

11/7/10 Sermon

"Like a Horse and Carriage"
Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

Marriage is one of life's most courageous human acts – to commit to love one another on all levels. It is immortalized in song, "Love and Marriage go together like a horse and carriage" but do they really?

Personally, my wisdom about relationships seems at best fleeting. While I have experienced many of the joys of a marriage/partnership, I have also endured the pitfalls of dissolving relationships. Perhaps because of my experience I now know a little of why marriages succeed and end.

Notice, I did not say "fail," for sometimes a marriage ending is like a Broadway show – closing after a long successful run. As my former wife said when we divorced, "we had learned all we could from one another and it was time to move on." Perhaps so; for love and marriage require much of us if they are to hold together and flourish or meet an untimely, sometimes unseemly death. The road to marital hell is after all, not paved with good intentions – but rather, in the words of John Gottman, with the scourge of "The Four Horseman of Apocalypse:

- "Unrelenting criticism, insults, name calling, putdowns and sarcasm;
- "Contempt for your partner's sense of self;
- "Defensiveness to avoid be victimized;
- "Stonewalling – an unwilling to respond to your partner at all, cutting off all communication."

If we are to avoid such an end, couples must constantly work to get to know and understand the other and themselves. When I counsel couples, I tell them that every marriage calls for a threesome. Yes, I said threesome – and they look at me as you are now – wondering "What the heck?" Well before you get all squirrely, let me explain.

A relationship is like a three-legged stool. If any of the legs are missing, it cannot function in its intended way. A marriage is the same. Wait for it, I am getting there. A marriage requires two unique individuals (two of the legs) and the union of the two into a couple (third leg). If any one of the three is missing, a marriage cannot thrive. If you do not bring all of yourself – the good, the bad, the ugly, but not too ugly – to a marriage, nothing

honest and real can happen. In fact, you cheat your partner of what they deserve – a fully committed partner based on love, shared intimacy, personal integrity, honesty and kindness.

We must be willing to share it all – the pain, the fear, the insecurity, the hidden self and the joy that makes Ecclesiastes true, that “Two are better than one.” In relationship, Gottman writes, one moves from “singing a solo in a grand mysterious choir,” and then “our voices rise to the heavens the moment we find a partner to blend with in a two part harmony.”

Better that than to be the couple who says the first things that come to mind no matter how hurtful or venomous; or the couple that stuffs it all down, sidestepping any potential disagreement. In my vast experience – LOL – I have learned to never hurl the insult you can't take back – the hurt that blazes through all defenses and put a hole in the other's heart. These are wounds to our vulnerability that we have shared, out of trust and love. These insults only weaken the foundation of a marriage.

Marriages can withstand many assaults, but can and do reach the breaking point, as it does in up to 60 percent of them. It happens for many reasons – we fail to pay attention to the other or withdraw respect and common decency, or worse yet, we become indifferent – adapting a state of neutrality devoid of emotion. It is, in Guttmann's words, as if “some subterranean current takes hold of you both and leads you down a path of negative thinking, destructive feelings, painful action and reaction, drifting towards isolation and loneliness,” negating along the way our first Unitarian Universalist principle that calls us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of the other.

Now, before you give up in despair, there is good news in all of this. Couples that intensely fight like cats and dogs (my parents) or couples that avoided conflict at all cost (my in-laws), perhaps have done nothing more than develop highly successful coping skills that keeps them together. You and your partner are the only ones who know the sacrifices and the rewards of your marriage, and the only ones who can decide its future. To save a marriage, we must both learn to fight fairly and respect the emotional triggers that hurt and offend the other. This knowledge can put a couple on the road to controlling the direction of their marriage.

Not all conflict is bad if it brings out the truth of what is happening and what each of you need. Honesty and trust are the keys to unlocking the door to a good marriage. Without that integrity, the odds of dissolution rise dramatically.

Marriages live and fail on how well the disagreements and grievances are aired. How you fight matters. Do you escalate your anger or seek to resolve issues? When things get heated, do you give yourself permission to call a time out ... to count to ten before more unpleasantness? No? Why not? Often our anger comes from feeling we are not being heard. To counter that, we can seek clarification of what we think we are hearing and frame the discussion with "I" personal statements. This is what I am hearing and it makes me feel this way. Is that what you meant? Often, in the heat of battle, we are just reacting and not thinking about the other person.

If you want to break this destructive cycle, it will take courage, strength and trust to overcome your feeling of victimization, hurt and anger. Think about what gets under your skin and then perhaps you can understand that what you say can also be hurtful to your partner. John Gottman, in his book "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail," offers a prescription for a healthier marriage that I want to share.

First, Calm Down!!! Calm Down!!! Learn to recognize when you are feeling overwhelmed and then make a deliberate effort to calm yourself – to slow your elevated heart rate which can lead to triggering your fight or flight response.

Rewrite your inner script of righteous indignation. You are no longer a child and don't have to use old coping mechanisms that no longer work. Try something new; repeat a mantra that calms you down – breathe out, breath in, pay attention to your breathing. One time while giving a deposition in a court case, I was demonized over a conference table and I had to repeat over and over again, "I am a good person." It worked. It validated my existence. Try it sometime.

Speak and listen non-defensively. Have a positive attitude about the person you love and reintroduce praise and admiration into your relationship. Remember why you married them in the first place. Balance the negative with the positive.

Finally, if you find one of these coping mechanisms to work, keep doing it, over and over again until it becomes a habit. We don't learn how to overcome a lifetime of bad communications habits overnight. Don't let yourself get discouraged. Remember, your relationship is worth saving. Keep rehearsing and practice, practice; these skills – that's how you get to Carnegie Hall. You can never over learn these coping mechanisms.

I am not being Pollyannaish about the difficulty of improving your marriage. I have only shown you the tip of the iceberg. It is up to you to steer clear of the danger the way the Titanic did not.

This sermon is both a cautionary tale and beacon that can lead you back to unconditional love, hope and faithfulness in your marriage. Remember why you got married, the sweet feeling of romance, and the excitement of the other. As the hymn goes, there is more love somewhere. Look for it again. Life is too short and love too precious not to.

May it be so!