

I Do, I Do

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I have a colleague who does most of the weddings and Holy Unions that come into one of the larger churches in our denominations, and he has for years. So Richard has dozens of stories of things going awry on the wedding day. He wants to write a book and call it "For Better or for Worse." Favorite among the stories is Richard's tale of the service and reception that were to take place on a boat in the East River prior to a cruise around Manhattan. While boarding the boat, the maid of honor lost her footing when a wave raised the boat up suddenly. She fell into the water, and to make matters worse, three groomsmen dove in after her simultaneously, since no one knew if she could swim. Needless to say, the wedding was delayed until everyone could get back to the hotel and change.

My own favorite story is of the Indian bride I married to her American spouse. The families came from far and near, and by Friday, all had made it in, including the bride's brother, who arrived from Paris with his fiancée. The fiancée was a beautiful woman who was, in fact, to serve as the maid of honor in the wedding. We rehearsed the wedding without the organist, as we usually do, and all went smoothly.

On the day of the wedding, the bride wore a stunning gold sari. The maid of honor wore a lovely pale pink couture gown. The wedding started. I came down the aisle and cued the processional music. Parents came down the aisle. Groomsmen and bridesmaids. The groom came down the aisle. And then there was a long, long pause. So we waited and we waited. Finally, the best man and the maid of honor appeared. The organist, seeing this French woman in her lovely pale pink gown and guided by a man in a tux, appearing as they did after a long, protracted pause, assumed they were the bride and her father and switched deftly to "Here Comes the Bride."

Well, imagine the moment. Two hundred people facing forward and you are the only one facing back. Imagine 200 people who wonder what is going on and are looking at you to see how you respond. In ministry, we talk about a "non-anxious" presence. This was my test of a non-anxious presence!

What did I do? I just smiled. I pretended like in Unitarian Universalist churches, practically everybody entered to "Here Comes the Bride." Inside, of course, I was thinking as fast as I could about how to save things from the inevitable disaster of a bride coming down the aisle to silence. It turned out, though we didn't know it at the time, that the bride had stepped on her sari, torn the bottom and pulled it loose from the folds and tucks that hold it in place, and that in that long pause, her brother and future sister-in-law were rushing to put her back together.

Well, the best man and maid of honor made it down front and the music swelled to a finish. And I turned to the organist and mouthed the word, "Again." "Again?!" he mouthed back, perplexed. "AGAIN!" I mouthed emphatically. And he played "Here Comes the Bride" again. This time another beautiful woman, this one in a gold sari, came down the aisle with an escort, her father. And the rest, as they say, was happily ever after.

In weddings -- as in marriage, as in life -- something is bound to go wrong. And as unromantic as that may sound at a Service of Union or on Valentine's Day, someone should just tell you off the bat, so you can be ready. In preparing with dozens of couples for their weddings, I ask myself again and again, "What does it take to make it work?" If stuff is going to go wrong, what is required of us to deal appropriately and constructively with the stuff that goes wrong, not just in marriage, but in all relationships of love?

In my life, whether it is at weddings or Holy Unions I perform, or here over the course of events when you celebrate your anniversaries, or renew your vows, as some of you are preparing to do this very month, I always ask couples who are veterans at this business of happy partnerships what it took to get them there. Here is what I have boiled what I have heard over the years down to so far. I call it my three virtues of good love. They are: (1) honesty, (2) forgiveness, and (3) devotion.

There was a couple I knew and loved very much. They were married 25 years and had raised three children together. They seemed devoted to each other from the outside. Then one day, she walked away. We'd known there had been some issues. He could be insensitive. He'd gone out with the boys a few too many times and forgotten to call. He'd never gotten around to fixing that snoring problem he had that sometimes drove the whole family into the living room to sleep. Sure, he could be difficult, but he could be a prince too. So why was she leaving?

There was no other love interest. She even still loved him, but there was anger and resentment in her voice that welled up when she spoke about it. She finally confessed that one day she was dressing for work. He was in the room and they were talking and he looked at her and remarked that she wasn't the woman he'd married. What did he mean? she asked. "Well, the woman I married," he said, "was much fitter and skinny."

That was that. She never said anything to him, she never mentioned it once. Turns out he never remembered even saying it, but she harbored it. She'd never told him how sensitive she was about the way she looked or that she needed to hear that he loved her and found her attractive. He thought she knew all that. She never asked him to apologize and go more gently with her. Not knowing he had hurt her, he never did. She planted bricks around her heart, and soon enough, she'd made a wall so thick there was no getting through. That comment wasn't the end of their relationship, but it is symbolic of why it ended.

When it did end, he was broadsided. It turned out he adored this woman. He just didn't love her the way she wanted to be loved, and she never helped him figure out how to do so. I think this was a tragedy of sorts.

Being able to be honest about who we are and what we need. Being able to ask each other for what we need and want. Saying clearly what hurts us and what we won't stand for. These are key. And they may sound simple and obvious enough, but how many of us actively help the ones we love to love us better? Or when we do, do we say it in large brushstrokes: "I need you to be more loving," or "I need you to respect me"? Even that often is not enough, because what is showing love to one person is cloying behavior to another. We aren't the same, even when we love each other, and with a dearth of mind readers on the market of love, we need to be able to say in simple, easy and very specific ways what makes us tick, or purr, or irks us, and how our loved ones can be better spouses to us. That's the only way we have a hope of getting what we need.

