

## What Is Marriage For?

February 11, 2007  
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First Parish in Brookline

### Call to Worship:

**"What's real?" asked the velveteen rabbit one day, when she and the skin horse were lying side by side. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?"** "Real isn't how you're made," said the skin horse. "It is a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just play but really loves you—then you become real."

**"Does it hurt?" asked the rabbit.** "Sometimes," said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are real you don't mind being hurt."

**"Does it happen all at once like being wound up, or bit by bit?"** "It doesn't happen all at once, you become—it takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Reading: From *"What Is Marriage For?"*

By E.J Graff

One day in 1991, almost against my will, I knew Madeline and I were going to stand up in front of the people we loved and commit ourselves to each other. Of course, it's ridiculous to say that it was against my will. I decided. Madeline, being distinctly private, wanted just to exchange rings... something inside me insisted on a ritual moment in full community view. It took awhile to write a ceremony that meant enough, but not too much. In our dearest friends' living room, we would say a few Jewish prayers, recite four favorite poems, exchange rings, speak our declarations, and, of course, kiss. All of which we did, semicircles of family's and friends' eyes on us like lamps. How can I describe what came next? It was nearly a delirium: by accident we'd spilled into something sacred. In that backyard in (yes) June, we kissed madly, actually forgetting we were lesbians, forgetting that the neighbors might be shocked. ....

My dryly sarcastic brother cried so hard while making his toast that he could barely complete his sentences. My stepfather, who once squirmed at hearing I was queer, announced his pride in me and my friends. My mother led the blessings, cut the *challah*, and charmed all my friends. To poke fun at the ceremony's earnestness, we brought out a cake topped with two brides--laughing so hard that we brought down the house. To our utter surprise, the ceremony did bring us closer, pulling an invisible cloak around us that has warmed us during difficult times. We'd thought ourselves as committed as any couple could be: how else could we have exposed ourselves to the world's ridicule? But now even the most subtle traces of doubt dissolve instantly, chased away by the memory

of the day when we made our declarations so publicly, placing our love in the hands of God and everyone we knew.

**Reading:** “A New Constellation”

by Marge Piercy

*We go intertwined, him and you  
and me, her and him, you and her,  
each the center of our own circle  
of attraction and compulsion and gravity*

*What a constellation we make: I call it  
the Matrix. I call it the dancing  
family. I call it wheels inside wheels.  
Ezekiel did not know he was seeing  
the pattern for enduring relationship  
in the late twentieth century.  
All the rings shine gold as wedding bands  
but they are the hoops magicians use  
that seem solid and unbroken, yet can slip  
into chains of other rings and out.  
They are strong enough to hang houses on,  
strong enough to serve as cranes, yet  
they are open. We fall through each other,  
we catch each other, we cling, we flip over.*

*No one is at the center, but each  
is her own center, no one controls  
the jangling swing and bounce and merry-  
go-round lurching intertangle of this mobile.  
We pass through each other trembling  
and we pass through each other shrieking  
and we pass through each other shimmering.  
the circle is neither unbroken  
nor broken but living, a molecule attracting  
atoms that wants to be a protein,  
complex, mortal, able to sustain life,  
able to reproduce itself inexactly,  
learn and grow.*

**Sermon**

Tuesday evening I sat across the table from Josef, my husband of 33 years. He’s been a Justice of the Peace for more than 15 years and has a photo album full of smiling faces of the just married. We were discussing the topic of this sermon, “What is marriage for?” and we had lots of agreement on the question of what’s “holy” or “religious” about marriage. Joe passionately shared his religious belief that marriage is a human opportunity to make and live out a life-time commitment—a commitment to stay together in a future neither can control or predict.

His well thought-out and well-lived position reminded me of the wedding homily so many couples have chosen for me to speak, the same homily my son and daughter-in-law asked Rev. Jim to speak to them at their wedding here last June:

*Tracy and Alex you cannot know what the future will hold. But you bring yourselves here today to take part in a ceremony that says you are not afraid, that whatever may come, you believe in each other and that you are secure in your love.*

“You cannot know what the future will hold. You are not afraid. You believe in each other.”

