

Marriage as a Spiritual Practice

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

June 16, 2013

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June is a month filled with weddings. I am not entirely sure why this particular month became the month to get married in, but so the tradition has come down to us. This morning I wish to speak to you about marriage as a spiritual practice. I know today is Dad's day. Of course marriage and fatherhood do not always correlate strictly speaking, but I thought the occasion an apt one. That and this morning is the last time I will have to speak to you before Sharon and I celebrate 10 years of marriage together in a couple of weeks. So often when I talk to people about marriage it is usually with couples who are planning their weddings or within the wedding ceremony itself. It is not often that I have the chance to talk about it with you from the pulpit.

As I said, Sharon and I were married ten years ago at the First Unitarian Church of Omaha Nebraska. That was not the church I was serving at the time. I was the minister at the Second Unitarian church, but my church was too small to accommodate our guests. Beside First

Unitarian Omaha had a classic New England look to it that photographed really well. We didn't necessarily say that to my parishioners at the time, but it was a factor. Rev. Fritz Hudson performed the ceremony. If you attended my installation a few years back you will remember Fritz as the guy who gave the charge to the minister and dressed up like Obi-wan Kenobi from Star Wars during the service. Fortunately he left his flair for the theatrical at home on the day he did our wedding.

I remember everything going so smoothly as we got ready for the ceremony. And then, just about ten minutes before the service I started to freak out. It wasn't cold feet exactly; I wasn't looking to leave. But it was just a realization that I was on the brink of this huge moment in my life. I sympathize with the grooms in Vanessa's story. Marriage is a big step to take and getting nervous just before doing it is a natural thing. But I remember it surprised me.

I was a minister for about three years before I got married. That means I had seen this marriage thing done, and in fact had been in charge of making it happen, probably a dozen times or so. But you know, being the minister at a wedding is sort of like being the guy at the top of the water slide who is in charge of telling kids when to go

down. You aren't the one taking the plunge yourself, yet you have all these instructions for the people who are about to make the leap!

I had written plenty of weddings. I had and still do, have a booklet of how to put together a wedding ceremony. I had a lot of fun doing it myself, picking out my readings, making sure the ritual flowed well. I had the benefit of seeing all of this before and knew what worked and what didn't. But no matter how many weddings you write, no matter how many times you declare a couple united in holy matrimony, it is a whole other thing when it is your turn. It's one thing to be the kid at the top of the water slide controlling who jumps down and when. It is a vastly different experience to be the one who actually propels themselves down the slide, accelerating with the slippery water through the twists and turns, and is then plunged into the pool below. Can't even compare those experiences.

Our ceremony itself was quite moving. I will never forget Sharon tearing up as she walked down the aisle. It was a very sweet and tender moment that kicked things off. A friend of hers sang a John Lennon song on his acoustic guitar "Grow Old with Me." I had not heard the song before, but it is now pretty common at wedding ceremonies. While the service started out a bit teary and nervous, by the end I remember laughing and smiling during the exchange of rings

and the vows. As many brides and grooms have noted to me over the years, Unitarian Universalist weddings are notoriously fast. We don't mess around with a whole lot of ornate side rituals. We tend to get right to the meat of the issue, marry the people, and then we are out.

Like all rites of passage, a wedding is a moment of liminal time. That means that it moves you from one status or state of being to a new state of being. Young men in tribal societies go off to caves where they are taught "secrets" about hunting and leading a family. They are put through trials and when they return they are men. A wedding takes two individuals, each person making their own way in the world, each one unique and fully formed adults in their own right. But marriage shifts their primary focus from themselves and their self-interest and replaces it with the concerns and interest of another person; more when children come. That is a radical reorientation to life. It means that if one of the partners gets a new job on the other side of the country the response from the other isn't "So long it's been a great ride!" No it means, "Let's start looking for houses in that new state!" Where you go, I go.

Marriage is love inside commitment. One can of course separate love and commitment, but if it is to be marriage, then they have to go together. I believe it is the commitment part that truly makes marriage

a spiritual practice. The Catholic Church is on to something when they list marriage as one of the seven sacraments of the church. The intent was to elevate marriage to be the equivalent of holy orders. Whereas a priest's commitment is to the church, the lay person's commitment is to another person. Either way, commitment entails a spiritual practice of staying with someone regardless of what comes along. As the old marriage vows state "For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." I have even had a few couples insist on the old language just as a way to bring home how important that commitment is to their relationship.

That is why it is ridiculous to make the claim that same sex marriage weakens heterosexual marriage. First off the logic is suspect; another couple's marriage has at best indirect impact on my own. If anything heterosexual divorce weakens marriage more so than same sex marriage does. But frankly I find the whole "weakening" and "strengthening" of marriage to be somewhat spurious. Does my Zen improve by being around other Zen practitioners; probably a little. But no one can sit for you. You either clock in the hours doing Zen meditation or you don't – you can't do it by proxy. Same with marriage. Just because gay folks can get married too, doesn't really affect my marriage in any tangible way. Actually, if I am to use my own terms consistently, all the states have done is recognize same sex weddings as legally binding. Marriage, which is love inside

commitment, is possible without such legal trappings. But it is certainly nice to see same sex marriage be recognize as equal—which it always has been in my view.

