

- This paper discusses a sensible approach to the problems of persons arising from their condition as man and wife.

## HOW TO BE HAPPY THOUGH MARRIED!

The quest for happiness is a very important focus about which we humans try to organize our lives; and most of us think we are organizing our lives about possible happiness when we get married. That many of us find ourselves to have been mistaken in thinking that being married is the way to happiness, is a fact which merits careful consideration. Later on, perhaps, I may imply why a good many people fail to secure happiness through marriage.

First, however, a few general ideas. We do want happiness. We try vigorously, although not always wisely, to manipulate events, surroundings, people and even ourselves so as to achieve this goal. Our success is usually quite spotty. One of the things we do in overwhelming numbers in this manipu-

lative process is to pair off two by two of opposite sexes and live in that pattern. The experience of the race has demonstrated that "single blessedness" is no better way, but rather a poorer way, to achieve happiness than "wedded bliss." If people had not absorbed this racial wisdom, marriage would not be as popular an institution as it is.

Whenever I read or hear some woe-crier declaring that marriage is falling apart, disintegrating before our very eyes, I say, "nonsense!" There is no more popular institution among human beings than marriage. Individual marriages break up, of course, in numbers that alarm the woe-criers. But by far the majority of people whose marriages are terminated (by death of divorce) diligently set about seeking to estab-

lish new marriages. Having gotten out of the married state, the thing they want most is to get right back in. As long as people have this mood toward marriage, I do not concede that marriage is on the way out.

The simple fact is that the vast majority of us do not want to live a life-time alone. We need continuing companionship. Only a very few choose to go it alone; and another very few to team up in a situation without full intimacy, or in which such intimacy is abnormal and under question. Hence we do not usually pair off as apartment, or house, mates of the same sex; but rather as partners of opposite sexes, and secure social confirmation and approval by getting married. This is the way we humans live our lives. The woe-criers to the contrary notwithstanding, this is the way we are going to continue to live them.

But sometimes we get bitter because this accepted and popular pattern of living by pairs doesn't automatically bestow happiness upon us. However, marriage is only one of the human institu-

tions upon which we call for happiness. Others are education, the church, social life, work, entertainment, material goods, etc. None of these, either, bestows happiness automatically. We are not greatly surprised that these other things often fail to make us happy, but somehow we expect more of the institution of marriage. We get bitter when it doesn't come through. This isn't fair to marriage, which is, after all, only one of the human institutions we have developed to help us come to terms with life.

If we could look at the whole matter objectively, as it would seem to a man from Mars unacquainted with human customs, human values, or the human psyche, a case could be made that in marriage we have devised an utterly impossible institution; and to expect happiness from it is the height of unrealism. We expect two relatively immature individuals, or individuals just barely mature and with little experience in maturity, to sign a contract to share the rest of their lives; to live together and be responsible for and to

one another day after day for all the days they shall live, whatever changes of status or personality may take place. None of the other institutions from which we seek value (or happiness) requires anywhere nearly as much. Contracts with them are always assumed to be revokable at will. No other human relationship is so demanding: friendship, occupation of a common domicile, relationship with employer or employee, commitment to an educational program, commitment to a church. Even the commitment to children has an expected duration of only a couple of decades. But in marriage you are expected to be stuck with your partner for the rest of your life, which, so far as you are concerned, is forever. To me, it's no wonder that a quarter of the marriages in our culture end in divorce. I'm a little surprised that more of them don't. To me it's no shock that a good many marriages that don't end still fail to yield much happiness to the participants. Instead, I'm surprised that as many peo-

ple are reasonably happy though married as are.

I think we should recognize that whatever failure marriage suffers in delivering happiness is probably less due to marriage than it is to our concept of happiness. Probably we fail to achieve happiness, in marriage as elsewhere, because we demand an unrealistically high degree of it. We are bemused by Aristotle's law of the excluded middle — we are either happy or unhappy and there's no in-between. If we cannot settle for lesser degrees of happiness, for ups and downs, but insist upon idyllic bliss all the time, neither marriage, lack of marriage, any other institution or its absence is going to make us happy. We need to set a more realistic goal. In terms of a more realistic goal I would guess that marriage — considering what an intrinsically impossible institution it is — doesn't do too badly.