I observed, fully in the mode of trying to integrate my recent study for this sermon, that this mode of thinking about marriage-as a living out of commitment between two individuals was *Protestant* theology as distinct from a *Catholic* theology. I opened the book I’d just put down and quoted E. J. Graff across the oak dining room table: “The Catholic marriage sacrament rested on the idea that your consent, once given (whether in words or by having sex), changed your soul’s status forever, merging you with your spouse—and could never be undone. The practical Protestants, felt, instead, that marriage was a contract for companionship, and it was not consent upon entering but living up to that contract that made marriage holy....”

Neither tradition lifted up the emotional intimacy we venerate today.

The distinction we were making led us, almost simultaneously to quoting some poetry we used to listen to in the early days of our courtship—from *The Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. The line, “a promise is a promise and marriage is marriage” came out of our mouths together.

Here it is whole—the headstone of Mrs. Purkapile:

*HE ran away and was gone for a year.  
When he came home he told me the silly story  
Of being kidnapped by pirates on Lake Michigan  
And kept in chains so he could not write me.  
I pretended to believe it, though I knew very well  
What he was doing, and that he met  
The milliner, Mrs. Williams, now and then  
When she went to the city to buy goods, as she said.  
But a promise is a promise  
And marriage is marriage,  
And out of respect for my own character  
I refused to be drawn into a divorce  
By the scheme of a husband who had merely grown tired  
Of his marital vow and duty.*

Right beside Mrs. Purkapile is Roscoe Purkapile, her husband. His headstone reads:

SHE loved me. Oh! how she loved me!

*I never had a chance to escape  
From the day she first saw me.  
But then after we were married I thought  
She might prove her mortality and let me out,  
Or she might divorce me.  
But few die, none resign.  
Then I ran away and was gone a year on a lark.  
But she never complained. She said all would be well,  
That I would return. And I did return.  
I told her that while taking a row in a boat  
I had been captured near Van Buren Street  
By pirates on Lake Michigan,  
And kept in chains, so I could not write her.  
She cried and kissed me, and said it was cruel,  
Outrageous, inhuman!  
I then concluded our marriage  
Was a divine dispensation  
And could not be dissolved,  
Except by death.  
I was right.*

We had a good laugh and I pondered whether the Purkapiles were Catholic or Protestant. We guessed Catholic, since their marriage was a “no-exit” arrangement.

I knew that I wanted this sermon to find its way to a theology that synthesizes the Catholic and Protestant understandings of what is holy and at the same time lift up the holiness of same sex marriage. I was struggling with the wish to have both the holy union of opposites concept and the lifetime faith of separate individuals living out a promise over time.

My solution is to hold a theology that posits that the holy work of marriage is to allow **each person** to become whole *in themselves*—that one of the purposes of marriage, beyond the economic and social purposes of cultural stability, is the union, the marriage if you will, of our inner selves—the male and female sides of ourselves.

I shifted the conversation in hopes of exploring this notion out loud with Josef. I said, “What about inner marriage?” He looked perplexed and said with a slightly raised voice, “You can’t change the definition of the word “marriage.” The air went out of the room. I felt like I was sitting across from one of my clergy colleagues who seem to think they have a lock on the definition of marriage.

The idea that an individual might marry oneself was apparently beyond contemplation for *that man* sitting across the oak table. He suddenly looked like a total stranger. We slipped into a family style-ritual argument about definition with familiar ease. I remembered my husband and mother arguing about the definition of “prune” for two days straight. Smiling I went searching for the dictionary definition of “marriage.”

Our frayed Webster's first definition began "a lifelong union of a man and woman." I skipped to the last definition which was metaphorical and claimed victory. He was not swayed. We went online. The up-to-date Princeton online dictionary reads:

1. the state of being a married couple voluntarily joined for life (or until divorce)
2. two people who are married to each other;
3. the act of marrying; the nuptial ceremony;
4. a close and intimate union; "the marriage of music and dance"; "a marriage of ideas"

We ran out of time before we could declare a permanent winner and ended our conversation at the place of our agreement in our roles as Justice of the Peace and Clergy. As a Unitarian Universalist minister I believe that marriage between two people is spiritual in that each of the humans making promises are putting their faith in something that cannot be seen, measured, counted, or controlled. I believe marriage is holy because the context of a committed relationship requires individual persons to surrender to something larger than themselves.

