

‘Til Death Do Us Part: Taking Marriage Seriously
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Imagine a wedding ceremony, a very traditional church wedding. The clergy person asks the groom whether he wants to marry the woman standing beside him, and instead of simply agreeing, the groom starts off on a long lecture on uncertainty and legal issues. Do you remember this television commercial? Finally, another young man steps in and marries the bride, and we are expected to believe that they will live happily ever after. By the way, I have no idea what product they were trying to sell. Can anyone tell me?

Here’s a second little marriage vignette. Kerry and I travel to Milwaukee from time to time, to visit our granddaughter and her parents. Our next trip will be the end of this month, by the way. We were there on a Sunday morning during one visit, so of course we went to church. During joys and concerns, a woman shared with the congregation that she and her husband had been married 55 years. They had been married 55 years, she said, despite opposing views on “the two big ones, religion and politics.”

One more. Back in 1973, a young Washington lawyer was interviewed for a magazine article on bachelors. **hold it up** He lived in a commune, with several other single, young adult, anti-war activists, and, as it turned out, he was the token hippy in the article. During the interview, the writer asked him how he felt about marriage. He responded with casual indifference. If the right person comes along, fine. But if that doesn’t happen, life as a single person is just fine, too. Well, he lied. He very much wanted to find someone, and get married, just the way his parents, and *their* parents had. Indeed, within a year, he was married. [see *Washingtonian*, Sept. 1973]

Marriage is a strange institution. Is it a religious institution? Is it a legal, or governmental institution? Is it an economic institution? Or is it some strange hybrid? Should we seek guidance with respect to marriage from lawyers, from clergy persons, from business planners, or from psychotherapists? Is the institution of marriage in decline? Many people don’t seem to think it’s necessary any more. More and more children are born to unmarried parents. Old folks pair off, but don’t bother with formalities.

Marriage, indeed, is a strange institution. I do not claim to be an expert on it. And even if I were, there’s no way in the next fifteen minutes that I could say anything definitive about it.

I fear that my title for this sermon – *‘Til death do us part* – that my title could cause pain to some of you, or perhaps it has caused pain to some who chose to stay away this morning. *‘Til death do us part*. That’s part of the language of the traditional wedding ceremony. But to many of us it’s a source of discomfort; it’s a rebuke. We committed for life, but then we quit; we

broke our promise. In the real world, many marriages fail. Some should be terminated. People should be able to escape from bad marriages without feeling guilt, or at least without feeling guilt forever after.

Really, the very topic of marriage is painful for many – for those who would like to be married but haven't found the right marriage partner, for those not permitted to marry, for those whose spouse is no longer with us. If you are sad this morning, I can't make it better for you. But I can give you the good news that you are in the right place, in the midst of a loving, supportive religious community.

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Many couples have church weddings – I've had two, myself – so you might expect marriage to have its historical foundation in the Bible. Of course, whole books have been written on this, but I'll try to summarize the Bible and marriage in about thirty seconds.

Let's look first at the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The emphasis here is on procreation. A small nation, living in an area of hostile climate, surrounded by unfriendly neighbors, Israel needed offspring. Polygamy was accepted, and men who could afford it had children with concubines, too. Marriage, as the reading from E.J. Graff's book suggests, **hold it up** was a commercial transaction. [*What Is Marriage For?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999)] As you might expect, men were in charge. Women were second class citizens.

Jesus, the Apostle Paul, and the New Testament writers generally, bring some new features to this picture. First, a monogamous marriage is the implicit ideal; polygamy is passé. Without much effort, you can find support for the idea of the equal status of the marriage partners. But, secondly, marriage itself is no longer the universal norm. Jesus and almost all his disciples are presented as though they were bachelors, though it seems unlikely that they were. Paul tells us *he's* single, and you can find, in the teachings of both Jesus and Paul, support for celibacy.

This quick sketch obviously doesn't do justice to the rich complexity of the Bible on the subject of marriage, but I'll leave further exploration for another day.

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If we look at marriage historically, we'll find, by and large, that it's more about economics than about love. The married couple become an economic unit, with a division of labor between them. If we look at marriage through the ages, we'll find as well that it's about transfer of authority. The father of the bride transfers his authority over her to the bridegroom. Some wedding ceremonies still retain the anachronistic ritual of the father giving away the bride. Some ceremonies still call upon the bride to obey her husband.

