

I Do: Sort of
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Falling in love is one of the best things in the world. It just might be the best. There is the excitement, the connection, the drama, the joy, the physical attraction, all those tremendous things that happen when we love someone who loves us in return. What power. Weddings and services of union are the public recognition of the private discovery of love.

At the same time there is something about the newness of love that obscures the greater challenges of love, especially long-term love. Falling in love also comes with a healthy dose of denial and narcissism. We overlook our partner's flaws. We overlook our limitations as a couple. We think that we invented love (something Joy said to me about when she and Bud first met over 50 years ago). We are energetic and confident.

Falling in love is so much more complex than giving and receiving love. We are looking for safety and belonging, as well as the resolution of personal and family problems. We are at times attracted to our opposite, which is wonderful only in moderation. We are afraid to lose love so we suppress our concerns. Sometimes we don't ask the hard questions (Do you want to have children? When are you going to come home in the evening?).

I have married dozens of couples over the years and what stands out for me is how reluctant they are to tell me about the complexity of their relationship, particularly non-members that I marry. I think there is a two-part answer for this. First, they are afraid to say anything "wrong" in case I refuse to marry them. I once married a young man who had been married once before, only he never mentioned this in all the times we met. I found out when I looked on the marriage license. I learned my lesson from that. Now I ask everyone if they have been married before. And here is the next question if they tell me they have been married, "What did you learn."

Second, couples aren't aware of or willing to discuss the complexity of their relationships. I have a lot of conversations with couples that go like this "So, tell me about an argument you have had." "Oh, we don't argue." Is there anything you have disagreed about lately?" "No, nothing." You know, where do you go with this kind of information? I find it very hard to believe that any two people have nothing to argue about. I ask the argument question because I want to hear how they communicate, how they accommodate one another, what they have learned. I want to affirm for them that disagreements are normal and healthy. I want to affirm for them that they can learn from disagreements. The answer "no" always makes me sad, because I know that I am about to be window dressing on their wedding, and many of our conversations will be superficial.

Here's another conversation I regularly have with couples approaching marriage. They share with me some personal troubles, a long-term area of confusion, a reoccurring

flash point, so I ask, “Do you have anyone you can talk to about this?” “What do you mean?” “Have you ever gone or considered going to a therapist?” The look of horror I receive when I suggest this. You would think that therapists are the grim reapers of relationships. Again, I don’t know what to do when I see this. I know that a lot of older folks don’t like the talking cure of therapy, but I usually marry people younger than me. We have grown up in a different generation.

A member here recently said to me “When I am sick I go to the doctor. When my car doesn’t work I take it to the mechanic. When I have emotional problems I go to a therapist.” This is how I look at it. A good therapist can help you work through stuck points, together, so that you avoid the repeated arguments and learn some new patterns. And every couple is going to have them, EVERY COUPLE. Now I suggest therapy as a possibility for every couple that meets with me. I tell them to file this suggestion away. They might never need it, but life has this way of changing things, like you and your partner, and the life you envisioned. I talk about communication and therapists because I hope the couples I marry to have long, satisfying relationships. I want them to have tools in their toolbox when troubles occur.

This morning we heard “Bess, You Is My Woman,” from *Porgy and Bess*. What a haunting, moving song about love, commitment and longing. We know that Porgy and Bess struggle because Bess is fickle and not her own woman, and Porgy is loyal and too sacrificial. Right before the sermon we heard P. D. Q Bach’s humorous take on a classic “My Bonnie Lass.” The lass is lovely and fair but she smelleth, among other problems. Both of these songs honor the complexity, depth, and challenge – the reality - of love.

Robert Johnson writes

I recently heard about a couple that had the good sense to call upon the shadow in a wedding ceremony. The night before their marriage, they held a ritual where they made their “shadow vows.” The groom said “I will give you an identity and make the world see you as an extension of myself.” The bride replied “I will be compliant and sweet, but underneath I will have the real control.”¹

A shadow vow ceremony might be a little extreme, but the idea of exploring personal weaknesses, habits, and fears is profoundly relevant. A couple’s ability to honestly do this can make or break a marriage.

I think it is terrific that new lovers like to think they invented love. I thought I invented love. I thought I had solved all my current and future problems when I fell in love (each of the times I fell in love). I also thought that marrying my husband, Peter, would protect me from all the slings and arrows of life. Well, there is no person who can protect an adult from all things. It’s not humanly possible. And although love is a tremendous shield (of power, self-esteem, courage, self-reliance) it can’t protect us from all things either. Partners are not parents, although, if we were honest, we might be able to admit that that is the kind of security many of us secretly and silently look for in a partner. And I have had more than one person say to me years later (with an eye roll), “Oh, I married my mother.” “Oh, I married my father.” What wouldn’t they admit the day they were joined in union?

¹ Robert Johnson, “Owning Your Own Shadow, quoted in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (1996), 437.

Here's the reality many of us don't face when we arrive at the altar; we are going to change. You will not be permanently frozen in looks, values, ideas, careers, money, or education the moment you marry. Instead, a couple stands at the altar, hoping they have been honest, hoping this relationship will work, hoping they will be supported, hoping they will grow together in the mysterious and large future beyond.

