



THOUGHTS BEFORE MARRIAGE

BY
BILL HOWDEN

It was around Christmas time. A couple we had known for two or three years invited us to supper at their house. Another couple was also invited whom we had known longer. In fact, I had married them in an unusual and spontaneous ceremony at a restaurant. They had their marriage license but didn't have time to plan a wedding. As the three couples were talking over breakfast, my wife suggested since I was performing wedding ceremonies for other couples and since they had their li-

cense out in the car, why couldn't they get married here and now? We all looked at each other and our faces lit up.

While the couple who invited us to dinner stepped out to buy a box of rice and a throwaway camera, I hiked to the front of the restaurant to ask the owners, who were friends also, if it was OK. The couple wrote out their wedding vows on the back of a paper plate. The bridal bouquet was a sprig of evergreen decoration snatched from the edge of a nearby picture frame.

This restaurant is a notorious crossroads for Albuquerque and the ceremony was so unusual that a local TV station had us reenact it two weeks later for a "postcard" during the evening news. It was all tremendous fun. And also quite spiritual. We were honoring and recognizing a bond that already existed between that man and woman. The place and circumstances were trivial and playful by comparison.

"...a marriage relationship is the purest gold..."

So as we sat at supper we started talking about the ceremony and the topic of relationships in general. The host said, "It's a miracle that relationships are possible at all." Without thinking, I concurred. But as a specialist in putting together married relationships and as a person who sometimes faltered in relationships with my wife and with others, I got to thinking about the mystery of relationships.

What could I say to couples who come to me seeking marriage, seeking help in creating a wedding ceremony with vows that are realistic? "Till death do us part." What a statement! Are such vows pipe dreams? Does such a couple have any idea what they are saying, much less how to achieve it? Are relationships possible for longer than fifteen days? Is everlasting love a fan-

tasy? National statistics show that over sixty-five percent of new marriages end in divorce. Should we revise our wedding vows to something like, "Till either of us has a change of mind"?

Well, I can't predict how long our restaurant-married friends will stay together. I can't even predict the future of my own marriage. But something inside tells me that a marriage relationship is the purest gold, buried deep, deep under difficulties, changes and even impossibilities that require work and courage to overcome. I'm hopeful about marriage. I'm hopeful about relationships. But I also suspect my hope may be slightly insane because it's grounded in a spirituality of oneness that's beyond words.

Seems to me there are several building blocks that stand like Stonehenge around each bride and groom. They are: spirituality, relationships, the social environment, the self, the community, the family, the wedding event, and the vows. I'll discuss them in random order because I don't want to imply that one is more important than another. If one is missing the whole edifice is incomplete.



THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The divorce rate is huge, and climbing. Breaking up is in the water. The pain of divorce is immense; I've been there. For children it's a disaster they may never outlive. Hedonism, the belief that personal pleasure is the highest good, runs rampant: Threaten my fun and I'll run. Interfere with my career and you're out of here. My way or the highway. Instant gratification.

“An engaged couple is called to seek deeper values....”

And Pragmatism oozes from the soil: If it don't work, trash it. Power is king. The golden rule: the one with the gold, rules. Every male an alpha; every female a goddess. All the soft places have been paved over. Every child has had its naming rights sold. Duty is dead. How can long-term relationships progress in such an environment? Not without heroic upstream rowing.

Hedonistic marriages are fragile. Pleasure is never satisfied and ever-changing. The slightest misfortune or disappointment may send a spouse running to the nearest lawyer for a no-fault divorce.

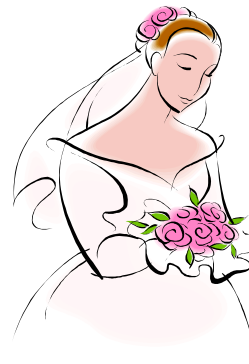
Yes, marriage is pleasurable. But its satisfactions come from giving more

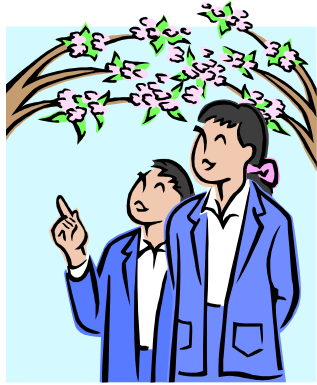
than receiving. And I'm not talking about sacrifice or submission. Trust is a flickering lamp when given. But it returns to surprise even its giver, a blazing torch. Forgiveness returns bearing certificates of innocence. These are treasures more than pleasures.

