

**“What Makes For a Good Marriage?”**  
**Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley**  
**Carlisle, PA • July 5, 2009**  
**The Rev. Judy Welles©**

**First Reading**

“The Third Body”  
Robert Bly

A man and a woman sit near each other, and they do not long  
at this moment to be older, or younger, nor born  
in any other nation, or time, or place.  
They are content to be where they are, talking or not talking.  
Their breaths together feed someone whom we do not know.  
The man sees the way his fingers move;  
he sees her hands close around a book she hands to him.  
They obey a third body that they share in common.  
They have made a promise to love that body.  
Age may come, parting may come, death will come.  
A man and a woman sit near each other;  
As they breathe they feed someone we do not know,  
someone we know of, whom we have never seen.

**Second Reading** from “For Better and Worse” by Lynn Darling  
anthologized in *Here Lies My Heart*, Chasman and Jhee, eds.

All marriages are mended garments. In marriage, you don’t make it all better;  
you get over it. By marrying, Robert Louis Stevenson warned, “you have willfully  
introduced a witness into your life...and can no longer close the mind’s eye upon  
uncomely passages, but must stand up straight and put a name upon your actions.”  
Because if you don’t, she will.

**Sermon**

What Makes for a Good Marriage?

Some time last Fall, I received a message from XXX, YYY’s daughter, asking if I  
would conduct her wedding ceremony. It was going to be on July 4 (and in fact, it was  
— ad lib) — “It’s going to be an ironic Independence Day wedding,” she told me.

I love irony, and I loved the idea of an “ironic Independence Day” sermon about  
marriage, rather than the usual July 4<sup>th</sup> “the Founding Fathers were Unitarians”  
sermons that we’ve all heard (or preached) before. So today, instead of politics and  
history, you get my thoughts on the juxtaposition of independence and marriage — or  
to put it more broadly, what makes for a good marriage.

Now I want to make it very clear that when I say “marriage,” I am talking about  
both heterosexual and same-sex marriages. What I mean by “marriage” is a union  
between two people who have pledged to share their lives and their fortunes, and to  
stay together in a committed relationship no matter what. I’m a strong and fervent  
supporter of marriage equality for all people, and the kinds of issues that I’m going to  
be talking about today apply equally to any couple.

And speaking of marriage equality, I want to call your attention to the cover art for today's Bulletin. You probably recognize the new 44 cent stamp with the two wedding rings on it. But I can assure you that the U.S. Postal Service doesn't have a caption under every stamp that says "Marriage Equality." That's my personal addition.

I've committed to buy these stamps and only these stamps as long as they are available, and to write "marriage equality" under every stamp that I stick on an envelope. Who knows how many hands these envelopes go through before they reach their destinations? It can't do any harm to advertise my opinion as publicly as possible, courtesy of the U.S. Postal Service, and I hope that you will join me in this effort.

I'm very aware that not everyone here this morning is married. Some of you have never married. Some have been married unhappily and are now divorced. Some of you want to get married, and some of you most certainly don't. Some of you are widowed, and you long for the days when your partner was by your side.

But whether you are married or not, the chances are excellent that some people you love *are* married. When I conduct a wedding, I always tell the guests that they have a responsibility to the couple that goes far beyond witnessing their vows and partying at the reception. I charge them to help the couple remember the intentions and the dreams behind those vows, and to help them stay married when the going gets rough.

You can do the same, married or not, straight or gay, for the people you love.

You may be aware that Duane and I were away last week at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, the annual business meeting of the Association. Each year it's held in a different city, and this year it was in Salt Lake City, Utah. The Convention Center is close to Temple Square, the location of the Mormon Tabernacle and the Mormon Temple. Occasionally on my walks from our bed and breakfast to the Convention Center, I would walk through Temple Square, enjoying the lush gardens, fountains, statuary... and wedding parties. Lots of wedding parties. The place was loaded with brides and grooms getting their pictures taken before or after having their marriage vows sealed in the Temple.

It's no small thing to be married in the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake City. It's the aspiration of most Mormon young people to marry in the temple because only those marriages are sealed for eternity; marriages that take place elsewhere are only sealed for this lifetime.

In order to be married in the Temple, a couple must be interviewed by their Bishop and meet several expectations, including the expectations that they currently live the law of chastity and are both full tithers who give 10% of their income to the church. They must affirm that they are honest in all their dealings with others, keep their promises, participate actively in their congregations, and of course, believe in the specific tenets of faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. When a couple asks for a "temple recommend," as it is called, they are instructed that entering the temple is a sacred privilege. It is a serious act, not something to be taken lightly.

I think that it's a good idea for a religious community to make its expectations of marriage very clear. While I don't agree with all of the Mormon requirements, I do think that everything possible should be done with a couple entering marriage to impress upon them that this union is expected to last forever, that they should take it very seriously, that it entails social obligations, and that the entire weight of their faith community is there both to support them and to remind them of the rules if they should

start to stray.

