

Marry, Marry, Quite Contrary

Rod Richards

Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona

06/13/04

Reading

Selections from [Marriage](#) by Gregory Corso, Beat Poet

Should I get married? Should I be Good?
Astound the girl next door with my velvet suit and...hood?...

When she introduces me to her parents
back straightened, hair finally combed, strangled by a tie,
should I sit knees together on their 3rd degree sofa
and not ask Where's the bathroom?
How else to feel other than I am,
often thinking Flash Gordon soap--
O how terrible it must be for a young man
seated before a family and the family thinking
We never saw him before! He wants our Mary Lou!
After tea and homemade cookies they ask What do you do for a living?
Should I tell them? Would they like me then?
Say All right get married, we're losing a daughter
but we're gaining a son--
And should I then ask Where's the bathroom?

O God, and the wedding! All her family and her friends
and only a handful of mine all scroungy and bearded
just waiting to get at the drinks and food--
And the priest! He looking at me [as if I'd done something wrong]
asking me Do you take this woman for your lawful wedded wife?
And I trembling what to say say Pie Glue!
I kiss the bride all those corny men slapping me on the back
She's all yours, boy! Ha-ha-ha!

And in their eyes you could see some obscene honeymoon going on--

then all that absurd rice and clanky cans and shoes

Niagara Falls! Hordes of us! Husbands! Wives! Flowers! Chocolates!

All streaming into cozy hotels...

Everybody knowing! I'd be almost inclined not to do anything!

Stay up all night! Stare that hotel clerk in the eye!

Screaming: I deny honeymoon! I deny honeymoon!

running rampant...

yelling Radio belly! Cat shovel!

O I'd live in Niagara forever! in a dark cave beneath the Falls

I'd sit there the Mad Honeymooner devising ways to break marriages, a scourge of bigamy a saint of divorce--

But I should get married I should be good...

Yet if I should get married and it's Connecticut and snow

and she gives birth to a child and I am sleepless, worn,

up for nights, head bowed against a quiet window, the past behind me,

finding myself in the most common of situations a trembling man

knowledged with responsibility...

O what would that be like!

No, I doubt I'd be that kind of father

not rural not snow no quiet window

but hot smelly New York City

seven flights up, roaches and rats in the walls

a fat Reichian wife screeching over potatoes Get a job!

And five nose running brats in love with Batman

And the neighbors all toothless and dry haired

like those hag masses of the 18th century

all wanting to come in and watch TV

The landlord wants his rent

Grocery store Blue Cross Gas & Electric Knights of Columbus

Impossible to lie back and dream Telephone snow, ghost parking--

No! I should not get married and I should never get married!

But--imagine if I were to marry a beautiful sophisticated woman

tall and pale wearing an elegant black dress and long black gloves

holding a cigarette holder in one hand and highball in the other

and we lived high up a penthouse with a huge window

from which we could see all of New York and even farther on clearer days

No I can't imagine myself married to that pleasant prison dream--

O but what about love? I forget love
not that I am incapable of love
it's just that I see love as odd as wearing shoes--
I never wanted to marry a girl who was like my mother
And Ingrid Bergman was always impossible
And there may be a girl now but she's already married
And I don't like men and--
but there's got to be somebody!
Because what if I'm 60 years old and not married...
and everybody else is married! All in the universe married but me!

Ah, yet well I know that were a woman possible as I am possible
then marriage would be possible--...

--Gregory Corso, from a poem entitled, *Marriage*

With most weddings I do, I meet with the couple three or four times before the service. At these meetings, I get to know the couple's history (as much as time allows), while assisting them in preparing the service and, I hope, preparing them as best I can for that state of being that is "being married."

I suspended my usual practice recently for a couple that called the church from Bisbee. They were only going to be in Arizona for a couple days, over the weekend, and wanted to get married if, indeed, I was available to perform the service on a Saturday afternoon. I talked to them on the phone and told them I did not really feel comfortable doing a "Las Vegas quickie" sort of wedding service. Turns out they were *from* Las Vegas...And the more that I talked to them, I got the distinct impression that the decision to marry was anything but a "quickie" decision. This is a couple that had been together for five years, yet their excitement about their relationship was palpable even over the phone on a so-so connection. They were actually in Bisbee scoping out locations to get married later on in the year, and then decided...hey, we're here now! Why don't we just *get married* now?

At any rate, I picked up on their excitement, and probably the spontaneity and romance of the situation, and agreed to perform the ceremony. Shirley Sandy, from our congregation, kindly offered to be a witness, and the groom found another witness in the lobby of the Copper Queen Hotel, and the wedding took place just outside the hotel on a gloriously sunny afternoon...and I have to say that I have rarely seen two people as happy as they were. (When I told my wife, Hanje, that, she pointed out that, indeed, this couple might have been happy because they hadn't had to meet with me three times before the wedding...)