An engaged couple is called to seek deeper values, even if pleasure is what brought them together. They must change; seek the deeper things in life. Marriage is not for hedonists or pragmatists. It's for explorers and dreamers. It's not about fun nor power—not for long. You need faith, hope, and love. But these do not come alone. With them you will find doubt, disappointment and selfishness. Marriage sanctifies every possibility. It's real; not just pleasant or useful.

THE SELF

We all have needs, unique needs, hidden needs. We all have flaws. Some of them are big as mountains; most are not our fault, even if they are our responsibility. We all come to a relationship with baggage from our past: some good; some bad. And we all arrive bearing rare and unique gifts which can only be opened by love.





Relationships need wide gates which give entry to the circus parade of the self—gates that are open to magic and wonder—gates wide with innocence, opened by forgiveness and acceptance.

Popular psychology touts personal ego strength as the foundation of mental health and relational functionality. But marital oneness smiles at this and says, "You are who I am. I'm for you." Devotion is a flower. The ego is a stone.

Psychological counseling is often a last resort for suffering couples. In counseling these clients are brought to a realization that their pain and dysfunction are caused by errors within the self—errors requiring skilled therapy and hard work—errors that often cannot be removed; only sometimes controlled. The self revealed at the therapist's office is self-contained. To many therapists, a marriage relationship is merely a collection of symptoms. The marriage should dissolve as soon as its false foundations and neuroses are revealed. Only then

can the self continue its all-important but never-complete evolution.

This picture presented by psychology is depressing and essentially defeatist. Only clinically-crafted or naturally-perfect selves have any hope for a durable, therapist-sanctioned marriage. I don't believe that.

Why? Because I've had and still enjoy long-term relationships and I'm no poster child for mental health. But there's a deeper reason for my skepticism that marriage is dependent on the selves of its participants. I believe marriage is a reflection of an essential oneness that transcends separate selves. I'm not referring to supernatural assistance. I'm talking about a togetherness based on impossible intentions and unrealistic expectations. I believe in miracles which are manifestations of a reality which is

“Love that is discovered has an untouchable origin.”

the exact opposite of our separateness. Love that is created can always be destroyed. Love that is discovered has an untouchable origin.

A marriage does not depend on the mental health of two, separate selves. Those selves depend on the oneness represented by their marriage.

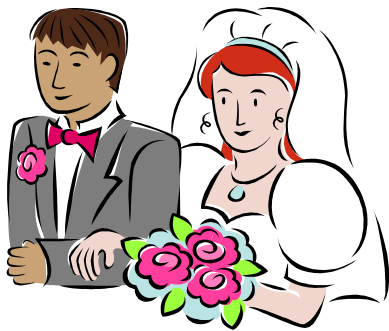
THE COMMUNITY

Let's face it. In America, especially urban America, there's no community left. Individualism and anonymity are prized. Nobody wants anybody

looking over their shoulder or telling them how to behave. Family ties are severed early by geography and careers. "Don't call me, Mom. I'll call you."

Grandparents have few legal rights to see grandchildren. Divorced parents visit children by court decree. Church congregations try to become families and end up substituting friendship for theology.

Unless a community knows a marriage is in trouble, help, even unwanted help, cannot come. Without community encouragement and mentoring, a man and woman can fall into a maelstrom of self doubt and recrimination. Without some sense of being part of a joint effort, we seldom give our best. Without guilt, we seldom do the right thing. Without fear, we cannot summon our courage. A marriage navigating outside of a community will soon run aground. Your marriage has a much greater chance of staying afloat if you make an effort to become part of one or more of the following communities:



Family

Everybody, even if you are an orphan or adopted, has some sort of family. I'm not necessarily talking about people you are related to by blood or marriage. My parents were both alcoholics. Including them in my community was not always a good idea. Friends, on the other hand, can be like the best of brothers and sisters. They are "family." But if you do have relations like grandparents, parents and siblings who are willing and able, you and your spouse should get close to them and stay close. These people have wisdom and experience. They care about you both. Sure, their care requires you to care in return. But caring is not a heavy burden. It's a skill you will need for your spouse.

Friends

As a married couple you're going to need lots of friends -- separate friends and joint friends. Before marriage, most of your friends were single. After, you will find you have more in common with other married couples. Your single buddies may feel awkward in your home. You've changed.

Friends are great listeners when you need to complain about each other -- or complement each other. Other couples make great company once you've

“Marriage isn’t a second-best status or a boring inevitability.”

realized parties and barhopping aren't as much fun as before. Friends watch you and your spouse interact and give you feedback. Friends are fellow travelers on the bumpy road to one more wedding anniversary. Cherish your friends; you never have too many.