The ideal we have of a young couple falling in love and eventually getting married does not represent the historical norm. More common, around the world, is the arranged marriage. According to an author I heard interviewed on NPR a while, on Radio Times – that’s a local Philadelphia interview show – according to this author, Robert Epstein, sixty percent of marriages worldwide are arranged. Here’s the interesting part: love between the couple starts out lower in the arranged marriage than in what we think of as the standard marriage. But give it time. Five years out, and the love in arranged marriages exceeds that in nonarranged marriages. [Radio Times, 8/1/05, Robert Epstein]

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How do I, as a now permanently married Unitarian Universalist, view marriage? The short answer is that marriage is a human institution, but, secondly, it is more than a human institution. Let’s explore what those two assertions mean.

Marriage is a human institution. I’ll make seven points here, one for each day of the week. Marriage is a human institution. That means, first of all, that it is a changing institution. I’ve already alluded to some of the ways that marriage has changed, and not too long ago. The role of economics has gradually diminished; the role of love has increased. I don’t think we can expect marriage to reach some ideal state and then stop changing. For that matter, marriage as an institution could be superseded, or transformed into something quite different. If, for example, the human life span were to double, to, say, 150 to 170 years, what would marriage look like? We have no way of knowing.

Second, marriage is an imperfect, fallible, institution, and those participating in it are themselves imperfect and fallible. That’s the nature of humanity, and of the people I know. We may have the ideal of marriages that last ‘til death do us part, but we know that, despite our best efforts, it doesn’t always work out that way. And in a perfect world, marriages would not be terminated by *death* until both partners have reached a ripe old age.

Third, since marriage is a human institution, it is governed by human values and principles. Thus, in my view, the human institution of marriage should be grounded on the principles of equality and democracy. Husband and wife, the two spouses, they should be equals. The life partners should share decision making.

Fourth, since marriages are not created by God, we cannot expect that each of us has one perfect soul mate. If you’re single, there’s no one ideal spouse just waiting for you, if the two of you can ever find each other. We must work to find a possibly right person, work hard with that person to become a couple that can make a good marriage. And then, after the wedding, that couple must continue to work to make the marriage successful and lasting. It’s not easy. We can never say that we’ve finished the hard work. We can never say that it’s up to the other person.

I mentioned earlier the couple that had been married for 55 years. I'm sure there was much more to the secret of their long marriage than avoiding the topics of religion and politics. I suspect that they put some effort into it.

Arranged marriages succeed because those participating in them realize that there's work to be done. It's just as true, but perhaps less obvious, in nonarranged marriages.

Fifth, since marriages are not created by God, and since we therefore cannot expect to find that one perfect soul mate, it follows that there are others out there whom we would find just as attractive and desirable as the one we have now. In a book called *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* **hold it up** psychologist Barry Schwartz advises us, *make your decisions nonreversible*. Don't try to make the absolute best choice, Schwartz says, don't try to maximize your choice, but be content with a choice that is good enough. Trying to make the best possible choice is very time consuming, and you probably won't succeed anyway. Worse yet, you'll be afflicted with buyer's regret – you'll be sure that some other not yet discovered choice would be better. Avoid all of this, Schwartz advises. Make a choice that's good enough, and then don't look back.

I think the power of nonreversible decisions comes through most clearly [Schwartz writes] when we think about our most important choices. A friend once told me how his minister had shocked the congregation with a sermon on marriage in which he said flatly that, yes, the grass *is* always greener on the far side of the fence. What he meant was that, inevitably, you will encounter people who are younger, better looking, funnier, smarter, or seemingly more understanding and empathetic than your wife or husband [or partner]. But finding a life partner is not a matter of comparison shopping and “trading up.” The only way to find happiness and stability in the presence of seemingly attractive and tempting options is to say, “I'm simply not going there. I've made my decision about a life partner, so this person's empathy or that person's looks really have nothing to do with me. I'm not in the market – end of story.” Agonizing over whether your love is “the real thing” or whether your sexual relationship is above or below par, and wondering whether you could have done better, is a prescription for misery. Knowing that you've made a choice that you will *not* reverse allows you to pour your energy into improving the relationship that you have, rather than constantly second-guessing it. [Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (HarperCollins, 2004), p. 229]

Individualism is a theme in American history, a theme amply reflected in our Unitarian Universalist history and principles. But here's the sixth point. In marriage, we must compromise our individualism. Here's how Anderson and Fite put it, in their book *Becoming Married*: **hold it up**

The central danger of radical individualism is that it seems to support only those commitments to others that are based on personal interest. The idea of marriage as a

lifelong commitment does not fit easily with this emphasis on the individual as an unburdened self. For the survival of marriages, we need to keep a balance between respecting the needs of the individual and strengthening the social bonds of marriage. [Herbert Anderson & Robert Cotton Fite, *Becoming Married* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 26]

Seventh – and this is the last point – since marriage is a human institution, we are responsible, we human beings. As individuals and couples we're responsible for our own marriages. As parents, friends, citizens, and voters we're responsible for maintaining the institution of marriage. We cannot take it for granted; we cannot leave it up to someone else.