Marriage is the only institution we have to keep from having to go through life alone. For all its defects and impossible demands, we have

not been able to dream up a better one for general consumption.

We want to know what to do, how to behave, how to think and act in and about marriage so that we can derive from it more and better values.

To begin with, I wish for far wiser selection of mates to begin marriages with, than often occur. Nature has thrown us a curve by installing in us a powerful sex urge which frequently befuddles our judgment in selecting a mate for life. Of course, having said this, I must pause to consider that without this sex urge, maybe we would have devised a different, less trying, but possibly much less rewarding way of arranging to live two by two.

At any rate, concerning the matter of selecting spouses, I must declare that marriages are not made in Heaven. I think the Christian church, advertently or inadvertently, has contributed to this impossible fiction by the custom of "sanctifying" marriages, by perpetuating the thesis that God joins people

together in marriage — "whom God hath joined together," etcetera.

Of course, I am not saying that anybody can marry anybody and be happy. But I do believe that for any one individual there are large numbers of potential spouses in the world with any of whom he would have an equal chance of making a good marriage.

In the second place I wish we could learn to deal with and put in its proper place the experience of romantic love. This is, of course, very closely related to the powerful sex impulse which so often befuddles our thinking and acting in the selection of mates. It involves the sex impulse but goes, I believe, considerably beyond it to be a longing toward consummation with a whole personality.

But, from the very nature of it, romantic love rarely lasts very long. Its duration is brief compared with the duration of a life-time; or what is left of a life-time from age 20.

It is normal for a relationship between two people

who get married to begin with romantic love. But this cannot be relied upon as the continuing basis for a satisfactory marriage. If there is not something else, or if something else cannot be developed to take over as the principal glue, a marriage is not likely to last with much satisfaction.

Then, in the third place, I wish people could learn to respect one another as persons. I am not proposing that spouses should treat each other in exactly the same way they treat members of the general public, but I will say that they should treat each other at least as well as they treat other people.

Failure of marriages to result in happiness is due, in no small measure, to the destructive special ways we treat our spouses. These ought, of course, to be avoided.

Among our special destructive treatments (which we would not think of directing toward others than our spouses) are such actions and attitudes as assuming a sort of position of ownership (like: "she's my wife, she

belongs to me"), and the right to control actions and even the attempt to control the thoughts of a spouse. Also it is a far too common practice for married people to try to make one another over, to correct alleged deficiencies in behavior and character and to force one another into a predetermined pattern. Closely related to this is a tendency to criticize one another, as we would certainly not presume to criticize anyone else.

We should feel a special responsibility toward our spouses to try to do those things, say and think those things which will add to their stature and status as human beings.

Finally, it is important to find and cultivate common interests if a marriage is to have much chance of yielding happiness. To share sleeping and eating with another person is not enough. There is a lot of life left over after we have eaten and slept. An important part of sharing a lifetime is to pool energies, concerns and interests during much of that left-over time.

Very few ways of earning a livelihood today involve husband and wife in a common enterprise they can share. For both to work at different jobs (certainly a common pattern) does not fulfill this need. Hence, in the time left over after eating and sleeping and after earning a living, it is important for spouses to find some common interest they can share together.

I must close with merely pointing to the common concern of children and noting that it, like everything else, is no sure-fire guarantee of

happiness in a marriage. This common interest sometimes causes intolerable problems; sometimes it goes astray and sometimes, it doesn't work. Yet it contains more, and more intense, potential for happiness in marriage than anything else. But in order to yield that potential it must be treated with the same high degree of wisdom, positive emotion, and commitment as anything else in life which is expected to result in value. — *by Rev. John G. MacKinnon in Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist Letter.*

## SOMETHING OF VALUE

If a man does away with his traditional way of living and throws away his good customs, he had better first make certain that he has something of value to replace them. — *African proverb*