

5-28-89 - To my children:

On Marriage, A Life-long Companionship

If we are lucky, we humans live 70 to 100 years. Very few seem able to do this happily by themselves. Most find life is better when its joys and disappointments are shared with someone else. Though there are several alternative solutions, the most common is a lifelong companionship of husband and wife in marriage. This arrangement typically has three stages. First is the romantic stage, when the couple enjoy discovering mutual enthusiasms and interests and the joys of loving each other. Second, typically, is the period in which they jointly produce, nourish, and rejoice in the development of children that are uniquely their own. Finally, there is the period, after children have gone out on their own, as they live out their final years together.

Many marriages today do not last long after the romantic phase, presumably because many people think of marriage as being simply a romantic relationship, and their romantic interests shift. Other couples stay together only through the child-rearing stage; they find little basis for continuing together after the romantic interest and the shared project of child-rearing is over. For many people these and other paths are the wisest and most satisfying.

But it remains true that for most couples, marriage is a life-long companionship which continues through all three stages, "til death do us part". Although not every such marriage is a happy one, it says something that so many couples continue them. And the ideal of marriage as a life-long companionship is favored by many more, even among those who do not have one.

Thus without derogating other life styles, I want to present some reflections on marriage as a life-long companionship. Since I am firmly ensconced in such an arrangement myself, and have every intention of continuing in it to the end, my remarks will be partisanly in favor and biased by personal experience. I hope they may nevertheless be helpful to anyone who is interested.

I might have called this "On choosing a wife" or "On choosing a husband". But it takes two to enter into a marriage. My sons do not **choose** a wife, nor does my daughter **choose** a husband. Rather it is something like this: some men are looking for a woman who might be their life-long companion, and some women are looking for a man who might be their life-long companion. The desired solution is to get the right match. If either one has a life-long commitment in mind, it is probably a wise first step to be sure the other does also. If such a marriage comes about, it is because each thinks or believes that the other will be a person they could live with happily until death. But are they right?

I

It is impossible to **know** whether such a marriage will work. When I married my wife I was quite unsure, but promised her (by-passing my firm formal vows) that I would stick with her for at least seven years. When the seven years were up my third son was on the way

and I had quite forgotten about the promise. My wife, who seemed to feel uncommonly secure, did not raise the question. It was about twenty years later - when my wife indicated distress as various male acquaintances in 'mid-life crisis' began to ditch their wives, usually for younger women - that I finally came through with an unconditional commitment. My wife tells me that she never had any serious doubts about her commitment. Perhaps it was because I am a professor of philosophy and trained to doubt everything.

But if excessive doubt is possible, so is complete certainty for the wrong reasons. The wrong reasons, I think, are sins of omission, not commission; namely, not attending sufficiently to what each of the three stages demands. Is each member of the couple thinking about all three stages of the life-long companionship?

II

The romantic element is important and indispensable in almost all cases. Marriages of convenience may work for royalty and inheritors of great fortunes, but for most of us the joys of loving and being loved intimately are realized in just one simple economic setting, our homes. We do not want and cannot afford both a marriage for convenience and an intimate continuing liason for love. The desire to love and be loved intimately is surely one of the strongest human desires and, for most of us, realized chiefly in marriage.

Essential to romantic love is womanly beauty and handsome manlihood. But the concepts of each are all too easily and misleadingly stereotyped. Stereotypes for the beauty of a woman's face and figure are displayed on magazine covers and all sorts of commercial advertisements. Movie actors present many male stereotypes in the form of "leading men".

At some point in college I concluded that physical features - the right bodily proportions and shapes, hair and skin color - are not the deciding factors in what makes a woman, or a man, attractive. Attending a coeducational college I observed too many young women and young men with perfect features who simply did not attract - and other, less physically well-endowed individuals whose behavior, personality and spirit, made them very attractive and popular. I never completely rid myself of being attracted to classic physical beauty, but I recognized that it was not enough in itself.

I do not know whether I would have asked my wife to marry me if she had not been physically beautiful. What I do know, is that this was not the deciding factor. I decided to marry her upon realizing that she was a "good" person in a special sort of way. It is this quality - I will spell it out more carefully later - which I loved and still love. I have the feeling that I would have loved her for this quality even had she been differently endowed, though I might have been slower to discover it.

