

Cupid's Conundrum - © February 10, 2002

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He who has seen the radiance of love, he is saved! Kabir

First Reading: An excerpt from *Chasing Grace: Reflections of a Catholic Girl Growing Up* by Martha Manning. The author is a clinical psychologist who was the eldest child in a devout Irish-American Catholic family. In her book she shares her experiences growing up as a Catholic school girl in the 50's and 60's. Martha Manning has the following commentary on engagement and marriage:

When I was sixteen, I saw marriage as the pinnacle in a woman's life, with motherhood a close second. In my fantasies, I never projected myself beyond the wedding. I had a vague sense that I would attend college, but only so that I could be a good mother to my children and have "something to fall back on" if my husband left me (as in "died.") I never even considered the possibility of divorce. Thoughts of an actual career did not cross my mind. Ironically, it wasn't until I became engaged on my twentieth birthday that I started thinking about the rest of my life. The actual proposal of marriage -- an event I had played out thousands of times in my head, each time more romantic, more spectacular -- lasted eight and a half minutes -- at most. There were no beautiful dress and tuxedo and candlelight in a wickedly expensive restaurant, with champagne and long-stemmed pale-peach roses; no Brian kneeling and professing his devotion; no dining room breaking into applause as I accepted; and no me, radiant with joy, for every single moment of the rest of my life.

In reality, we were in our wet, sandy bathing suits, dripping on the hall carpet in my grandmother's beach house in the middle of the morning. There were no flowers, champagne, or applause. Just a simple opal ring I had admired months before and an unwavering and straightforward declaration of love. Unlike the

absolute perfection of the fantasy, my reaction to the reality of my engagement was ambivalent. I was thrilled. But I was also terrified. This was the rest of my life we were talking about. My life. MY LIFE. All of a sudden, I realized how little I'd thought about it that way. I'd jumped right over it to thoughts about our life. I had never actually calculated the total time spent in engagement fantasies, but I knew it was a hell of a lot more than the eight and a half minutes I had just experienced.

If this was the actual engagement, was it also true for marriage? When we drove off in our "Just Married" car, lewdly decorated by our drunken friends, would it really be the beginning of our lives, or the end?

Second Reading: "On Love" from *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. Love one another, but make not a bond of love; Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other's cups but drink not from one cup. Give one another of your bread, but eat not of the same loaf. Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone, even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music. Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping. For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together, yet not too near together: for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

Sermon

As a minister, I've performed a lot of wedding ceremonies during the past 12 years. Although all of them were quite special, perhaps the one I remember best was also the simplest. It took place on a hot summer day in a trailer park in Ephrata, PA. The Groomsmen wore black polyester suits, cowboy boots and camouflage baseball caps that they took off just moments before the service began. The Bridesmaids wore beautiful gowns that they had worn to their high school prom a few months earlier. The Groom was young and shy and appeared

nervous as he stepped up to the makeshift altar in the center of the trailer park. The Bride was blushing as she processed down the aisle between rows of folding chairs borrowed from the local fire hall. Only the most observant onlooker could see that she was already expecting a child.

The service was religious but brief, which was a blessing, given the heat of the day and the Bride's condition. After the service, the Best Man put on his camouflage cap and sauntered over to me. He wanted to tell me how much the service had meant to him and the Groom. Then he had a question for me.

"Hey, preacher lady, what religion are you, anyway?"

"I'm a Unitarian Universalist," I said. "A Unitarian Uni-what-alist?" "A Unitarian Universalist," I repeated. "Hummm. A Unitarian Universalist," he said, kicking up some dirt with his cowboy boots as he decided if he should be suspicious or not. He reached into his suit coat and took out a cigarette. I stood quietly, waiting to see what he might say next. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he broke the silence. "Let me ask you another question, preacher lady. Does your church have any rules against smoking and drinking?"

"Not specifically," I answered cautiously.

"Well, hell," he said, as a big smile broke across his face, "Then I guess I'm a Unitarian Universalist too."

"Great!" I said, a little surprised by his quick acceptance of our faith. "I'd love to see you in church some time."

"You bet," he said, as he marched off in search of the beer keg.