Seriously, though, as I watched them walk down the sidewalk hand in hand, giddy with delight at having passed through this awesome-yet-imperceptible-to-the-passerby passage that they had just experienced in a 10-minute ceremony with three strangers, this somewhat-comical-yet-sacred confirmation of their commitment to each other that flew by quicker than a daydream, I was led to think once again about

marriage itself, how we approach it, what we expect from it, and what awesome potential it holds for joy and sorrow.

"Should I marry?" says the poet, "Should I be good?" Many of us answer "yes" even when we aren't sure exactly what we're saying "yes" to. In the meetings I have with couples, there is one question that is nearly guaranteed to cause an uncomfortably long silence. The partners often look to each other to answer. They sometimes look at me with an expression that says, "Well, *you know*..." I always wait them out.

The question? "Why are you getting married?"

There is no lack of wise words and witty quotations to be found regarding marriage. All the way back to Ancient Greece, we find Socrates advising young people to, by all means, marry. "If you marry well," he says, "you will be happy; if not, you will become a philosopher." (Now that sounds like the voice of experience...was Socrates married? Yes, I found out that he was. He had two wives...at the same time. And I'll bet his wives did a bit of philosophizing themselves...)

Personally, I think that marriage is bound to lead to a bit of philosophizing, however it turns out. It is a complex arrangement, full of so many romantic, religious, anthropological, political, sexual, and psychological components that we, (whether we are presently married or single or divorced or widowed or joined in a union other than legal matrimony), we can be left...well, flabbergasted by our attempts to unravel the many layers of meaning that marriage may hold. We stand awestruck by such a momentous decision when viewed from this multitude of perspectives, and baffled by the seeming ease (almost nonchalance) with which it is often entered into. We may be disturbed by the outdated notions, lingering inequalities and sometimes offensive traditions that still surround marriage, and yet somehow still be drawn to it, nonetheless, for its connotations of commitment and security and lasting love (a dilemma which the poem that George read points to quite well). We may be fearful or relieved by the predictions of the demise of the institution of marriage—feeling, maybe, like the person who said: "Marriage is a fine institution, but who wants to live in an institution?" (I found this quote attributed to everyone from H.L. Mencken to Mae West)—we may be frightened or relieved by the message of the doomsayers who say that marriage itself will soon become a thing of the past, abolished completely or taking a new form so radical as to be unrecognizable, but we should know that there have been many such dire predictions about marriage throughout the centuries...and marriage is still with us.

Marriage is still with us, but marriage has changed. Indeed, one could say most convincingly, that marriage is still with us *because* it has changed, adapting to new cultural understandings, economic realities, and civil and political struggles. Marriage, as it is generally understood in this country today, actually has a rather shallow root system. Though there are those that would try to convince you that "traditional marriage" as it is understood in conservative religious circles would fit just swell in the Garden of Eden...don't believe it. Fundamental questions such as who should make the decision to get married, what roles the partners assume in married life, who controls property, how involved should the families be, how sex should be treated, what parenting consists of, and who, finally, has the authority to

say if you're married or not married...all of these questions have been up for grabs at different periods of history, and as the answers have changed, as people and communities fight to keep up with social and cultural realities, there have been those that sounded the death knell for goodness and decency and family values and TRADITION!

The records of such shifts in understanding are easy to find. I'm in the midst of reading *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy this summer, along with the Oprah Book Club, and this week I ran across this passage where a mother is fretting about her daughter's marriage:

The old princess herself had married thirty years ago, with her aunt as matchmaker. The fiancé, of whom everything was known beforehand, came, saw the bride, and was seen himself; the matchmaking aunt found out and conveyed the impression made on both sides; the impression was good; then on the appointed day the expected proposal was made to her parents and accepted. Everything happened very easy and simply...But with her own daughter she had experienced how this seemingly ordinary thing—giving away her daughters in marriage—was neither easy nor simple...She saw that much had changed lately in the ways of society, that the duties of a mother had become even more difficult. She saw that girls of [her daughter's] age formed some sort of groups, attended some sort of courses, freely associated with men, drove around by themselves, many no longer curtsied, and, worse still, they were all firmly convinced that choosing a husband was their own and not their parents' business...[T]he princess understood that in making friends her daughter might fall in love, and fall in love with someone who would not want to marry or who was not right as a husband. And however much the princess was assured that in our time young people themselves must settle their fate, she was unable to believe it, as she would have been unable to believe that in anyone's time the best toys for five-year old children would be loaded pistols.