Romantic love is not, of course, found only in the first stage of marriage; in some sense it can continue throughout a life-long companionship. To be sure, the pure physical beauty of a young woman and the handsomeness of the young man fade as the years go on. But physical beauty is not just what we are born with; it is what we do with what we have. Obesity and physical deterioration, when they could be controlled, are signs of weak character and as such ugly. But wrinkles and white hairs, like congenital deformities, can be

vehicles of a proud spirit when the will and the spirit is there. The physical beauty of youth is present in each new generation and old age can not diminish its attraction. But the beauty of spirit expressible in old age can not be denied either. Romantic love begins with an awareness of visible forms, but it is always really love of the spirit; and this becomes clear as the focus shifts to the spirit which shapes the visible forms.

Thus it is the spirit exemplified by the woman and the spirit exemplified by the man which must be matched. And how is this best done?

III

The second stage - raising a family - is not for everyone. It is the usual, but not the universal, pattern. Today women have become increasingly interested in the kinds of careers - in business, the professions, government - that have traditionally been pursued primarily by men (and still are), and men are very slow to think of themselves as primarily carers of children. Yet children not only get born; they must be cared for. Initially they are watched, cleaned and fed, day and night; tasks traditionally performed by the wife while the husband was out working to support them. As children go through school they need support and caring as well as motivation by encouragement and discipline. Again, traditionally the mother has provided the primary care and support.

Children are a delight and objects of deep affection; but also, raising children is messy and difficult in many ways. Practically, it involves tedious and boring work, and the discovery that children can be disobedient, irrational, and independent calls for a strong sense of duty, patience, and over-riding love. A man's or woman's interest in their profession or simple devotion to social, cultural or intellectual pursuits that children can not share, can create tensions in a family which fire an urge to escape. The practicalities of child-rearing force radical changes in the romantic life-style based on mutual adult interest and love-making.

But in most cases the rewards of having children are great. Despite teen-age rebellions, few people fail eventually to be grateful to parents for giving them the privilege of living, and few fail to recognize in adulthood the honest efforts and sacrifices made by their parents. Parents' rewards are not just the joys and affections which mix with the drudgery and frustrations as children are being reared. Children are ways to keep in touch with what is new and exciting and changing in the world. And this novelty continues after children have left the home and as grandchildren arrive. In the normal case, the two parents share together a real, though tentative, satisfaction in having completed a relatively successful project. Once firmly in the past it stays with them the rest of their lives: the knowledge that they will leave behind something good which would not be there had they not done it together. Not only this; they also have a bank of affection - in old age when they are much less involved with other people they remain important in some real sense to their children.

Some couples, sharing a disinterest in having children or because of over-riding interests in a career, agree to forego child-rearing. By foregoing the rewards just mentioned

they sometimes gain others through successful careers which leave even more substantial contributions to society behind. Or it may just be that by temperament they are able to live richer and happier lives that way than if they tried to raise children.

Regardless of whether, for a life-long marriage, the two partners have a common project of raising children or not, it seems important that 1) they have **some** common projects, and 2) they have **some** separate interests.

The romantic stage is a stage of self-absorption. Husband and wife are in love with each other. But if it is nothing but mutual admiration it soon becomes dull. Constant change, novelty and contrast against a background continuity is needed. Different interests are essential. The husband must have activities and interests the wife is not engaged in; the wife must have activities and interests the husband is not engaged in. Then they have things outside of themselves to talk about. They retain their independent individualities. Each finds something to admire in the other that they do not find in themselves. There is nothing more dull than to live with a copy of one-self. It is important in all of this that neither become so absorbed in their own interests that they fail to listen to and respond enthusiastically to the interests of the other. It is entirely possible to be fascinated by activities that someone else enjoys but one does not want to engage in oneself.

Common projects need not be children - perhaps a common business or a book cooperatively written. But children are the dominant common project of most marriages; they force husband and wife to concentrate on something other than themselves, grappling with problems, overcoming obstacles and sharing in successes together. When husband and wife are distinct individuals, differences between them on how to deal with and raise children will arise and must be resolved. Often a distinct allocation of responsibilities in a common project helps remove the problem.

For example, I often differed from my wife on what was safe for our children to eat or do healthwise; but since she generally took care of them when ill, the job of deciding what was healthy was made her job.

Where the husband (or wife) works while the wife (or husband) cares for children, each has things to talk about at night that the other missed. It is important for each to keep alive their interest in what the other person is interested in. It helps each to talk out their enthusiasms and frustrations; and in listening to other interests, each achieves a bit of distance from his or her own pre-occupations.

