

CHAPTER 29

Marriage

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

— Sonnet 116, by William Shakespeare

By looking at marriage, a tradition that most cultures regard as one of life's most revered passages, we can explore further the relationship of man and woman. Cultures change. Lifestyles fluctuate. Modes of thought come and go with the passing of time, and yet the institution of marriage remains.

There is a deep cultural and spiritual drive for men and women to marry. Woman was born for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman. What does every man desire? An ideal wife. And the wish of every woman is to meet an ideal husband.

The spectrum of marital love

Even though divorce rates are climbing, every newlywed couple believe that a wonderful life-long love affair is *especially* destined for them. The thrill of romance, becoming best friends, the tranquility of belonging, learning the sweetness of intimacy, the heights and the depths—are all aspects of love that are a basic part of marriage.

“Stirring-the-oatmeal” love is also part of marriage. Stirring oatmeal is not exciting, but it symbolizes a relatedness that brings love down to earth. It represents a willingness to share ordinary human life



and to find meaning in the simple, unromantic tasks: earning a living, living within a budget, making breakfast, feeding the baby in the middle of the night, etc. “Stirring the oatmeal” means that two people transform even the unexciting, difficult, and mundane things into a joyful and fulfilling component of life. They find value and beauty in their daily interaction.

When a couple are genuinely bonded with one another, they are willing to enter into the whole spectrum of human life together. Is not a man different at dawn from what he is at sunset? And a woman too? And does not the changing harmony and discord of their variation make the secret music of life?

And is it not so throughout life? A man is different at 30, at 40, at 50, at 60, at 70; and the woman at his side changes as well. Isn't there a peculiar harmony through youth, the period of childbirth, the period of young children, the period of grandchildren, the period of waning passion but mellowing delight of affection, the dim period of the approach of death when the man and woman look at one another with the apprehension of separation? Is there not throughout it all some unseen, unknown interplay of balance, a kind of harmony and completion like a symphony which moves with a rhythm from phase to phase, so different, so very different in the various movements? Yet one symphony made from the music of two strange and incompatible lives, a man's and a woman's? This is marriage—quite a mystery! And this oneness, gradually accomplished throughout a lifetime, is the highest achievement of time or eternity. From it all things human spring—children and beauty, the true creations of humanity.

Marriage is a journey of transformation. In the union of men and women, acceptance is often the most basic binding thread. Anything less than total acceptance will not realize the extraordinary potential of our human nature. To accept another requires the sacrifice of oneself and a willingness not to be oneself but to be *ourselves*. If a husband and wife are able to accept one another completely, they are very close to being able to accept many other people as well. If anyone *truly* loves another, he has the potential to love other people. Those who enter into marriage by that act alone do a great service to humanity.

Marriage in public

Marriage is not something to be entered into lightly, as it is a commitment not only between two people but also with the community. Other people are depending on them to make the marriage work for the continuation of the family and community. In nearly every society throughout history the marriage ceremony has been considered a public ceremony.

A married couple, by going through a public marriage ceremony, are saying, “We are ultimately to be held accountable for making this work. We will need all your support. Together with your hopes for us and our commitment to each other and to you we will fulfill this promise.” If wedding vows stipulated conditions or were a contract for only a temporary arrangement, it wouldn't be a “wedding” at all.

Why are people who attend a wedding happy to witness this event—so happy indeed that they may cry? Because everyone is moved to see two people committed for life and soon to bear children who represent the joining of two lineages into one lineage that will go on before them into the future. A wedding represents the past, present and future coming together into one point. Thus it is very sacred. What if the people who attended that wedding were invited to another wedding a few years later with the same bride but a different bridegroom? Even if they wished them well, could they have the same excited feeling, the same hopes, the same joys, the same anticipation?



No matter what form the marriage ceremony takes, one thing is clear: Through marriage we enter a whole new world. We learn to see what we haven't seen before, do what we haven't done before, feel what we haven't felt before, understand what we never understood before, love in ways that we have never loved before. Many new, unexpected, unprecedented things take place. Above all, marriage is a new task and a new seriousness and a challenge. If a couple are successful in their marriage, their lives will be filled with infinite love and happiness, but if they are unsuccessful, the results can be devastating to all involved.

Acceptance and intimacy

How is true happiness attained in marriage? In the first stages of a relationship we show off our best side. We dress well, show our best manners and do almost anything to attract the other person.

However, we all carry burdens from the past, and so in time a couple will discover each other's strengths and weaknesses, good habits and bad habits. We need to understand that in married life we also will feel negative things about our spouse. We need to learn to understand, accept and love each other fully. It takes time but *can*

happen and *should* happen.

Here is a letter one woman wrote to a friend, regarding her relationship with her husband:

I am now safe and secure in our love. We are free to communicate about anything to each other. We are not afraid to expose ourselves and our faults, because we know that we accept each other just as we are, with all our frailties and faults and good points. How wonderful it is to know that no matter how poorly I perform, I will still be loved. And that has to make me perform better.

Here are some aspects that make up the bond of intimacy, closeness and a wonderfully happy marriage. They are given in no particular order:

- × Shared feelings.
- × Physical touching of an affectionate, non-sexual nature.
- × Spiritual harmony.
- × Open communication and honesty.
- × Absence of psychological defenses.

