

## Making Love Last

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
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*“Young love is a flame; very pretty, often very hot and fierce,  
but still only light and flickering.  
The love of the older and disciplined heart is as coals,  
deep-burning, unquenchable.”*

— Henry Ward Beecher

## Invitation to Worship

Dan Cozort

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall...  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Sometimes things get too broken to get fixed. Sometimes what you thought would last for the rest of your life ... doesn't.

Does anyone get married with their fingers crossed behind their backs? I suppose. But most of us take that leap with the full intention of keeping the vows: through sickness and health, poorer and richer ... and yet, for more than half of us, it doesn't last until one or both members of our couple are in the grave.



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Quite a few people in this room know what it is like to experience the broke-ness of their marriages. It's something I know now, too. And I've been conducting a postmortem investigation, a kind of marital autopsy, to see if I can discern what made it break. It is painful and discouraging — there's enough blame to go around, for sure — but I have been learning a lot, and I hope to apply my lessons to make my second chance the last I need. The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "I have been married three times, and none of them were failures." You learn, I have come to appreciate much more keenly, what it takes to forage and sustain a relationship for the long run.

That's what today's service is about. What does it really take to go the distance?

How much rests on the strength of the passion you felt at the beginning? How much on your original compatibility? How much is due to dumb luck? How much is just due to compromise and sacrifice? How much to just making the determination that you will not ever, ever give up?

### **First Reading**

Song of Solomon 5:10-16 and 7:1-9

My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven.

*How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden! Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.*

His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk, fitly set. His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.

*Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.*

His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh. His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.

*Your neck is like an ivory tower. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim. Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus.*

His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars.

*Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses.*

His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.

*How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden.*

### **Second Reading**

*"The Longly-Weds Know"*

Leah Furnas

That it isn't about the Golden Anniversary at all,  
But about all the unremarkable years  
that Hallmark doesn't even make a card for.

It's about the 2nd anniversary when they were surprised  
to find they cared for each other more than last year

And the 4th when both kids had chickenpox  
and she threw her shoe at him for no real reason

And the 6th when he accidentally got drunk on the way  
home from work because being a husband and father  
was so damn hard

It's about the 11th and 12th and 13th years when  
they discovered they could survive crisis

And the 22nd anniversary when they looked  
at each other across the empty nest, and found it good.

It's about the 37th year when she finally  
decided she could never change him

And the 38th when he decided  
a little change wasn't that bad

It's about the 46th anniversary when they both  
bought cards, and forgot to give them to each other

But most of all it's about the end of the 49th year  
when they discovered you don't have to be old  
to have your 50th anniversary!!!!

### **Sermon<sup>2</sup>**

Duane Fickeisen

Valentines Day celebrates the sweet sting of Cupid's arrow, the lust and infatuation of the early phase of falling in love, when our brain chemistry is altered by the flood of hormones in response to physical attraction. We respond as the lovers in the Song of Solomon, extolling the physical characteristics of the beloved.

The holiday marketing machinery celebrates that infatuation and if it has faded, promises to lure us back to it with a dozen roses, chocolate truffles, a candle-lit dinner, or a romantic getaway.

But to someone who is not in a relationship at the moment, the hearts, the send-a-bouquet-of-roses fundraising campaign on public radio, and the constant media attention to love and lovers can be a painful reminder that something important is missing, that you are out of step and perhaps unhappily lonely. When I was single it was a cruel reminder of the hurt of rejection and of my longing for a partner in life and for ro-

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<sup>2</sup> ©2010 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

mance and intimacy.

The lusty, sexually charged romance and physical attraction feels great and of course we miss it when Cupid has ignored us. But research and experience show that it isn't enough by itself to sustain a long-term relationship.

To make a relationship last we seem to need something more. But what?

When I meet with couples planning their wedding or commitment ceremony, I tell them that there are two things that I need to hear from them in their ceremony — first that they are each entering into the committed relationship by their own free will, and second that they each commit their intent to remain faithful to the relationship for the rest of their lives, no matter what. They will nearly always choose different language for those vows, but their covenant with each other is one of commitment to an unknowable future together.

This is a high aspiration, it is challenging, and it is not easy. We live in a culture and time that doesn't support that kind of long-term commitment.

I remind couples that they can't possibly know what the "no matter what" part means — sometimes we can make pretty good guesses, but life happens and it nearly always brings unexpected troubles and disappointments as well as the joys.

I don't mean that a spouse should remain in a relationship that becomes abusive, but I do insist on the intention that the vows be taken as serious commitments for a lifetime together.

So what does it take to make a relationship last, no matter what the "no matter what" turns out to be?

There is plenty of advice readily available. Just search the

web or browse the library for resources and you'll find an abundance of suggestions and directions. They tend to boil down to a short list that probably most of us could recreate on our own: trust, communication, honesty, fidelity, commitment, forgiving, and compromise. But there is also some research on the longevity of relationships and what makes that possible that points to perhaps more helpful suggestions.

Last July Judy and Dan talked about making a marriage last, and cited research by John Gottman and his colleagues at his Seattle institute, which researches marriage, trains therapists, and runs workshops for couples.

Gottman claims that he can predict the long-term success of a marriage by observing even a brief conversation between the couple and counting the number of positive and negative statements each makes about the other. If the ratio is 5 to 1 or better, the relationship is likely to be a long-lasting one. Less than that and he predicts a separation.