When both husband and wife have careers, a similar exchange of interests is important for the same reasons. The lack of such exchanges thrusts them back into what can become a tiresome routine of mutual admiration. Furthermore, while there is a natural bond with one's children which makes joint interest in their doings come naturally, joint interest in another person's career requires a more conscious effort. Genuine (but not obsessive) curiosity and interest about the details and problems of the wife's (or husband's) career, and shared joys in its accomplishments, helps a lot. On the other hand, if the two careers seem to dictate widely separated places of employment, the dilemma of choosing between either separation or subordination of one career to the other may arise. Thus, there are special

problems for a life-long marriage when dual careers take the place of child-rearing.

Above all, mutual support and cooperation should reign in all areas of serious activity, never competition. Couples who compete, whether for favored treatment from their children, or to prove themselves superior in intelligence, or in money-earning ability, or in political standing, or social status with friends, pave the paths with potential frustration and frictions. Friendly competition at cards or tennis, perhaps (as long as it doesn't matter who wins); but deadly serious competition, never.

How any given individual, man or woman, will respond to such situations can never be completely known while they are still single. Certainly, mutual agreement on what the marriage will be is important. But beyond that, a person's life when single often includes evidence about his or her future life when married, not only in their stated preferences, but in their behavior. How does he or she act with children? with colleagues? with people who have interests different from their own? How do they respond to failure? to success? to the ignorance of others? to unfairness by others? From observing all these things (not just how one acts with you), one gets a sense of attitudes, of dispositions to respond and act in certain ways, a spirit. And it is the spirit of the man and the spirit of the woman which, complementing or conflicting with each other, will govern the life-long companionship. The spirit is part of what makes the body beautiful, and it is essential to what makes it lovable - or not.

IV

In the final phase - when the children are gone, and the romantic period of their youth is at best a cherished memory - husband and wife are in a sense alone together. Having retired the husband (or wife) no longer has an economic niche in society where other people depend on them, looking to them for help or decisions. The children, too, no longer need them; there is even the danger that children will treat them as helpless and think of them as children incapable of making the right decisions, thus diminishing their self-respect and independence. Personal medical problems arise and increase, and each thinks more than they used to about illness and eventual death. Focus shifts to plans for retirement, financial security, wills and estates.

The past with its successes is firmly behind them, but by themselves memories of this past are thin nourishment, like warmed-over porridge. The children and grandchildren are in the distance, a solid testimony to the life they lived, but usually a small part of their active life now. Romance is still there - deep and steady - but in a more tempered, less hotly passionate form.

What can keep it from becoming the narrow, dull, routine of mere self-absorption and mutual dependence?

Only two things - continuation in different outside activities and interests which involve real goals of people other than themselves, and common projects in which they work together for interests they share.

By this time, presumably, they will have long ago learned to recognize and make allowance for character traits or quirks that they initially found distasteful in each other. So

they pursue their times together smoothly with little or no genuine anger or bitterness. And they have a large reservoir of experience which reassures them of their worth to each other and to others.

V

Finally, a few guidelines (for what they are worth).

1. Your Grandfather Baker gave us a 200 year old grandfather's clock (it is now 240 year old). Inside of the door in front of its pendulum he pasted:

Mutual Love and Forbearance
Brad and Imogene 1949

This was pretty good advice!

2. Enjoy ideas and external events and things openly; people are lovable for what they love.
3. When angry or annoyed, hold it in until you can describe what angers or annoys you without bitterness or hostility.
4. Always be as polite to your spouse as you would be to any friend; appreciate with thank-yous; when you slip up, beg pardon.
5. Do not expect emotional feelings to be always in high gear; remember, when they are low ebb that the tide will come in again.
6. Don't expect ever to know everything about a person you love; people are complex; no one completely knows even themselves.
7. Recognize and revel in mysteries - the mystery of where you came from, the mystery of what a person is, the mystery of the bonds that tie people together.
8. Do the unexpected once in while, but in a way which reveals strengths not weaknesses.
9. Remember that no one is or can be perfect, nor should they try -- neither you, nor your spouse, nor your children. But each should be supported when they try to do their best.
10. Relax and enjoy life. Love is not the only thing. There are many other very exciting things to life.
11. You can hurt your spouse more sharply than anyone because you are more important than anyone; you can also be more nurturing than anyone else. Don't muff it!
12. Don't forget your place in the universe; you and your partner are a tiny part of an unique, awesomely complex, magnificent region in the vast reaches of space-time. You are immensely privileged to exist at all and to be able to explore it with someone else. Don't waste the trip!

There are a great many fields of good green grass. Sometimes the grass looks greener in the next pasture; but if you already have good green grass in your own field, don't leave it.