

Love and Marriage

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“Always the best man, never the groom.” This expression applies to me: I’ve been the best man for four weddings before getting married this summer. I’ve also been the minister for approximately twenty weddings. In recent years, I’ve begun to question myself: how can I guide people in marriage when I have not been married?

Despite these doubts, I’ve been able to minister effectively in this rite of passage for others. I provide more pre-marital counseling than most other UU ministers, typically meeting with couples four times. They construct genograms, or relational family trees, and go over them with one another with my guidance, learning more about one another’s families and how familial patterns may interact with their own relationship. I guide couples through a process of writing their own vows. I help them honor their vows as a covenant, the guiding light of their relationship. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I put faith not in creeds but in covenants, in sacred promises. I live out this religious orientation in each wedding I officiate, helping others honor their promises to each other as sacred. Regardless of how long they’ve been together, I help them honor their wedding as a true rite of passage.

So, despite my lack of experience with marriage, I’ve been able to guide others appropriately. Yet for the past few years, I’ve had a gnawing sense that the couples I’ve assisted, even those in their twenties, know loving on some levels that I don’t. They might not know what they know, and they’re rarely as articulate about their knowing as I am, and my perspectives are still valuable to them. With my training and experience with other couples, I can show them the map. But they know the landscape more intimately than me. Instinctively they know better how to climb out of the thickets and sand bogs, assisted by habit and inspired by a level of love deeper than I had known.

Rainer Maria Rilke writes,

For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation. Loving does not at first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person – it is a high inducement for the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world, to become world in himself for the sake of another person; it is a great, demanding claim on him, something that chooses him and calls him to vast distances.

My adult life has been dominated by the vocation of ministry and my long preparation for this work. Ministry involves loving. Not necessarily the affection that flows to one's intimate family members and friends, although something like that may occur. To minister is to love in the sense that one acts with genuine concern for the well-being of others, supporting and guiding individuals, families, and groups in the ways of one's religious tradition. Which for Unitarian Universalists means discerning and walking in the ways of Love and Truth, making promises in the face of the unknown and keeping them.

I do feel that I am loving when I take time to prepare and lead a worship service, teach a class, guide others in their ministries to groups or individuals, and accompany people through rites of passage. Ministry involves lots of helping, truth-telling, lots of work. Hence the nearly-constant drumbeat for "self-care" among ministry support networks. The dominant message is this: if you are going to give of yourself to others, you need to be replenished, so you have something to give. The dry well quenches nobody's thirst.

Functioning as a single minister during most of my career, I came home exhausted and often lonely on Sunday afternoons... and after night committee meetings and other times, but most especially on Sundays. Single church members often feel this way on Sunday as well – we hold hands, sing songs together, and then the couples and families go home with one another and the single people, if they haven't lined up plans in advance, often go home alone.

So I got my dog, made friends, dated, and became very attached to reading the Sunday New York Times on my couch with comfort food. ☺ Even with friends, I never had people I could see on Sunday unless I made plans ahead of time, which I was often too busy to do. Much of what I am describing is the plight of many busy single Americans, especially whites, regardless of their profession: if you don't have the energy and the time to make plans, you're alone. This is much less the case in other countries and cultures, where time with extended family is a given.

Given the nature of my work and the fact of being single, I did a pretty good job of "having a life" – in fact, other ministers often admired my life balance, with my regular exercise, getting a dog, and having an intermittent social and dating life. Their admiration made me feel good about myself at the time but now seems to me more of a commentary on their lack of balance than on my allegedly holistic life, which in hindsight now seems kind of pathetic, although I was trying. There are MANY lonely ministers out there. And counselors and people in other helping professions, whose intimacy needs begin to seep into their work.

I knew I wanted more intimacy, more love; I could feel the absence of receiving love, especially during those times when I extended myself for others in my congregation or took a lonely principled stand. Without naming it as such, I

yearned for a relationship that would refuel me for ministry. I wanted to receive love.

What I didn't feel as strongly was the absence of offering love, probably because I thought to myself, I do so much of that as a minister.

What I didn't realize I was missing was the day-in, day-out experience of living for others. Following the lead of the "self-care" mantra, I thought of love in terms of an equation: the amount coming in must equal or exceed the amount going out. Feeling exhausted on Sunday afternoons, I yearned for someone to take care of me, not for someone to take care of.

I misunderstood the physics of love.

It's true that my relationship now does refuel me, and that, like all people, I do need to be taken care of to a certain degree, and that, as a care-giver and leader, I may need this more at times. But equally important, perhaps more important for me, has been the ways being a partner and a parent draws me out.

When one is feeling depleted, how can it be possible that giving more is what one needs? Seeing love through the lens of an in-flow, out-flow model or equation would negate this possibility. It turned out for me that living for others in my daily life is the single form of love I most need. I think of the Prayer of St. Francis, which ends:

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

The physics of love work differently for different people. Living for others morning, day, and night – and sometimes, with a restless child, quite late at night – is what I most needed. I'm sure I couldn't do it if I weren't being loved so well, too, but this is the core need I did not know I had. It seems to me that many American men are insufficiently aware of their own need to care for others, to put others first. Other people may need to receive more, and perhaps give less of themselves for a time. This is more often true of women than men.

And for all of us, what matters less is any "equation" of giving and receiving love; what truly matters is the quality of love that is given and received. People in public roles, such as parish ministers, often benefit from giving in more anonymous or at least unheralded ways, such as helping out at the food bank. Parish ministers receive a great deal more recognition for their work than other

people who serve others. Ministry can become performance, bright and sparkly and seemingly life-giving, but in actuality worthless or even poisonous if it is not rooted in a deep, humble love.

A passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is the most widely used reading for weddings to my knowledge: "Love is patient and kind..." In my favorite book of wedding readings, the paragraphs preceding and following it are also included:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love suffereth long and is kind. Love envieth not. Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doeth not behave itself unseemly. Seeketh not her own. Is not easily provoked. Thinketh no evil. Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth. Bareth all things. Believeth all things. Hopeth all things. Endureth all things. Love never fails. But where there be prophesies they shall fail, whether there be tounges, they shall cease, whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I fought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass dark plain, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then shall I know even also as I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love - these three, but the greatest of these is love.

There are so many people who seem, on the surface, selfless, giving to others and so on – but something's missing at the core. Or something's present: a hidden, subtle selfishness. This selfishness, this ego, has a way of polluting all that is offered, over time. This is true of many religious leaders, politicians, and activists.

The gap between my professional skills and my day-to-day loving was growing. I've been saved by a loving relationship with a woman who has love and family life deep in her bones. Being in this deep has been hard for me at times, particularly in the first six months, as I resisted in unhelpful ways. After twenty years of adult life of living for myself in my personal life, aside from a few relationships of one to two years, I found parts of myself out of step with my self-image. I found a relationship where, yes, I have been well cared-for, but more importantly, where I've learned more consistently to care for others – nighttimes and wet beds, in the middle of the night, a partner with a demanding job herself who needs me to cover for her just as she covers for me when something comes

up with my work. Two human beings with needs just as real as mine, and, in the case of our son, with greater help needed to meet them.

Now, I can't take a nap any time I want to when I'm at home! I can't finish the milk without thinking about who else drinks it, and considering the comparative distress of a 41 year old man and a 6 year old boy Amazingly, the distress is almost as great for the 41 year old – I love my cereal! -- but I get to rise above it!

At times in the last twenty months, I've felt like I was in boot camp: thinking of others, thinking of others, thinking of others. I almost never get to read the Sunday New York Times with a sandwich on Sunday afternoon, as I used to do every Sunday! Well, I get to read it ten or fifteen minutes, not two hours.

I've been more sleep-deprived at times, and deprived of many of the things I used to consider essential self-care. It was a difficult adjustment, and occasionally still is. But mostly I feel now that I'm getting the hang of this, and I realize how deeply I've been yearning for it: not just the companionship and the support, but also the drawing forth of love. Not just the experience of being loved, but more, the experience of loving, every day. There is no greater spiritual practice than this.

I have long thought of covenants as promises made, with words, into an uncertain future. An act of faith, a giving oneself to another or to an ideal, without assurance that everything will work out. While not diminishing this aspect of covenant, I also see it now as something more gradual, implicit; something that grows slowly beneath the surface. This aspect of covenant is not so much spoken or created as recognized.

When did I become Toraja's father? First answer: a year ago this week, the same day I proposed to Wendy, and she asked him if he would like me to be his daddy. From then on, I have been his father. I promised to be his loving father just as I promised to be Wendy's loving husband.

But a month or so ago, Wendy asked Toraja, "When did you first know that daddy was your father?" He replied, "When he read me the story at Laughing Planet." The second time I met Toraja, while Wendy and I were still dating. I felt I became his father, truly, on his birthday last year, May 5, when I sat in the parent's chair at his Waldorf school birthday celebration. So I officially became his father a year ago, but for six months, in his heart, I was already. Covenants are not just consciously chosen. They reveal themselves. Love is both a choice and a reality that we can accept or deny.

I approach our wedding day on July 6 with some excitement and nervousness, but less so than I anticipated. I already feel I'm married to Wendy. The ceremony and the events leading up to it – including an informal celebration here next Sunday afternoon – will make our marriage, our covenant, our love, more

real, and I look forward to celebrating it with our families and friends. We will write our vows, making promises to one another and to the unknown, in the presence of God. As with many couples whose weddings I've officiated, the rite of passage will probably turn out to have greater emotional significance than we anticipated. Yet the covenant we will enter formally and fully we have already been living.

This loving is a dance, as Wendell Berry writes, a lifelong dance with one another that intermingles and enhances one's relationships to others, to oneself, and "to the dance, and to the song that moves [couples] through the night."

When I say, "I do" to my promises to Wendy, I will be forming a spiritual covenant, offering her my fidelity into an uncertain future. Wendell Berry elsewhere (in an essay, "Poetry and Marriage") writes, "The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to one another we join ourselves to the unknown. We can join one another only by joining the unknown."

Yet when I say, "I do" to Wendy, I will also be recognizing the covenant that already exists between us, and includes her and now our son. I will be acknowledging the love between us, the intermingling of lives that has already taken place, the physics already at work. I am choosing to marry her, the most significant choice of my life. And yet I feel that there is no choice, really. Almost despite myself it seems, despite my fears and my habits, Love has reached out and wedded us together. The "I" that says "I do" has changed, has opened, has become interwoven with the "I" of two others, has become part of a "we."

I am glad of the ceremony, the vows, the entire rite of passage, even the endless stream of challenging logistical details which we are now attempting to manage. My experience in ministry has taught me that there will be times in the future when this reality of togetherness, this love, will be felt less strongly than it is now, and my vows, my offering words of commitment into the unknown, will help. But the words are more than promises; they are markers of a deeper reality, one that has been present and growing for some time, and will continue to grow. Sometimes I think of it as God, and sometimes as Life or Love or even Ultimate Reality; whatever it is, it is present in our relationship, and I will not deny it. When I say "Yes" to my beloved, I am also saying "Yes" to Love, to God.

I invite you to join with me in prayer...