Even though most of the couples whom I marry are not Unitarian Universalists, there is some power to the generic role of minister, and I try to take advantage of that role while I have a couple's attention. So I usually include a homily in their wedding ceremony along with the readings and rings and vows and music. This homily contains my instructions to them — my advice about what I think it will take for them to have a healthy and long-lasting marriage.

Today you get the expanded version of my little homily, along with a few examples and some references to a book that I've found to be a terrific resource.

The first thing I say in my wedding homilies is that the couple must acknowledge that what they are doing is forever. I say, "You must enter into this marriage with the sense that 'this is it.' This is a commitment you are making forever, no matter what, plain and simple. You are in this for the duration, and your intentions must be to stay in it regardless of what comes at you. I can guarantee you that life will throw you plenty of challenges which will tempt you to move apart from one another, and you must always approach those challenges with the thought 'How can we resolve this in a way that will keep us together and strengthen our marriage?'"

This is one thing I respect about those Mormon marriages in the Temple. They aren't even until death do us part; they are *forever and all eternity*. And if you're going to be joined with another person forever, or even for only this lifetime, it's still *for the rest of your life*, and you'd better accept *and celebrate* the foreverness of it.

Once you get it that this is forever no matter what, it can be very freeing to live within the embrace of that commitment. Rather than second-guessing and resentment, when you really grasp the spirit of what that commitment means, you can relax into the security of keeping your marriage vows and knowing that your partner will keep his or hers. Both of you can appreciate the blessing of being with a partner who knows you at your best and worst and won't withdraw their support when you're having a bad day or a bad month. With that realization, a lot of energy can be freed up that was formerly devoted to wondering and insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

Now I admit (and I am sure this is true for many of you as well) that there have been times in my marriage to Duane when it was only the promises we had made that kept me present in the marriage. I found myself gritting my teeth and saying to myself "I made a promise and I'm sticking to it, even now, no matter what. I won't break this promise." No matter if I was furious, disappointed, felt betrayed or wanted to give up, I stuck it out because I had made a promise that I intended to keep.

And guess what... those awful feelings eventually went away, things changed, and the marriage scene looked sunny again. This has happened more than once, and I can tell you that I now *know* that having made those promises to each other will hold us together through thick and thin even when the going gets very rough. This is real security.

Remember those wise words that Dan read earlier: "In marriage you don't make it all better — you get over it."

Another piece of advice that I give to couples I marry is that they have to talk

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<sup>1</sup> A restatement of a paragraph in Linda and Charlie Bloom's *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married*, New World Library, 2004, p. 22.

about the hard stuff. “Have courage,” I say. “Be brave. Confess to each other. Say the very things you don’t want to say. Trust that with your shared commitment, you can hear one another into deeper speech and deeper understanding. And for heaven’s sake, remember forgiveness.”

Now this is a place where we all can use some help. And there is help out there. In fact, there are hundreds of books that purport to tell us how to fight, how to interact, how to stay married. The one I really like is John Gottman’s *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... and How You Can Make Yours Last*.<sup>2</sup>

This book describes his studies of the spoken and unspoken dynamics between a couple, scientifically observed in a laboratory and evaluated for the likelihood of whether the marriage would last. What Gottman and his colleagues learned by observing and recording couples as they interacted and sometimes argued — recording their words and their body language, like eye-rolling or failing to make eye contact, even recording their heart rates — what they learned was that it really doesn’t matter how frequently or excitedly a couple argues. They studied couples who calmly hashed out everything, couples who fought dramatically, couples who didn’t talk much to each other, couples who seemed to live contentedly side-by-side, couples who made appointments to have a fight. Then they made predictions about which marriages were likely to last and followed up with the couples four years later, with an astonishingly high rate of accuracy in their predictions.

Gottman and his colleagues observed that regardless of the frequency or vehemence of a couple’s disagreements, those most likely to remain together had a ratio of five positive interactions for every negative one. You can be raising your voices at each other several times a day, but if there’s five times as much validation, agreement, compromise, affection or joking around, you’re probably going to be fine.

In my experience, you don’t have to keep count. Just knowing that the positives have to outnumber the negatives is helpful. It reminds me to give a hand squeeze or a kiss now and then, or make a joke out of something before it escalates badly. It reminds me of the importance of validating Duane’s feelings, even if I don’t share them. And it also frees me to confront or complain when that is justified, knowing that honesty and truth-telling are key elements in a healthy marriage.

Small acts of kindness can go a long way; in fact, I’m continually amazed at what a difference the little things can make. We have an inconsistent practice that when one of us is traveling, someone hides a chocolate bar for the other one. Duane may slip it into my suitcase, or I may leave it under his pillow. It isn’t something we expect — as I said, we’re inconsistent about this — but it’s a tiny moment of delight to find this hidden treat and realize that, even though he’s far away now, he thought of a way to say “I care.”