I regret to inform you that I never did see him in church, but it would have been nice if he had come. Because I believe something about the marriage ceremony really did touch him in a deeply spiritual way. And, I believe what touched him

most was our church's acceptance of the Bride and Groom, just the way they were. It turned out that the young people in the wedding party had all grown up together in the same conservative church. But, their conservative minister would not perform their wedding ceremony because the Bride was pregnant. Much to his credit, he referred them to me, saying, "Those Unitarian will marry anyone." (Which isn't true. Although we do have that reputation in some circles.)

Before I perform a marriage ceremony, I meet with the couple and ask them why they want me to perform their service. I did the same with this young couple and learned that they would get "hitched" by the Justice of the Peace if they couldn't have a religious ceremony, but they really wanted God to bless their union.

During the premarital counseling sessions I asked them to look deeply within themselves and try to figure out exactly WHY they wanted to get married. What was that special attraction they felt for each other? They told me that they were committed to their relationship and they wanted to get married for the sake of their baby. I was encouraged by their response.

If I had heard stories about sweaty palms and the feeling that they had "known each other all their lives and couldn't live without each other," I would have become concerned. Fortunately, this was not the case. This young couple seemed to be making a conscious and spiritually based choice to love one another. A choice partly inspired by the expectation of their child, but a conscious choice, nonetheless.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case. More than half of the marriages in this country end in divorce. Why? One reason is that many people fall in love with and marry a person for all the wrong reasons. Psychologist and marriage counselor Harville Hendrix, author of *Getting the Love you Want*, describes this as an "unconscious marriage" -- a union between two "half" people who are unconsciously seeking someone else to make them feel "whole." He explains that most of us have "psychological wounds" left by our primary caretakers when

we were young. Hendrix contends that as we mature, we unconsciously seek out that person who reminds us most of our parents or other primary care takers.

(Again, this is not always the case, but based on years of clinical experience, I have come to believe that it is a factor in a high percentage of troubled relationships.) Amazingly, what we are often attracted to is the person with the most NEGATIVE personality traits of our primary caregivers. And, our partner often does the same thing, looking for the person with the negative traits of her or his primary care takers. Finally, when we find each other, we "fall in love."

Just like in the First Reading this morning, we build a fantasy life in our heads. We dream of that beautiful dress and tuxedo, long-stemmed pale-peach roses and us, radiant and joyful for every single moment of the rest of our lives together. Or, perhaps our fantasy is not quite that unrealistic. Perhaps we're just looking for some "average" person to "make us happy." Only, what we REALLY want is often someone to meet all of our unmet needs of children. And, again, our partner often does the same thing.

When our partner fails to make us happy, because no one can "make" anyone else happy, we become furious with each other because we feel that our partner has broken an "unconscious contract" that we made with each other when we first met. Again, the key word here is UNCONSCIOUS, because we usually can't see what's going on. Instead, we react illogically, almost like a child, pushing each other's emotional hot buttons as we try to "make" our partner behave the way we "need" her or him to behave in order to make us feel whole -- that is, to meet our unmet needs of our earlier life.

Of course, nobody wants anyone else to change them. Yet, we have a deeply rooted need for our partner to change; and she or he has a deeply rooted need to stay the same. And, so, we find ourselves in a power struggle: in the bedroom, with the checkbook, with the children, and in all aspects of our relationship. We're both on emotional "auto-pilot," pushing each other's buttons without obtaining

any positive responses. Often, this power struggle escalates, and we hurt each other's feelings so often that we can no longer see any of the good we saw in our partner during the earlier stages of our relationship. And, the illusions of becoming "whole" through our relationship with this person are shattered, and we feel distraught.

Often, this can lead to serious fights. Some couples try to work it out on their own. Some call it quits and end the relationship, (usually to continue the same pattern with another person). What's amazing to me is that others stay together and continue to fight with each other for the rest of their lives. It is hard to believe this, but I have witnessed it with my own eyes. For more than 30 years I watched close family friends, "Mildred and Freddie," fight about everything. He lived in the attic. She lived two stories below. They cooked separate meals and washed their own laundry. They yelled and screamed at each other across three flights of stairs. For years we encouraged them to go for marital counseling. They said they didn't believe in it.

Other people suggested that they just get a divorce. "No way," they said. They were Catholic and Catholics don't divorce. So, they just fought for a few decades. I often thought that Mildred would be much happier if she were no longer married to her nemesis. And, when he finally died a few years ago (in his late 90's), I thought that she would be relieved, perhaps even feeling liberated. But, no. She has been depressed ever since. Every day she talks about how much she misses her late husband, Freddie, and what a good life they had together.

