

Love and Marriage

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[Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester](#) – February 15, 2009

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Love and marriage, the song goes—you can't have one without the other. But is that really true? I know it's not, and I'm betting so do you.

I, for one, have known plenty of loveless marriages. Some of them were even long-lasting relationships that worked. They were based on other things—mutual respect, common goals, or obedience to an authority outside of the union. But love, at least of the romantic sort, wasn't there.

I've also known plenty of relationships based soundly in love that made for horrible marriages. There are plenty of people who love each other (romantically, even) who shouldn't be married to one another. I cannot be the only person in this room who knows people better suited to a loving friendship than to marriage.

And I've known plenty of relationships full of love that can't or won't ever involve marriage. Leaving aside the question of legality for a moment, I know plenty of people who have chosen not to get married. Every couple (or even a committed group of more than two people) has their own reasons, but many people I know express ambivalence about or hostility to the very institution of marriage.

Which to me raises the question of what that institution really is, in the first place.

Is it an institution based in love, as so many would want us to believe?

Does it have other dimensions to it, dimensions other than love—perhaps deeper, perhaps even theologically-relevant to us whether or not we are married or will ever be?

You might be able to guess what my answer is to the second question, but you might be surprised to learn my answer to the first. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

E. J. Graff, in her book *What Is Marriage For*, traced the shifting nature of the institution of marriage in Western history.

“When you've listened mainly to the American shouting matches over whether the death of Ozzie and Harriet is good or bad, it's disorienting to discover the depth and variety in marriage's historical shifts,” Graff writes. “Although people throughout history have been sure that they'd know a marriage when they saw one, its exact borders have been so slippery as to garner thousands of pages of commentary from lawyers and scholars, rabbis and monks.” (Graff)

She continues: “Marriage, in other words, turns out to be a kind of Jerusalem, an archaeological site on which the present is constantly building over the past, letting history’s many layers twist and tilt into today’s walls and floors.” (Graff, xix)

Graff found that at various points in history, the institution of marriage has been about the transfer of property rights (especially when women were viewed as part of the property to be transferred), the ability to define who is and is not part of your extended family, the creation of children so that one’s society can survive, and even the choosing of a life-long work partner with whom one could survive in an environment dependent upon shared and compatible labor (like farming or various skilled trades of old).

Only recently has love even been part of the equation.

Graff writes that “...marriage transformed dramatically in the nineteenth century. With capitalism, marriage stopped being the main way that the rich exchanged their life’s property, and that the rest of us found our life’s main co-worker.”

She continues: “That change—the death of “traditional” marriage, which had dropped ill in the mid-eighteenth century and breathed its last by the 1920s—was so dramatic that it set off changes in every other philosophy of marriage: what makes sex sacred or even acceptable; what children need to grow up well; how far in or out of their kinship circle...people are expected or allowed to marry; what marriage rules are required to keep social order; and how important is it to consult your own heart.” (Graff, xxi)

Now, Graff eventually concludes that modern-day marriage is all about love, and uses this conclusion to make a powerful argument for marriage equality. And while I might agree with her conclusions about who should and should not legally be allowed to marry, I think she’s actually missed the mark when it comes to what marriage is about.

Certainly, love is part of it, or it should be at least.

But I don’t believe that love is enough for marriage, or even the basis on which it is founded.

Lebanese-American poet Khalil Gibran, famously wrote in his work *The Prophet*, “Love one another, but make not a bond of love/Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.” (Gibran)

And if love is not to be the bond that holds people together, something else has to be.

What makes “marriage” different from just being in a good, stable relationship?

To answer this, let’s first look at the qualities that make up a healthy relationship, without the layer of marriage thrown onto it.

For this, I think a good resource is the lifespan sexuality education curriculum co-written by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. *Our Whole Lives* is taught in religious education programs in most Unitarian Universalist congregations, and it is very explicit about defining healthy relationships for our children and youth.

According to the curriculum, healthy sexual relationships are consensual; non-exploitative; mutually pleasurable; safe; developmentally appropriate, based on mutual expectations and caring; and respectful (including the values of honesty and keeping commitments made to others). (UUA)

That sounds like a nice list, a good and comprehensive list for what makes a basic relationship.

Throw in love for one another, and you have a pretty good relationship there. But you don't have a marriage.

As someone who has been performing weddings for some nine years, since as a student minister I was given permission to officiate at my brother's wedding, I am often asked about the different parts of the wedding ceremony. Specifically, a lot of couples seeking to be married (or to bless their union in the case that legal marriage is not available to them) want to know what parts of the ceremony are required and what parts are optional.

It might surprise you to know that I've helped design wedding ceremonies that lasted anywhere from ten minutes to almost an hour—the longer ones layered with meaningful (and very optional) parts of the ceremony.

What goes into the ten-minute wedding ceremony? Only the required parts: my declaration that our intent in gathering is to marry the people before me, the declaration of each party that it is their intent to get married, their definition of what that marriage means, and my pronouncement of their marriage.