As the story illustrates also, being able to forgive is key too. One thing I always liked about the story of the Garden of Eden was that it was some ancient's attempt to remind us that we humans were bound to violate covenant. I know we Unitarians think we are too good to be damned, and we are, but it doesn't mean we don't do some damned painful things to each other. We will hurt each other. We will say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, even, at our low points, willfully do and say the hurtful thing. And here's the tough part: We will do it a thousand times in our lifetimes and do it most often to the people we love.

So getting through this thing called love together means packing a lot of forgiveness in our bags, and just as much healthy contrition. Not holding grudges or being held captive by them. If we start keeping score on hurts, eventually we all have so much against us from the moment the day begins that our only hope of being free to love is to leave behind the one who keeps score.

I would like to meet the person who said, "Love is about never having to say 'I am sorry.'" I imagine that his closest relationship must have been with his stamp collection.

Honesty. Forgiveness. Devotion.

The first movie Spike Lee made for national distribution was "She's Gotta Have It." Early on, there is a scene in which the protagonist, Nola Darling, shows us all the pickup lines she has heard. It is one of the funniest scenes in the movie. Each man is more seemingly sincere and seductive than the next.

"Baby, it's got to be you and me," one says.

"I know I only saw you for the first time in my life a minute ago, but I love you," says the next.

"Please, baby, baby, baby, please baby, please," says a third.

Finally one man comes and says, without much show or pomp: "Nola, I don't want to chance not seeing you again. Whatever you want to do, I'll do. Wherever you want to go, I'll take you."

She is hooked. And who wouldn't be? Here's a man to travel with wherever the road takes you.

This is the same sentiment I find so marvelous, though in a different context, in the Book of Ruth when Ruth says to her mother-in-law, "Whither thou goest I will go. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

What Ruth pledges is quite extraordinary, more rich the more details of the story you know. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, has lost her husband and her sons. Naomi therefore is in the worst place in her society -- among the widows and orphans. In the Bible, it is these, the widows and the orphans, who are named as the ones who need the temple's charity most. They are the most vulnerable, the ones with the least status or means. What's worse is that Naomi cannot even have more children so that she could provide Ruth with another husband, as Jewish law allows. So pledging to stay with Naomi dooms Ruth also to the lowest status -- to the vulnerability and poverty of a widow.

Naomi encourages Ruth to leave as the other daughter-in-law did, to create a life of some means for herself. And Ruth refuses in an extraordinary pledge of committed love and says: "Wherever you go, I'll go. Your people will be my people. Your God, my God." To me, they are the words and spirit of lifetime unions. This is the better-or-the-worse part. The part that requires grit and a Taoist-like trust in the Way.

Gwen Buehrens, an Episcopalian priest and close friend, tells the couples she marries that lifetime covenants are like a rope -- it has three strands woven together. Two of those strands are love and one is longevity. So two-thirds of the time you are with the doll because you adore him, and one-third of the time you are with the bastard because you were with him yesterday. This is the perseverance part.

Years ago, I met a couple at a wedding I performed. The couple had been married 35 years and told me that there were three other couples who were friends of theirs who had all been married around the same time. None of the others was still together. "We went through what each of them went through," they said. "The only difference was that at each juncture, we made the decision to stay together." This was a revelation to me, that love that endured strong wasn't love that was better matched necessarily, or that got lucky and avoided infidelity or whatever life struggles pulled couples apart. It was love that chose to ride out the hard times together.

The payoff for perseverance, I think, is personal growth and mutual transformation. Couples who have been at it a long time know first-hand what Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote about in *Gift from the Sea*:

When you love someone you do not love them all the time, in exactly the same way, from moment to moment. It is an impossibility. It is even a lie to pretend to. And yet this is exactly what most of us demand. We have so little faith in the ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships. We leap at the flow of the tide and resist in terror its ebb. We are afraid it will never return. We insist on permanency, on duration, on continuity; when the

only continuity possible, in life as in love, is in growth in fluidity -- in freedom ... How can one learn to take the trough of the wave? It is easier to understand here on the beach, where the breathlessly still ebb tide reveals another life below the level which mortals usually reach. In this crystalline moment of suspense, one has a sudden revelation of the secret kingdom at the bottom of the sea ... So, beautiful is the still hour of the sea's withdrawal, as beautiful as the sea's return.

And anyone who knows anything about her life -- the tragic kidnapping of her first child, her husband's volatile military career and political engagements -- knows that she knew the ebbs of married life. So we can trust that she is being honest about the beauty found in those times too.

Honesty, forgiveness and devotion -- my holy trinity of virtues for long-lasting love. We all know that what keeps us in these relationships has to be more than simply that the other person makes us feel good about ourselves, because that will pass. It has to be about some commitment to each other's personal and spiritual well-being. And a vehicle for bringing themselves and us more fully into this world. Truly loving relationships in seeking this become the vehicle for what is quite extraordinary and simply divine.

In our unions of lifetime partnership, friendship, familial love, may we bring all that we are to bear on each other and on the fragile units we build, so that all who follow our lives with interest and affection have cause often to rejoice, not just in our happiness, but in the brave and generous living we make possible for each other. Blessed be. Amen.