Josef, for his part, believes deeply in the separation of church and state. He does not want any church to declare what is holy and what is not holy, and so, as an agent of the state, Justice of the Peace, he is committed to making sure that there is equal access to that possibility of promise for every person.

If we had our way, this country would be like most European countries where people can choose to have a civil marriage and receive the legal protections of the state and if they choose they can also have a religious ceremony to mark and remember the relationship to the transcendent. In such an arrangement the various religions do not have to compete for a definition of marriage but, rather, can practice freely side by side while giving free access to state protection to all.

This privilege of relating to another person over the same kitchen table for a lifetime is not one that I take lightly when I touch the lives of same sex couples who have been deprived of both the civil and holy matrimony even though I am about to share some humor.

There is a joke that was repeated in the papers during the time leading up to the legalization of equal marriage in Massachusetts. Perhaps you know it. An older man and woman are sitting at the kitchen table. They look really married. She's in curlers and a bathrobe. He looks beleaguered as she reads the paper to him, "The Globe says that gays are going to be able to marry each other." He answers, "Haven't they suffered enough already?"

Funny on the surface; Sexist in its own way; And true in the sense that marriage involves facing our suffering in the Buddhist sense. True healing, the end of suffering, will require the surrender of ego, and the ongoing discovery that the needs of relationship trump the narcissistic needs of our smaller selves.

A married couple, Ann and Karla, loaned me a movie—the one we'll be showing here next Friday, "If These Walls Could Talk" in preparation for this service. They wanted me to see the first vignette of the film, the one about two older women who have been closeted loving partners for 50 years.

Silver haired and feeble, Edith Tree and Abby Hedley secretly hold hands in the movies but walk home with a respectable distance between them. They prepare for bed, one making the tea and setting out pajamas on their shared bed, the other troops off with a ladder to take care of the bird house. Edith chides Abby in the way of a long-time married couple. Abby falls off the ladder and the scene switches to the emergency room.

Edith gives comfort to a distraught wife whose husband has had a heart attack at the kitchen table. When she asks Edith if she's married and Edith says no, the worried wife answers, "You are lucky. You will never have to grieve such a terrible loss." Edith's face, accustomed to the closet, shows only a small tic as she agrees. Edith is denied visitation in intensive care and is asleep in the waiting room when her beloved partner dies alone. The relatives come and clean out the house on the day of the funeral suggesting that Edith find a room so they can sell the house. They don't want the burden of taking care of someone who is not family. In the last scene Edith collects a baby bird, cast from its nest, climbs the ladder to the bird house, and gently places the bird back with its siblings. There is no hand doing the same for her. She has been cast out of the nest of her life without a single witness.

My colleague, Marc Belletini, tells about this in a poem he calls Gay and Lesbian Studies 101:

*And so one of the members of the search committee asks me  
"But why do you people" –he really said that, "you people –  
"have to talk about it?"  
Right.*

*Well because:  
Because, if I fell in love,  
you know, with sonnets and everything,  
and wanted to name all the stars in heaven  
one at a time with a goofy smile on my face  
I'd love to be able to.  
Because if I didn't fall in love,  
I'd like to be able to grouse a bit,  
or work up a bitter Theory  
to explain it.  
Because if my lover got run over  
By a drunk driver (it happens you know,  
remember blue-eyed Stewart?)  
I'd like to be able to take a few days off work  
and cry and stuff, OK?*

And so my response to the joke in the Globe is that gay people in committed relationship *do* have all the suffering that goes with that promising to love until death do us part and so *should* have all the protections and benefits that accrue: membership in a kinship circle, public recognition and honoring of a primary relationship, protection of property and inheritance rights.

And the threat to those protections is no joke.

We will participate in gender violence every day if we allow any church to coerce the state to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman. This is a wound, not just of individuals, but also to the very identity of America, the heart of who we are—the separation of Church and State.

Take yourself by the hand and marry your ideals to real action in history.

Take a stand on the side of love.

The wholeness of your soul depends upon it.