Jane Smiley writes

You know what marriage is? It's agreeing to taking this person who right now is at the top of his form, full of hopes and ideas, feeling good, looking good, wildly interested in you because you're the same way, and sticking by him while he slowly disintegrates. And he does the same for you.²

"Disintegrate" is a rather strong word, funny, but strong. I prefer to think of it as "transform," "while he slowly transforms and you do too." New love is full of delights like refuge and companionship, so it's difficult to admit that you and your partner will change, that you have to change so you can live in this world. This is the biggest risk of marriage. You are marrying someone who will change, and your partner is marrying someone who will, who has to, change (that's you). My only marriage advice is to marry your best friend. You are going to need him or her.

There was a time in my life when I realized I was changing so much that it was affecting our marriage (of course). I felt very guilty. This wasn't what Peter and I had "agreed upon" when we stood at the altar. When I told this to a therapist she looked at me and said "Sharon, everyone changes." "Hasn't Peter changed too?" Well, as a matter of fact he had.

So you want a new set of family rules. That is life. It's not betrayal. It's change. We need to communicate well so that we can explain and ask for change. This continual mutual recreation of the relationship is the good stuff. This makes the union vital, resilient, fresh, mutual, and attractive. You are not frozen at the altar forever. Your task as a couple is to change, grow, transform, together.

Some of us are going to have hard changes to make. You might become ill and need help. You might need your partner to stop drinking, whether she or he wants to do it. You might need to change jobs, or stay at home, or take a job. This is the re-creation part. This is hard, but hopefully your partner is your best friend, and you are going to figure it out together. Hopefully you will talk before your resentments build. Hopefully you will talk before you are too far away to hear or appreciate one another. First you care for yourself. Then you care for your partner and marriage. Then you care for your children if you have any. Then you care for your job.

My biggest complaint about weddings and services of union is that they focus on everything but the relationship, the point of the union. I was recently asked to perform a wedding ceremony in the center of a labyrinth that was going to be mowed in a large lawn for this very purpose. As the bride described the extensive processional into the labyrinth I thought, "I wonder if she is marrying the labyrinth." I didn't do that wedding.

Years ago I read a book that referred to wedding customs and costs as the "wedding industrial complex." This is how I have looked at it ever since. The dress worn for one day that costs more than two months salary. The party favors that Mom

² Jane Smiley in *At Paradise Gate* quoted in *Spiritual Literacy* (1996), 431.

says, “have to happen.” I’ve done my share of performing weddings and thinking “Hmm, I bet those flowers cost more than my services, but without me this couple could not marry.”

Wedding customs are familiar and cherished, but they are also a smoke screen where family members act out and couples avoid one another - providing diversions from the purpose, which is that you and you are telling the public that you are going to be together forever.

I wish half the cost of weddings went into pre-marital counseling. And if, as many couples I have married, you ever find yourself in the position where you can’t afford many things you wanted for your wedding, it doesn’t matter. I say this to couples over and over again “When you walk down the aisle, remember your partner, remember who is there with you (and if someone important is missing that is OK too, your partner is there and that is what matters). When you say your vows look at your partner. The only thing that matters this whole crazy day full of photos and receptions, limousines and airport scurrying is the marriage ceremony; the moment you say ‘I take you above all others.’ Your dress doesn’t say that. Your flowers don’t say that. Your rings don’t say that. The invitations don’t say that. You say that. This is all that matters.”

I do enjoy marrying couples, particularly couples I know. Although I confess to liking memorial services better, which always surprises people. Folks tell the truth then. The truth is more interesting. I also continue to survey my colleagues on this point, and they overwhelmingly agree with me. So don’t feel badly about dying. We enjoy memorial services and helping families.

But I do enjoy weddings when couples are self-aware enough to tell me the truth, no matter what it is. I remember one couple – they came with multiple tattoos, piercings, and multi-colored hair (as did their guests). And yes, this very young woman had been married once before. Her fiancée explained to me “Her family is like an Amazonian death cult. The men don’t survive.” This I will never forget. And she agreed with him. Then we had a great discussion about male/female relationships in their families. I loved marrying this couple. They knew their relationship and took responsibility for it.

I also enjoy marrying older couples, and couples that have found love “the second time around.” Some of these are the best stories. After some real struggle, an early death, a lot of time spent alone, or a marriage that didn’t work out, it is wonderful to see two people learn and grow and find one another. What a joy to see them happy, to be there on that day. These couples are usually more interested in the wedding and less interested in the wedding industrial complex. They get the point.

I also remember marrying two doctors who were a bit older. He was a plastic surgeon, and she was a neo-natologist. They both spent many hours at the hospital, away from one another. We spent a lot of time talking about their demanding work schedules, because they knew this was going to be an enormous challenge in their marriage. But they had also found a way to work together in the summer. In the summer they worked for a program that sends medical teams to Central America to treat poor children with facial deformities. Together they performed surgeries, providing children with cleft palates, and smiles, and lips that met together. And they loved doing this work together. I thought it was really ingenious, honoring their individuality, their skills, and their partnership.

Falling in love is a wonderful thing, a gift, and it always changes. You and your partner will transform many times in your lives. Talk about your relationship, notice the changes in one another, make time for one another, argue, communicate, learn, grow, and ask for help. And if you have yet to be married, or look to be married again, I assure you that the only thing that matters is openly sharing yourself with your partner, looking them in the eye and saying "I take you above all others." These are two things to keep forever. Everything else will change. Bring your best friend along for the ride.