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Marriage: What Is It Anyway?

By Kenneth A. Sprang

One advantage of marriage it seems to me is that when you fall out of love with him or he falls out of love with you it keeps you together until maybe you fall in again.

--Judith Viorst

A few months ago the Massachusetts Supreme Court began an avalanche when it declared that in Massachusetts it is unconstitutional to prohibit same-sex couples from marrying. San Francisco and other cities have begun marrying same-sex couple. Recently President Bush has announced support for a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to men and women. Suddenly we hear a cacophony of voices exalting the “sanctity” of marriage and the need to “defend” marriage, while others are cheering the elimination of the distinction. All of this discussion has caused me to muse a bit on the meaning of marriage.

The number of heterosexual couples living in domestic partnerships without marrying has grown exponentially in recent years. Although many are short-term co-habitation arrangements, many choose to live together for years without marrying.

Nevertheless, we continue to favor marriage in our society, and there are hundreds of rules and laws that favor married couples, e.g., family health insurance coverage, inheritance rights, tax benefits, mutual obligations of financial support. These economic advantages are usually denied domestic partners, both gay and straight.

Historically, there was tension among three forces—the Church, the civil authorities, and the local people. Informal marriage arrangements were common, including the ancient custom of “jumping the broom,” in which a man and a woman jumped over a broom and thereby became “married.” Common law marriage was the legal recognition of a couple who held themselves out as married without any formal legal or religious formalities.

So “what is marriage?” Is it a simple contract? Is it a religious concept which has somehow become law? What is its purpose? If it is simply a contract or legal arrangement, how can we prohibit same-sex couples from enjoying those legal rights? If it is a religious concept, how do we embrace it in a country that holds to a principle of separating church and state?

On a purely legal basis, marriage is a contract of sorts, which, among other things, gives each spouse a substantial right in the property of the other in the event of death or divorce, and imposes on each an obligation to support the other financially.

In centuries past, marriage was often a partnership of convenience. A farmer or pioneer needed a wife to mind the house and to give him children to help on the farm—love was not the driving force, if it was present at all. Marriage was also about property, as a husband gained control of his wife’s lands and ownership of her personal property. In some cultures, arranged marriages are still the norm. These arrangements are, at least initially, based on something other than romance.

Marriage has also been about procreation. In the Vermont courts opponents of same-sex unions argued (unsuccessfully) that marriage was necessary to support procreation. Does the state have an interest in our decision to have children?

Religious traditions have varying views of marriage. Most appear to view it as sacramental in nature. One of the most beautiful descriptions I know is a Jewish saying that the

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space between husband and wife is where God dwells.

Most of us today marry for love, of course. Many clients come to our practice seeking help in finding their “soulmate,” someone with whom they can happily spend the rest of their life. Others who are in relationship come to gain greater emotional satisfaction and fulfillment out of their relationship or to restore love in a relationship that seems to be unraveling.

From my vantage point, marriage looks like a fundamental human relationship born of our desire as human beings to be connected to one another. It is also valuable, though not imperative, for rearing children.

Imago theory teaches that we are attracted to persons with characteristics of our primary caretakers. If our partner out of love and commitment can give us the emotional support and gifts that we did not get in childhood, a great deal of emotional healing can take place. Certainly, we can heal and grow outside of relationship, but there is a unique emotional energy in a committed relationship that can be truly transcendent.

The key to success in Imago work, however, is not whether a couple is married, but whether each partner is emotionally and psychologically committed to the success of the relationship. With that resource, almost any relationship can succeed. One of the advantages of marriage, of course, as Judith Viorst suggests, is that when partners fall out of love with one another, marriage keeps them together until they fall back in love again.

If marriage is really about relationship and growing as human beings, query whether the current fuss is misdirected. If we encouraged marriage of same-sex couples, we could facilitate a lot of healing and growth for gay and lesbian folks and bring a lot of joy to many.

I know, of course, that there are religious traditions which oppose same-sex love on religious grounds. Maybe the answer to that concern is to separate marriage as a legal institution from marriage as a religious one, adopting the European model of a civil marriage distinct from any religious ceremony.

The issue is certainly complex. Feel free to email your thoughts.

Kenneth Sprang, MA, JD, and Carol Sprang, MA, RNC, LCPC, direct Bethesda-Chevy Chase Counseling & Consulting in Bethesda, offering Imago Relationship Therapy, relationship and executive coaching, individual and couples coaching and counseling, and business consulting services. (301) 907-3377. ken@bccounseling.com. www.bccounseling.com