Those middle two parts—the parts done by the people being married—are the most important ones.

I never have to ask people to pledge their love to one another, nor is it required that they do.

In order to be married, though, they need to say what they mean by marriage. Usually, this comes in the form of vows. They often sound something like this:

"In the presence of these witnesses,

I, --- now take you, ---,

to be my wife. To have and to hold

from this day forward,

*for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness or in health,
in sorrow or in joy,
to love and to cherish
as long as we both shall live.*

While not everyone uses these particular vows, the vows are a required part of a marriage ceremony.

Why is this?

It is because marriage is fundamentally about more than love. It is about creating a covenant.

And this is the part that applies to you whether you're married or not, whether you will ever be married or not: covenant is the sacred way in which people are bound together, and the foundation of liberal religion, it is simultaneously a solemn promise and a living document.

Covenant is something that we should all understand.

The Rev. Dennis McCarty, in a recent article in *UUWorld*, wrote about the theology of covenant, from the perspective of religious history and authority.

He wrote that a covenantal religion is based on "committed faith that people's lives matter; that what happens between human beings here and now matters more than the authority of any particular belief, and that we have it in our power to make the future better than the past." (McCarty)

He went on to explain that "covenantal faith is not a 'theological abstraction.' It's a way of living in the world. A... covenant with God [such as those made between the ancient people of the Hebrew Bible] calls people into a... covenant with one another, into a way of living that sees each human being as created in the image of the Divine." (McCarty)

McCarty rightly points out that covenant among human beings is the basis of any liberal religion—the sacred agreement on a common ethic for right action, rather than the sacred deference to religious authority, which marks more conservative religions.

"To a religious fundamentalist," McCarty writes, "my good works toward my fellow human beings will not save me from eternal punishment. I am lost unless I accept the proper religious authority. On the

other hand, a religious liberal's faith centers on the human condition, ethics, relationship, and faith in the importance of each person." (McCarty)

The two kinds of covenants McCarty talks about—one the one hand, the Biblical covenants with God, and on the other hand covenants with other people—are different covenants, yet the concept remains the same. Covenants between people are sacred agreements among equals.

They can be as narrow or broad in scope as the people entering into the covenant wish them to be: they can cover how we behave with one another for the duration of a meeting, or they can be a pledge to lifelong relationship. They can be the work of a pair of people or a group of unlimited size.

But any way you look at them, they are our religion's most sacred source of instruction as to how we live, how we treat one another, and the values we hold most dear.

They are also, unlike the Biblical covenants, living contracts and not things set in stone for all of eternity.

Covenants between and among people must be open for re-negotiation, with the consent of all parties involved. That re-negotiation is as sacred a process as the initial creation of the covenant, and ensures that the covenant continues to meet its stated purpose as time goes on.

In Unitarian Universalism, our congregations have formed a covenant with one another. This covenant, in the form of seven principles our congregations pledge to affirm and promote, is printed on the back of your order of service each week. It, too, is a living document. To many people's surprise, our Association's governance actually requires a periodic process of review and possible revision of this covenant.

The vows of marriage—the biggest of the non-optional parts of a wedding ceremony—represent the formation of a covenant. They are a sacred promise to right action in front of witnesses and an officiant. And they, too, must be a living agreement if a marriage is to last.

Years into any covenanted relationship, the agreements made at the relationship's beginning don't account for the complexity of relationship that develops over time. Those vows need to be re-examined, transgressions must be reconciled, and promises revised and re-made.

This is the basis of marriage—whatever the law says, and whatever we'd like to think. The understanding that a promise has been made that can survive the ups and downs of life together, a promise that can be strengthened over time even when it has been temporarily forgotten. The basis of marriage should be covenant.

Many relationships aren't meant to have such a promise attached to them. This is fine and good, and those relationships can and should be meaningful and satisfying. But if that promise is there, and if that promise is real, no law can tell me that what is there is not marriage.

Love and marriage—they sure are nice together. But you can have love without marriage or marriage without love. Marriage requires more than love—it requires covenant.

And covenant requires us to see one another as equal, as equally worthy, as full participants in the co-creation of our world. And this way of seeing one another, I would argue, is potentially even greater than the romantic love we want to see in marriage. It is the understanding that you are bound in relationship to another, a mutual and empowering relationship.

It is an understanding that we—no matter our marital status or relationship history—all come together with in this community of faith. This Valentine's Day weekend, I hope that you know that here, you are loved, that here, you are worthy of that love, and that here, in this covenanted community of worshippers and seekers, you are not alone. Go in peace.

Works Cited/Consulted

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McCarty, Dennis. "The Tyger and the Lamb," *UUWorld*, Fall 2008 (8/18/08).

UUA, *Our Whole Lives* program values, author not attributed (found in every edition of the curriculum).