The shocking lesson I learned is that some people can only relate in unhealthy ways, and they would rather have the drama of this power struggle, rather than face the prospect of living alone. Fortunately, there are other couples who run into problems in their relationship and decide to give marriage counseling (or therapy) a try. When they are successful, couples learn to heal the emotional wounds that led them to fall in love, unconsciously, rather than "choosing" to be

in a CONSCIOUS, loving relationship. They can learn to be two "whole" people who have the capacity to live on their own, but instead choose to be together and share their love.

Often, the process of healing is a deeply spiritual experience that involves an ever-increasing faith in a "Higher Power" or the "trustworthiness of the universe." When this happens, couples may experience a spiritual "rebirth" as they come to realize that they are lovable and whole, just the way they are. In this state of consciousness, they can begin to align themselves with the creative, animating power of the Universe, which I understand as "Love" or God. They allow love to flow through their lives. Intentional love. Conscious love. Love which isn't as much a feeling as a way of being -- a decision which is lived and expressed according to the principles which arise from real understanding -- principles which guide us in loving one another.

Many of these principles I've encountered in my training and practice as a Marriage and Family Therapist. Some of these principles I encountered a few months after my husband Phil and I began dating. We were talking about the many mistakes we had made in previous "unconscious" relationships, and the lessons we had learned from them. At some point, Phil reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a folded, frayed piece of paper that he said he'd like to read to me. The title was *An Intentional Relationship: The Giving and Receiving of Love*. "This is what I'm looking for," he said, as he began to read.

"If you feel unheard, I will listen respectfully and without judgment.

If you feel afraid, I will give you my gentleness, that you may know your strength.

If you feel wounded, I will nurture you with understanding and compassion.

If you want wisdom, I will show you all that I do not know.

If you are beset by the demands of daily life, I will do the things that must be done.

These I will do without conditions, or expectations or hope of reward. I will do them as you ask, as best I am able, so that we may trust one another.”

Alongside each of these precepts were other words in parenthesis. They were:

(Listen & Compassion)

(Nurture & Heal)

(Teach & Learn)

(Work & Contentment)

(Trust & be trusted.)

Phil explained that these were his corollaries, his principles of conscious love. He said he believed that when we listen deeply and without judgment, compassion arises. When we nurture, we heal. When we teach, we learn. When we do the things that must be done, contentment follows. When we give love, love returns to us, whether or not we are looking for it. I was still practicing as an engineer at that time, so I responded in true engineer's fashion. "It seems like a blueprint for an ideal relationship, as long as it's mutual. I don't know if this is a proposal or not, but if it is, I'd probably accept."

Phil assured me that it wasn't intended as a proposal, but if I took it that way, we'd have to give it some serious consideration. There were no sweaty palms and no promises of a "happily ever after." It was hardly romantic. But, it was real, conscious love, which was later reflected in our marriage vows exchanged at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster almost twelve years ago.

Part of the reason I was attracted to Phil, and part of the reason I believe our relationship still works, is that we both have a similar understanding of love and marriage. Through many difficult life experiences, and adopting mindfulness practices, we have both come to understand that we have to take responsibility for our own thoughts, feelings and actions. We have to make ourselves "whole." No one else can do that work for us. Yet, if we achieve a sense of personal "wholeness," we come to realize that anyone can love anyone. Anyone can love everyone. It's just a matter of choice. Please remember that I said LOVE – and not LIKE. Granted, it's harder to love some than it is to love others. But, if we practice the principles of deep, nonjudgmental listening; if *we* are nurturing; if we are gentle; if *we* are teachable; if *we* do the little things that must be done; then *we* naturally align ourselves with the greatest Love of all.

I have great faith in that Love. I have great hope in the unions of people who are guided by that Love -- couples whose relationships are intentional and based upon spiritual principles -- couples such as the young people from Ephrata, PA, who chose to marry one another when they could have just easily walked away. With a lot of hard work, faith and patience, I believe that their relationship can endure, and become a rich and rewarding experience. Because, they have a common, spiritually-based understanding of love -- real love -- without falling. An understanding captured in *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, which they insisted be part of their wedding ceremony.

"Love one another, but make not a bond of love. Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. ... Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping, for only the hand of Life can contain your hearts. And stand together, yet not too near together, for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow. Love one another, but make not a bond of love."

Amen.