Refilling the coffee cup, straightening out the sock drawer, pitching in to help when one of us is overwhelmed. These things really matter. Another thing we’ve learned to do after fifteen years of marriage is acknowledge when we’re stressed, especially if we see it coming and want to minimize it. We know what’s on each other’s calendars, and we know that when we’re both really busy, we tend to get a bit snarky with each other. I’ve been known to say “The next two weeks are going to be really full and stressful. Let’s make an extra effort to be nice to each other for a while.” It sounds

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<sup>2</sup> Gottman, John, Ph.D., *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... and How You Can Make Yours Last*, Fireside Books, 1994.

hokey, but it works.

Another thing I say to couples I'm marrying is that they are always on the path to somewhere, every day. Each crisis that they *resolve*, each problem that they *solve* helps to keep them on the path toward intimacy and a healthy relationship, while each problem left unaddressed and each crisis ignored will pull them backwards. There is no standing still. So pay attention to which direction you're moving in from day to day or week to week, and be proactive to insure that it's a positive direction.

My last piece of advice to couples getting married may sound strange, though it's probably the most serious piece. It is this. I say to them, "Lower your expectations. (Not your standards!) Don't expect your marriage to give your lives all meaning and focus. This is too much to expect, too much of a burden to put on one other person and one relationship. In addition to the life you share, let each of your lives be full of friends, of work, of personal goals that have little to do with one another."

I think that one of the reasons my first marriage failed was that I had hugely unrealistic expectations for it. I had grown up in the fifties and sixties, never quite sure whether I wanted to be June Cleaver or Gloria Steinem. But when I got married, June Cleaver broke through (at least temporarily), and when I found myself restless even with a terrific husband, two children and a lovely house — everything I always thought I wanted — I was perplexed and unhappy.

Romance is great; romanticism is okay — but there is such an everyday-ness to marriage that it needs more than romanticism to make it strong and healthy. It needs two whole, separate people who understand how to join their lives and yet, at the same time, maintain their individualism. It needs people who are interested in their own lives, who are deeply aware of each other and celebrate each other, yet who at the same time are entire and separate unto themselves. They cherish this third body that they have in common — the marriage itself — which they feed with every breath they take.

In some traditions, it is very explicit that God is a full participant in every good marriage. Personally, for myself, I like this idea. It holds me to a high standard, yet it also feels like a resting place or a place of sanctuary when Duane and I alone are feeling shaky.

To choose another person in love, to commit to that relationship as the place where love's work will be done, is to enter into a promise not only with one another, but with the Great Love that moves the universe. A couple who are marrying are making a commitment to realize and live out the full potential of divine love by giving it an earthly form in marriage. Marriage provides continual opportunities to bring together the most sacred aspects of divine love with the mundane and simple tasks of daily living. When two people blend the inspiration of love with the hard work of putting that love into practice, their marriage becomes a sacred alchemy, joining heaven and earth.

You don't have to attribute divine qualities to the third body called "marriage" in order to acknowledge its value. The relationship itself has a personality, needs, quirks, vulnerabilities. The marriage asks something of us — commitment, kindness, intentionality, loyalty. Marriage gives us one context — though not the only one — in which to become our best selves, to reach down deep inside and bring forth what the world needs: loving, patient, fully-realized people who know how to be in partnership with one another and in right relationship with all that surrounds them.

Regardless of the context that you're in — married or not, committed relationship or not — we are all called to live full and authentic lives. We come here each week to be reminded of this, and to reflect on all the ways — for they are numerous — that we can strive for this authenticity and help one another to achieve the fullness that life offers.

The mystery is that we are so connected, even when we feel so far apart.

Amen.

### **Minister's Prayer**

Will you pray with me?

Gracious and loving spirit whom we call by many names, our hearts are full today as we consider what it means to be partners with the world. All of us are called to join hands and acknowledge the connections that keep us strong, that energize and support us, that help us to know we are not alone — we are never alone.

Oh Life abundant, creative and sacred, we know your power and beauty as Love in our lives, joining that which is separated, calling us to risk connection, leading us to lives of devotion, commitment, courage, and compassion.

In the spirit of compassion, we turn our loving thoughts to XX, who was admitted to Harrisburg Hospital yesterday with symptoms of weakness and an inability to move.

We recognize your presence among us, the wholeness of our gathering this day being more than the sum of our parts. Bless this community which gathers for one holy moment of witness and celebration, oh Spirit of Life. Bless the vows — all the vows — which have been made among us. Let the love which flows between the hearts of all committed couples overflow into all our hearts, reminding us that what is truly holy is between and among us — your power flowing through us forever and ever.

Amen.

### **Benediction**

“The Problem”

**Dan**

from *101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married*  
Linda and Charlie Bloom

...The problem with many of us is not that we desire too much from marriage, but rather expect too little. More often than not, we greatly underestimate the possibilities for love, joy, freedom, and wholeness that two partners in this creative process can generate for themselves, each other, and the world around them. The real question is not “How much pain are you willing to tolerate?” but “How much joy are you willing to experience?”