- ✗ Sensitive appreciation of the mate's physical and emotional responses.
- ✗ Similar beliefs and values.
- ✗ Imparted secrets.
- ✗ Genuine understanding.
- ✗ Mutual confidence.
- ✗ A sense of warmth, safety, and peace when together.
- ✗ Sexual pleasures lovingly shared.
- ✗ Signs of love freely given and received.
- ✗ Mutual responsibility and caring.
- ✗ Complete trust.

Of course, no marriage certificate guarantees these qualities in a relationship. To become so finely tuned to each other demands time and conscious effort from both partners. This is precisely why the most precious and rewarding intimacy can be experienced only in a permanent relationship of marriage. The resulting closeness lifts the relationship out of the commonplace and into the unique and irreplaceable. If marriages are made in heaven, their maintenance occurs in an earthly setting, which requires knowledge, patience, willpower and unselfishness. If one can acquire and develop these before marriage, the chances for a good, enduring marriage and an ever-growing love are almost 100 percent!

A true marriage

The first step in marriage is to recognize the power of the lifelong union between a man and a woman and to understand that it involves a lifelong commitment to *marriage* itself. In marriage we grow beyond ourselves. When we are sincerely married, it is impossible to be selfish anymore. In a good marriage we think about our husband or wife before we think about ourselves.

At the marriage ceremony we make a commitment to our partner and to the world that we are together as a couple. We commit ourselves to being with this person and to staying with this person. This means we can go through difficult experiences without leaving or even threatening to leave.

By committing to marriage itself, we come closer to our partner than ever before. Instead of rejecting him or her, withdrawing, closing off, and separating, we digest the undesirable experiences and emotions, and as a result we experience a more profound love. Every time we overcome difficulties, we receive greater understanding. We become more mature, less selfish, and less self-oriented, developing compassion toward our fellow human beings.

An emotional or physical attraction by itself fades quickly. Without a spiritual commitment to the "God" in one's spouse, there is little chance of weathering the difficulties that will arise.

The same sense of commitment and responsibility that we have in bearing children has to be present when going into a marriage. If you cannot make that type of commitment, then it is better not to marry yet.

Being a human being is not just about the self. Hence, if you want to have children, get married. If you want to live with someone for the rest of your life, marry that person. No one should take marriage lightly. Responsibility is the essence of commitment.

Restoring love restores society

The insecurity that has developed within modern societies comes from the erosion of the institution of marriage. What has resulted is the undermining of all other commitments—to other people and relationships, to work. In terms of human



The path that leads to marital happiness is so narrow that two cannot walk upon it unless they become one.

relationships, marriage is the most solid contract that we can make.

When we are committed and responsible within a marriage, our commitments to ourselves, to our children, to our work, and to our fellow human beings will be solid. Our word will be valued. The power of marriage brings value, worth, and commitment to our ideals. Those ideals become valuable because they are backed by sincere devotion in

serving something and someone beyond ourselves. When we are capable of developing a deep inner relationship with our partner in marriage, we will be able to do the same thing with our fellow human beings. Responsible marriages encourage the sense of community that modern societies lack. The marriage commitment gives us the power to stabilize and rebuild the fabric of a good society.

Thoughts on love and togetherness

The following three excerpts all contain thoughts about love and togetherness. Which do you like best? Why? Can the main ideas translate into practical advice for couples considering marriage?

"A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but gay and swift and free, like a country dance of Mozart's. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it."

— Anne Morrow Lindbergh, 20th century American writer

“A togetherness between two people is an impossibility, and where it seems, nevertheless, to exist, it is a narrowing, a reciprocal agreement which robs either one party or both of his fullest freedom and development. But, once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky!”

— Rainer Maria Rilke
20th century German poet



“It takes years to marry completely two hearts, even of the most loving and well-assorted. A happy wedlock is a long falling in love. Young persons think love belongs only to the brown-haired and crimson-cheeked. So it does for its beginning. But the golden marriage is a part of love which the bridal day knows nothing of.

“A perfect and complete marriage, where wedlock is everything you could ask and the ideal of marriage becomes actual, is not common, perhaps as rare as personal beauty. Men and women are married fractionally, now a small fraction, then a large fraction. Very few are married totally, and then only after some forty or fifty years of gradual approach and experiment.

“Such a large and sweet fruit is a complete marriage that it needs a long summer to ripen in, and then a long winter to mellow and season it. But a real, happy marriage of love and judgment between a noble man and woman is one of the things so very handsome that if the sun were, as the Greek poets fabled, a God, he might stop the world and hold it still now and then in order to look all day long on some example thereof, and feast his eyes on such a spectacle.”

— Theodore Parker, 19th century Unitarian minister

Individual Exercise



Ask married older friends and relatives to tell you the story of their life together, finding out all you can about married life. What do their stories tell you about the need for physical and emotional intimacy? About what makes a good relationship? About one’s experience of love as one becomes older? What promises did they make to each other on their wedding day? Are they keeping those promises? Is their relationship different from the expectations they had before they wed? How so? If they had a son or daughter who recently became engaged, what advice would they give him or her to establish a successful marriage and family life?

For Your Journal



The Prince Charming and his Fair Lady who fall in love at first sight and ride off to live happily ever after in palatial splendor are purely fictional. Real life is never so simple or so perfect, yet we all have our dreams and our fantasies.

The difficulty comes in striking a balance between our dreams and reality. Keeping this in mind, write down your own description of an ideal marriage. What are reasonable dreams, actual goals to work toward? And what dreams are too fantastical, so far beyond reason that we are doomed to disillusionment and disappointment if we hold on to them?