

A True Love Story -- Sir Gawain and Ragnell

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From the stories of King Arthur and his knights comes the one about Sir Gawain. In the tale, Sir Gawain agrees to marry Ragnell, a grotesquely ugly woman, in exchange for information that will spare the life of King Arthur. On their wedding day, a great sense of mourning hung in the air because King Arthur's handsome and gallant knight was being married to a monstrous hag.

On his wedding night, Sir Gawain waited in bed while his bride prepared herself for their first night together. When Ragnell laid down beside him, she said, "You have kept your promise and much more. You have never shown me pity nor revulsion. All I will ask of you is one kiss."

Closing his eyes, Gawain leaned over and kissed his bride. When he opened his eyes, he was startled to see a beautiful woman lying next to him. Leaping from the bed, he exclaimed, "Who are you? Where is my wife and is this sorcery?"

Calming, Ragnell said, "I am your wife and I will tell you my story." She told of how her stepbrother, Sir Gromer, hated her because of her beauty and the fact that she didn't succumb to his fear tactics and commands. His jealousy and resentment led him to convince his mother -- an evil sorceress -- to turn her into one of the ugliest women ever.

Ragnell then told Sir Gawain that there was a second part of the curse. She said,

"Since you have treated me with love and compassion, I am allowed to give you a choice. I can be a beautiful woman by day, so that all may admire me and consider you a lucky man, but I would become the ugly Ragnell by night. Or I can be the ugly Ragnell by day, only to become the beautiful woman you see before you at night. Which would you prefer?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Gawain replied, "This should not be my choice but yours. You must choose for yourself. I will accept either decision as long as it is your will." And with that response, the curse was lifted and Ragnell was the beautiful woman she was meant to be day and night.

This story captures the essence of true, unconditional love which is meant to be the basis of all relationships. Sir Gawain wasn't focused only on his own needs but saw beyond them and was concerned about his wife's happiness and well-being. His desire to empower her is what healed each of them and could bring them both real joy.

As partners and parents, we often lose sight of this way of viewing love and believe that love doesn't dwell within but is separate/outside of us. In his book "Mindful Loving -- 10 Practices for Creating Deeper Connections," Dr. Henry Grayson says, "Thinking of love and God/the Divine as separate from us, we create a never-ceasing need to seek love outside of ourselves... And by shifting the responsibility for change from ourselves to the other person, we unwittingly reinforce an insidious cycle of blame that prevents true healing."

There are many books and practices on how to heal our relationships with our spouses, children, parents, siblings and more. But the essential point that is often missed is that all change begins with me and my daily choices. The more I delve into relationship work, the more I discover that the central purpose of all relationships is to help us uncover our essential Divine Nature, and to help others do the same.