Married people

Once upon a time you wouldn't be caught dead socializing with married people. Now you are one. Actually, congratulations are in order. Married people raise children, pay taxes, take responsibility and keep things running. They've acquired the skills to make the grade as parents, lovers, companions, carpool drivers, handymen, Cub Scout leaders, employees, business owners and voters. Married people pay the price to earn the prizes of accomplishment: admiration, devotion, and endurance. They're the community you join when you say, "I do."

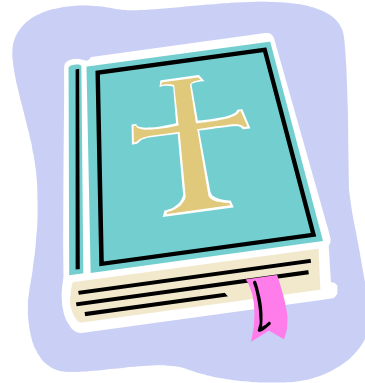
Be proud to be married. You're a family, the bedrock of our society -- all societies. Celebrate your new status. Flaunt it even. Wear your rings. Squeeze your spouse. Hold hands in public. Flatter each other in front of strangers.

Like black power and gay pride, flaunt your marriage, for your intention to stay married makes you a distinct minority. Marriage isn't a second-best status or a boring inevitability. It's a deliberate, living and vibrant adventure. Why are you married? Because that's where the action is.

Remember, communities strengthen marriage. Isolation weakens them. Work at creating community.

SPIRITUALITY

Wedding ceremonies are colored with spirituality. A "Minister" or "Reverend" officiates. Churches are the setting for many couples. The service may include prayers, blessings, and readings from sacred texts.



But our culture is overwhelmingly secular. People don't go to church like they used to. A one-shot spiritual wedding is quaint but not very relevant to the lives we live. Besides, "spiritual" is not so much what you do as who you are.

Judges, justices of the peace and sea captains perform civil ceremonies on demand. Wedding officiants ordained on the Internet advertise in the Yellow Pages.

I suppose the question is not whether weddings are spiritual. They aren't. The question is whether a personal sense of the transcendent helps a marriage endure.

The answer -- like most answers -
- is yes and no. It's no, if a spouse's
spirituality is focused on his or her per-
sonal salvation or access to divine assis-
tance. And I would also say there's no
help for the relationship from personal
religious practices or moral command-
ments. These kinds of spirituality are
turned inward and are often outwardly

***“What is, cannot be
damaged. What is
not, never was.”***

judgmental.

What a married couple can use is
a spirituality based on oneness and inno-
cence. By oneness, I mean a deep, al-
most inexpressible, sense that you are
not separate from other people, other
things, other times, other places. A po-
sure of embracing all without judgment.

By innocence I mean an equally
deep knowing that no deed, thought,
event, person, or possibility can have any
effect, for good or evil, on the essential,
unseen reality of oneness. What is, can-
not be damaged. What is not, never
was.

With such a spirituality, forgiving
your spouse is not a doubtful mental
game of overlooking evil. That's not
innocence; it's postponing passing sen-
tence. Oneness means you are your

spouse. Innocence says this oneness can
never be damaged by either of you.

For me, this is the kind of spiritu-
ality that not only supports a marriage
but sets one at peace with the whole of
existence. How do you get there? I
haven't the slightest idea. It's something
to be remembered, not sought. But I do
know that such an awareness will help
you tolerate each other.

THE VOWS

"Love, honor and cherish." "Till
death do us do part." "Faithful and loyal
to you only forever." These are typical
wedding vows. Are they realistic? Must
they be realistic?

Once upon a time, vows were
contracts. Break one and here comes
the judge. "Upon my soul" and "So help
me God" carried the prospect of eternal
damnation. "Cross my heart and hope
to die," persuaded me to swallow many a
lie. Fortunately, nobody goes to jail
when a marriage fails, although I suspect
the divorce rate would plummet if such
a law were enacted.

A wedding vow that simply states
the status quo would say something like,
"I promise to do what I've been doing
until something happens." That's a slam
dunk. On the other hand, "I'll never
think about anyone else till I die" is a fib.



Marriage is a safari, not a bus tour. Brides and grooms take big risks with each other and their futures. They need some assurance of at least a good heart and serious effort from their mates. So wedding vows that merely describe the present and the probable aren't enough. And vows made to conform to an external standard -- religious, social, parental -- are fairy tales with likely sad endings.

