritable I become, the more I struggle with impatience!

Perhaps the most important question, then, is this: what am I willing to do to become more patient? And what am I willing to do to improve my mood and the way I affect others? To put it another way, what am I willing to do so that I am nicer to be around?

The answer may be as simple as slowing down and working at a steady, manageable pace.

Why not try this during the week of Valentine Day? And why not share your results with your family? When people know where we are trying to take responsibility for our own improvement, they usually become our greatest cheerleaders.