Shocking! Not only that women no longer curtsied, but the very idea that you would let a young woman decide who she should marry, a young woman whose good judgment could be clouded by *love*...how ridiculous! (I love that image: a marriage decision in the hands of young people--"people in love"--is like a loaded pistol in the hands of a five-year old.)

We can see vestiges of this thinking about who makes the decision even today. On NPR, they were discussing the rather curious custom of the groom asking the bride's father for her hand in marriage. They had people calling in to tell their stories involving this tradition. One woman said she told her soon-to-be husband that he best not ask her father for a hand in marriage unless it was *her father's hand* he was after.

The idea that something could be agreed upon on the bride's behalf without the input of the woman herself sounds, to us, ridiculous, and yet some folks feel obligated to carry out this leftover custom from a very different time. The "marriage expert" on the show pointed out that, in the origins of the custom, not only was the bride left out but, many times, the groom was not part of the negotiation, either. It was strictly between two families, and much more of a business deal than the culmination of a romantic attachment. The purposes of the marriage were much more practical than the requited love of two

individuals, with important financial implications for the families involved. "Soulmate" was not yet a part of the wedding vocabulary. "A good match" was something else again. Leave that decision to the families.

Outrageous, right? Totally at odds with our present understanding of marriage. Who gets to make the decision about who marries who? Not our families. Not the state. We are convinced, aren't we, that only the individuals to be married, provided they are of legal age, are qualified to make the decision to be married, and that no one has the right to interfere with that choice? We believe, don't we, that weddings should arise from a free choice of free individuals, borne out of love and nurtured by humble effort, to commit themselves to each other and to have that commitment recognized by the community and the society at large as marriage? We stand, don't we, on the principle that civil marriage is a civil right, and thus the state should not be able to discriminate against any group of individuals by denying them this right?...

And yet...and yet, we live in a country where the President has called for an amendment to the Constitution that would effectively prohibit people who wish to marry another person of the same sex from being able to make that choice, people who are anxious to make that commitment, who have had the strength of their relationships tested not only by living through the necessary challenges of a relationship, but also by facing discrimination, misguided hatred, and the lack of community support and legal recognition that is afforded heterosexual couples.

I am excited to be performing a wedding this next month for two women in Tucson. The most important thing, of course, is that it be a service that speaks to their relationship, their special commitment to each other. They are clear that, for them, the ceremony itself is neither a political statement nor an opportunity to join in the great national marriage debate. And yet, I cannot help but be cognizant of the fact that, as the presiding minister, I am stepping into a long and proud Unitarian Universalist tradition of recognizing and celebrating the unions of same sex couples. I followed the stories about the first legal marriages occurring in Massachusetts just last month, at the Unitarian Universalist Association and Arlington Street Church. I look forward to the day that I can perform weddings of same sex couples in this state and know that those couples will be afforded all of the same legal rights that heterosexual couples enjoy. The decision to bless these unions should be left up to individual faiths, but the state should not be in a position of favoring a particular religious understanding of marriage, and such a position should certainly not be allowed to stain the Constitution in the form of an amendment.

Should I be married? With a divorce rate over 50% and climbing, the question is cast in a whole new light. Loudon Wainwright, taking the cynical view, sings in one of his songs:

I see people in love, and I wanna laugh.

Check out the statistics, take a look at the graphs.

And yet, regardless of statistics, despite the tawdry spectacle of "reality" (and I use the term loosely) reality TV shows that turn marriage into simply another prize in the game, despite religious groups that wish to return to the fabricated "good old days" of marriage by their rules alone, in spite of some on the conservative side saying that marriage has been corrupted irretrievably by our liberal society and in spite of some on the liberal side saying that marriage has always been a corrupt and corrupting institution based on inequalities and state control...in spite of all of this, people are still making the decision to be married, they are still finding something in their hearts and minds that leads them to this type of public statement of their personal commitment to their partners. They seek a blessing, not permission, from their families. They seek recognition and support, not interference, from their communities. They seek equality, not submission, in their relationship. And though they may not know the contours of the journey they have signed onto, and though they may not be able to articulate for an inquisitive minister at the drop of a hat their reasons for getting married, they know that it has something to do with celebration and trust and community and the inner life and happiness and hope and hard work and...yes, love.

"Oh, but what about love? I forget love," writes Gregory Corso. It comes at the end of his poem about marriage. It is the subject of the last chapter in the book entitled, *What Is Marriage For?* And here it is at the end of this sermon.

But we know, don't we, that love is where everything actually begins...