There is nothing like getting to know another person in a very deep way, as a means of getting to know yourself. You can be raised in your parent's household with only them and your siblings as your frame of reference on mundane things like how to mow the lawn or stack dishes in the dishwasher. But then when you are married to someone else you come to realize that the smallest things can be approached in whole new ways. Not to mention the big things—what sets you off into a mood of depression or anger. How you react under stress. Just where are those buttons your partner knows how to press in order to win a fight or avoid one? You would have never learned all of those things living by yourself. You would have blissfully went along through your life having never being challenged or supported.

All of that comes with marriage. The wedding is another story. A wedding is simply a ritual—a rite of passage from one stage of life to the next. Marriage is living in that new phase of life. In my role as minister, I have come to learn that I have almost complete control over the wedding and almost no control over the marriage. Marriage starts

at the reception, a moment I am very clear with people that I have no domain there.

My wedding reception was a lot of fun, and many guests said it was one of the best they had ever attended. I remember that during the pictures I kissed my best man—a photo that is quite precious to me. I can't remember another time when I did so many shots with my brother and sister! At the wedding rehearsal Sharon had smeared cake in my face, so I returned the favor at the reception, but she got me again there. It was a light-hearted time with good food, good drinks, good music, and old friends and lots of family.

But as I said, marriage starts at the reception. Two of my in-laws were not on speaking terms, and had not been in each other's presence since the previous family wedding. They refused to be in the same picture together. Not that I was keeping track particularly, but I did notice that neither my brother nor my sister gave me a gift on my wedding day. I would later learn why.

My sister had the idea of making a rug as a wedding present. This is not uncommon on that side of the family. I have an aunt who is a talented sewer and embroider and she gave us a beautiful embroidery in our wedding color pattern. She also did one for my ordination that hangs in my office. So my sister, inspired by this, tried her hand at

making this rug. It turned out to be a bigger project that she anticipated. From the stories I have been told, family members were working into the night with her at the hotel to try and get this rug finished by the wedding date. They couldn't get it done, so my sister promised it for our anniversary. Then again, and again. Finally for our fifth anniversary I at least got to see it. By then it had taken on mythical legend in our family. In fact, some family members who worked on it that night in the hotel have since passed away, and that rug, which I still haven't officially received, has their labor as a part of it. Their love and legacy are a part of that wedding day woven into my sister's wedding gift. I am keeping my fingers crossed for actually getting this rug in year 10.

Vanessa Southern correctly names marriage as a leap of faith. It is to believe in "as if" because you don't have any for sure guarantees that things will work out with this person, or that you won't find someone else who is the love of your life next week. Again, as the traditional wedding language has it, marriage is not to be entered into lightly or inadvisably. But marriage is a spiritual practice because, like all spiritual practices that we do over time, they transform us. Spiritual practices are intended to transform us. Love inside of commitment is transformational. That is why we understand a wedding as a rite of passage. Technically you probably aren't all that different the day after

your wedding than you were the day before. But practice that spiritual discipline of marriage for ten years, or more, and you will be transformed.

The Unitarian Universalist minister David Blanchard has this reflection on love:

“Most of us look for love in only the most obvious places, and as a result, most of us come away disappointed. It’s as if we are still grade school kids, counting valentines as a measure of what matters. The love that matters is not typically the subject of sonnets or love songs.

There can be love in being told we are wrong. There can be love in sharing a regret. There can be love in asking for help. There can be love in telling hard truths. Most of us find it painful to live at this level of love, but it can be there, even in these most unlikely places. It isn’t the kind of love we’ve been promised in the fairy tales of princes and fairy godmothers, but it is the kind of love experienced by frogs and dwarfs. It’s the sort of love that can bring us closer to finding the missing pieces of ourselves that we need to make us whole.

Some of the most loving things I’ve ever experienced, I haven’t been ready for, wasn’t looking for, and nearly didn’t recognize. A few of them I didn’t want. But all of them have changed me, transformed some part of me, filled in a place that I didn’t even know was empty.

When the valentine has been tucked away in a drawer, the candy eaten, the flowers faded and gone, there will be other legacies of love that will last as long as we do, because they have brought us to know an element of life—part feeling, part idea, part mystery—that once known, is ours to keep.”

To Blanchard’s words I give a hearty “Amen!”

This is my final sermon of the church year. I will be around in the office this summer, but will not be in this pulpit again until after Labor Day. So I wish you a summer filled with rest, happiness, and joy until we are together again at Ingathering. May you be blessed always.
Amen Blessed Be.