“If the shoe fits, wear it,” my mother often said while I was growing up. This saying seemed to have a multitude of applications. If I hadn't been brushing my teeth regularly, she talked about the agonies of a friend who had to wear dentures because she didn't brush. If I neglected my homework, she mentioned the regrets of a cousin who hadn't been able to graduate from high school because of procrastination. When I didn't want to practice the piano, she related the parable of the talents. Always she ended her examples with: “If the shoe fits, wear it.”

I soon knew that she meant I could apply the teaching to my situation or ignore it at my peril; I could learn from the experience of others or suffer in learning the truth for myself.

But it wasn’t until I was married and difficult tests came that I realized the depth of her message and came to know how many hardships could be avoided by learning from the experience of others. I also found other useful applications of the saying. I learned, for example, that fitting my foot into the shoe could also mean that in order to have a successful marriage partnership, I would have to put my foot into the shoe of my companion often to understand his ideas, decisions, desires, and problems. I found that the more comfortable my foot became in his shoe, the closer our relationship became.

My own experience has taught me that each one of us comes into marriage with our own set of problems, weaknesses, and strengths. For a husband and wife to expect each other to fit into a common mold would be foolish. It would be like expecting the same size dress or suit to be worn by everyone without considering individual sizes, shapes, or coloring; some might find that it fit perfectly, but for others it would have to be altered, and some might never be able to make it fit.

Because the personalities and contrasts of two unique individuals are being combined in a marriage, partnerships differ in the same way that people differ. What is successful in one relationship may bring difficulty in another. This is because every husband and wife come from different backgrounds and have various ways of viewing things. In the course of doing what builds our partner and strengthens our joint relationship with our Heavenly Father, it is usually possible also to do the things that please and satisfy each other. But first we must know what those things are.

Because I love practical gifts, I was surprised to learn of a woman who left her husband because, among other reasons, he had given her a practical birthday gift for their home when she was expecting something personal and romantic. What hurt her most was that after years of their living together, he didn’t sense her needs. A little of putting a foot in each other’s shoe might have saved
the marriage.

The more we can understand and accept a spouse’s needs, the more beautiful and solid our partnership may become. My mother’s principle of individual evaluation applies in marriage, where understanding comes through making the effort to know our companion—to know his or her desires, goals, needs—then care enough to let our knowledge direct our actions. The Lord teaches in the scriptures that he will not do our work for us; we must first study matters out in our minds (see D&C 9:7–9). There may be value in studying a spouse’s needs, formulating a plan to help meet those needs, then asking for the Lord’s direction. If we have chosen our course wisely, he can give confirmation (see D&C 9:8–9) and can assist us with his further spiritual direction and his strength.

Wise husbands and wives will not expect another person to fulfill their every wish or fantasy, of course. When we make that mistake, we move into marital danger zones, often falling prey to unrealistic and false comparisons. It is self-defeating to compare our situation with that of other couples, fantasizing that their marriages are perfect, while our own seems shabby by contrast.

A sister fulfilling her Relief Society calling once assisted a woman who had recently moved into the area and was seeking employment. The woman had left her husband and moved to another city, bringing with her four small children who needed nursery care while she worked. The children had been ill, funds were running low, and she hadn’t been able to locate permanent housing. Her struggles seemed overwhelming, and it was suggested that she might wish to consider the possibility of reconciliation with her husband.

She explained that her husband was a good provider, a caring father, and a dedicated Church member, but that he simply didn’t communicate on her level. She said that going to church every Sunday and watching all the happy couples with their wonderful marriages had finally been more than she could handle. Had she only known some of the problems behind apparently happy marriages! With a bishop’s counseling and new insights, this woman, much wiser from her experience, was reunited with her husband.

There is no perfect formula that creates great love. We have to supply our own ingredients based on study, prayer, caring, mutual respect, and selflessness. Many times it requires great courage to be a peacemaker, wisdom to give, and strength to concede on a point. Real love is enriched by patience, kindness, understanding, and help—especially at times when disappointment or the seriousness of a spouse’s error makes it difficult to offer these things.

The key to ultimate love has been given by the Lord (see Matt. 22:36–40, D&C 42:22). The Lord has sanctified marriage. I believe that he expects us to value and protect the important covenant we make, to use wisdom in how we nurture our partnership, and to guard the fragile happiness that is part of it. In fifty-two years of marriage, I have learned that there is no philosophy or set of principles to compare with Christ’s teachings in strengthening our relationships, and that nothing can bring more excitement, happiness, or fulfillment to our marriage than living the Golden Rule.

When we can put a foot in our partner’s shoe, sense righteous needs and wants, and try to fulfill them, we are taking steps toward becoming the kind of people who will grow in a relationship for eternity.