He looks for expressions of interest in the other, demonstrated concern and empathy, appreciation and affection, and the ability to share joy and bring humor on the positive side. Hostility, sarcasm, name-calling, and defensiveness are all on the negative side. It takes five or more expressions of affection to offset each expression of hostility.

So one answer if you seek a lasting relationship is to use positive inquiry — look for what's working and seek more of that — and express your joy in the relationship much more frequently than looking for problems and expressing the negative and displeasure.

In general, John Gottman and Robert Levninson<sup>3</sup> found that gay and lesbian couples were not much different from

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gottman.com/research/projects/gaylesbian/>

heterosexual couples when it comes to factors that predict longevity. In a twelve-year study of 21 gay and 21 lesbian couples, they noted that same sex couples tend to approach conflict in a more upbeat way than they found with straight couples, with less hostility and more openness to hearing each other, and they take conflict less personally than do straight couples. On the other hand, gay men were more likely than lesbian or straight couples to need help to repair negative emotions and to maintain a sufficient level of positive expressions to offset the negative ones. I suspect that's true of many men, both straight and gay.

But Gottman's research focused on couples who had been in committed relationships for several years and many of them were experiencing difficulties in their relationships.

In a study of relatively newly-weds in rural Pennsylvania,<sup>4</sup> Ted Huston found that the amount of change in the relationship during the first two years predicted whether or not the marriage would last. Those particularly at risk were couples who had a brief courtship and entered their marriages with a high level of bliss, but lost a significant amount of the love and affection they felt initially as the realities of their full personalities emerged and disillusionment set in. In other words, when the quirks, annoying habits, and not-so-wonderful traits we all have showed up and offset the infatuation. Couples who relied heavily on each other for personal validation were particularly at risk.

On the other hand, those who took the inevitable transition from the "honeymoon euphoria" in stride and replaced it with a working partnership that included constructive coping

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<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200001/will-your-marriage-last>

mechanisms were much more likely to succeed in a long-term marriage. In other words, those who have a realistic set of expectations, validate each others independence, and don't expect to be swept off their feet every moment are more likely to succeed.

Making a deep commitment to your relationship is paramount to its longevity. Judith Viorst once said, "One advantage of marriage, it seems to me, is that when you fall out of love with him, or he falls out of love with you, it keeps you together until maybe you fall in again."

When Judy and I were married, our minister instructed us to greet each day by looking at the other and saying "I choose you." It is an affirmation of our commitment to each other. One that is easy to forget in the midst of busy lives, but one that keeps the commitment fresh.

Before you enter into a committed relationship, the question should be whether or not you are able to make a wholehearted and full commitment to it. After the covenant has been made, the question should shift to how to keep that commitment. Ted Huston's research points toward lowering expectations that your partner will be the sole source of your happiness and validation, and engaging in creative problem solving and coping mechanisms.

We Unitarian Universalists espouse seven principles that act as ethical guidance. They arise from our heritage of progressive, liberal religion. They call us to behavior that is grounded in our faith in the unity of the divine and in the universality of love. There is one source with many manifestations and we are each held in the embrace of the holy.

If we bring that faith and practice the principles we espouse in all of our relationships, won't they be enriched? Won't our lives be enriched?

That would mean treating every person in light of her or his inherent worth and dignity — with an attitude of respect and empathy; striving for justice, equity, and compassion in all of our relationships; and accepting one another as we encourage each to spiritual growth. In other words, nourishing and facilitating the full development of your partner's and your own being.

It would mean supporting the free and responsible search for truth and meaning within your relationship, exploring and deepening your understanding of each other.

And supporting the right of conscience and use of the democratic process in decision making. Speaking the truth as you understand it and engaging together in shared responsibility for your future together.

The goal of world community is a call to reach out from the base of your relationship to make a difference in the world around you, striving to bring about peace, liberty, and justice for all, starting with your family and extending beyond to the communities around you.

And finally, the last of our seven principles recognizes that we are one part of an interdependent web of existence and serves to remind us of the ways we are linked and connected to each other, to others around us, and to the environment in which we live. Our choices and our actions matter and their impact extends far beyond our individual and separate selves. The ways we navigate our relationships have effects that extend beyond them.

Judy gave me the perfect Valentines Day gift this year. She made a donation to WITF in my honor to help fund planting a grove of seedling trees at Letort Park near our home. I've been lamenting the condition of the aging grove of trees in the park — many of them are diseased and several been removed in

recent years after wind and ice damage. Several more are just one big windstorm away from coming down.

Planting a tree represents a commitment to the future, the hope for its growth and the dream of its shelter. It is a risky thing — no one knows whether it will thrive or not, yet without taking the risk, there would be no grove.

We walk in Letort Park nearly every morning with our dogs, so the new trees will be a daily reminder of her gift and of our hope for the future. May they thrive for the next generations of park users to enjoy.

May your relationship be mutually gratifying. May it thrive and be a source of joy and fulfillment. And if you are not presently in a relationship, or just checking out the possibilities of a new relationship, may you choose wisely and find happiness.

Amen.

**Benediction**

“Four Questions of Value”

Don Juan Demarco

There are four questions of value in life...

What is sacred?

Of what is the spirit made?

What is worth living for,  
and what is worth dying for?

The answer to each is the same. Only love.

*Image: Maori Heart. In the public domain.*