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I said earlier that I look at marriage not only as a human institution, but also as something that's *more* than a human institution, as something that, in some sense, is *beyond* humanity. Here's what I have in mind.

Marriage is governed by the laws of Arkansas or Oklahoma or Missouri. State legislatures enact laws; courts decide cases and interpret the laws. But a marriage agreement isn't like a contract for the sale of six tons of scrap iron or for the installation of aluminum siding. I consider my marriage holy; marriage is a sacred, holy, mystical, spiritual institution.

At a wedding, the participants do not simply create a contract, but a covenant. You'll recall we talked about covenants when Susan Smith was with us a few weeks ago.

What's the difference between a contract and a covenant? It's how we look at it. In law school, I spent a year studying contract law, and most of my fellow students spent another year studying commercial transactions. Covenants involve a higher order of magnitude of trust and commitment. With contracts, we have to make careful provision for lack of fulfillment, for a party's changing their mind. With covenants, we're in it for keeps.

Here is what the Lester and Lester say about covenants. This is from the same book as the responsive reading. **hold it up**

Covenants are promises which are freely given out of a sense of love and commitment. Covenants are not so much an expectation or demand, but a gift to the other. The concept of "covenant" has a long history within the Judeo-Christian tradition in describing mutual commitments between two parties who have pledged their faithfulness not only to the specific agreements, but to the relationship. Contracts can be made between any two persons, but covenants are made between two persons who are committed to love and care for one another.

Covenants reflect trust already established between persons who are in a significant relationship. Contracts are of necessity legalistic and rigid, but covenants are dynamic and fluid. They can be adapted to changing circumstances. Couples find that

covenants must be continuously renegotiated to stay current with their life situation. When covenants aren't kept we will probably feel hurt and angry. But, keep this in mind too, when a covenant is broken we can express mercy and forgiveness. [Andrew D. Lester & Judith L. Lester, *It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 205-06.]

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I don't remember when I first heard of the idea of same sex marriage; it couldn't have been that many years ago. I remember well my reaction: "No, it doesn't make sense. A marriage, by definition, is between a man and a woman. Otherwise, you can't call it marriage." It was an emotional response; it was a conservative response. "This is the way the world is," my gut told me. "You could no more alter this fundamental feature, this defining characteristic of marriage than you could – say – challenge General Motors or add to Mount Rushmore."

That's often the way it is with unfamiliar ideas. We almost instinctively oppose them. But then we hear about something a second, a third, a fourth time. Of course, some ideas never get any better. But some ideas improve with age, with familiarity. Some ideas get their feet far enough in the door that we start thinking about them.

What's marriage about anyway? Why should we restrict it to people of opposite sex?

Courts started looking at the issue, too. If marriage is governed by the law of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, for example, and if the Massachusetts Constitution requires equal treatment, on what basis can we tell one couple that they cannot get married, while another can?

A few years back my cousin Carolyn, who had had two marriages, both ending in divorce, Carolyn told me that she had finally found the love of her life, Jayne. In due course I met Jayne and experienced Carolyn and Jayne together. What a wonderful couple they are! It was their good fortune to live in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They are now married. They have framed their marriage certificate and have proudly hung it on the wall of their kitchen. They come, together, to our annual family reunion. It just seems so natural to me *now*, that *they* should be married.

Every week the New York *Times* has stories about notable weddings. A couple of years ago the *Times* had a story about the wedding of another cousin of mine, Corby. [Nov. 14, 2004] **hold it up** Corby and John are now a married couple. Again, it seemed so natural to me. I was happy for them, and for a society that could accept this adjustment in our concept of marriage.

I'm not good at arguing with those who are opposed to same sex marriage. All I can think of to say to them is, if you don't believe in same sex marriage, then don't marry someone of the same sex.

May the institution of marriage long flourish; may it always remain open to change; may that change move it toward that unreachable target, perfection. Amen.