Couples should negotiate their first vows and continue to renegotiate them as the years pass. These changing vows will nourish their hopes, celebrate their victories, and envision their future, as a couple and as individuals. Wedding vows are lofty words spoken with deep resolve. They're a contract in which love and caring are both the price and the reward.

So start by negotiating your vows. Then make your celebrant put them in your ceremony, or find someone who will. It's your wedding—and your marriage.

THE BIG EVENT

Some weddings involve more logistics than a presidential inauguration. Often brides arrive at their ceremony exhausted and fearful.

Wait a minute! Weddings require only six things: a bride, a groom, an officiant, two witnesses, and a marriage license. The vows can go something like this: "Do you take him as your husband?" "Do you take her as your wife?" "Then so be it." When the license is signed by all and returned to the County Clerk, the deed is recorded. It's the

ceremony, not the recording, that makes it legal.

The rest is optional. Caution: Just living together for a long time won't do it in New Mexico. Common-law marriage is not recognized here. Who can officiate at a wedding and sign the license? I'm not sure. Could your

mother do it? Probably not. But the County Clerk is not trained to separate valid from invalid ministers. Internet ordination makes it doubly difficult. So it's my impression that anyone signing a marriage license, who claims any kind of ministerial ordination, would work.

But, believe me, there's a world of difference between Bubba Elvis, Bishop of the Church on the Street Corner and a seminary-trained professional with years of pastoral experience. The role of the officiant is not limited to saying, "I pronounce you husband and wife," and signing the license. You want an officiant who can guide you toward creating a personal and meaningful cere-



mony. You want one who can offer spiritual counsel and give you resources to prepare for married life, so you can survive the divorce holocaust.

I may be biased, but I'm convinced the most important -- the one you cannot do without -- the one who can offer the most personal wisdom at the core of what a wedding means is your officiant. Get this right and the rest is optional. Truly, your wedding is not an event. It's the opening of a door into a new life. Don't mistake that door for the life.

THE RELATIONSHIP

"It's a miracle that relationships are possible at all," my friend said. But, let's face it, relationships are not optional. Humans are a social species. For good or ill we have no choice; we have to relate. Our species cannot propagate without relationships.

Typically, we aren't born with all

"You can do it."

the skills for successful relationships. Some of us have almost none. Women seem to do better than men, especially with other women. But left at that, procreation goes down the drain.

Truth is, we need to learn to relate. We can't rely on native ability and natural instinct. We must learn the lessons and hard work of applying skills like listening, showing empathy, expressing anger, giving support, etc..

Sometimes we need outside help from friends, family or professionals. Sometimes we're going to fail -- and try again. Marriage is all about relationships. Become an expert. If you don't, you have no idea how much pain you're in for.

The good news is: You can do it. Millions of couples do it every day. "Even educated fleas do it," as the song goes. The key is never to take the quality of your relationship for granted. Wedding vows are a start. But the next day it's up to you. And the day after that. And so on. Perfection is not the goal. Life changes too fast. Your spouse changes, too. A sort of leapfrogging functionality is your goal. Willingness and flexibility supply the energy. Actual miracles of love are your reward.

CONCLUSION

Can your marriage endure and prosper with so many obstacles? Definitely! Can you and your sweetheart find the happiness and love you envisioned when you proposed? Absolutely! Will your "Then and Now" picture smile from the fiftieth wedding anniversary section of the newspaper? Why not?

Your decision to marry deserves admiration and respect. Thank you for stepping up to the noble task of raising the children of this world. Congratulations on your commitment to each other to become mature, responsible and growing leaders of our society. The future belongs to you. Bravo!

HELPFUL READINGS

The Hard Questions. An assortment of 100 questions for an engaged couple to discuss together. Topics from sex to money. The introduction will hook you. Written by Susan Piver in 2000.

Checklist for a Perfect Wedding. Covers everything. Great tips. Useful for large or small weddings. By Barbara Lee Follett. Updated frequently.

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail. A must read before your first anniversary. Covers the causes of marital decay and how to overcome them. Based on extensive research, this book is truthful, effective and worth your effort. By John Gottman, in its fourteenth printing.

Men, Women and Relationships, by John Gray. Based on his Mars and Venus concepts. Truly insightful and helpfully practical advise on male/female relationships. Very supportive of marriage.

The Conscious Bride, by Sheryl Nissinen. Quite psychological and somewhat contrived, but a helpful guide for the bride's emotional transition into married life.

© 2003 by Bill Howden
505-341-0504
Marriagemakers.net