

GRIST

Diocese of New Ulm Social Concerns Office May, 2010

Fidelity in Marriage from "Poetry & Marriage," an essay by Wendell Berry

*The Chinese character for fidelity depicts
the sign for "man" beside the sign for "word" –
fidelity to the given word; man standing by his word.*

Word-keeping, standing by one's word, is a double fidelity: to the community and to oneself.

Marriage is the mutual promise of a man and a woman to live together, to love and help each other, in mutual fidelity, until death.

Marriage is a form of sexual love which allows its fulfillment in satisfaction and in responsibility for its consequences, and sets a term to this responsibility – "until death" – at which it may be said to be fulfilled.

The meaning of marriage begins in the giving of words. We cannot join ourselves to one another without giving our word. And this must be an unconditional giving, for in joining ourselves to one another we join ourselves to the unknown.

A certain awesome futurity is the inescapable condition of word-giving – as it is, in fact, of all speech – for we speak into no future that we know, much less into one that we desire, but into one that is unknown. But that it is unknown requires us to be generous toward it, and requires our generosity to be full and unconditional.

The unknown is the mercy and it may be the redemption of the known. The given word may come to appear to be wrong, or wrongly given. But the unknown still lies ahead of it, and so who is finally to say? If time has apparently proved it wrong, more time may prove it right. As growth has called it into question, further growth may reaffirm it.

Until the wedding vows are said, the argument that one might find a better spouse has standing because there is no argument or evidence that can be produced against it; statistical probability would seem to support it: given the great number of theoretically possible choices, one *might* make a better choice. The vows answer that argument simply by cloture: the marriage now exists beyond all possibility of objection.

Undoubtedly, some marriages are wrong, some divorces right. But it must also be understood that the possibility of breaking a vow can tell us nothing of what is meant by making and keeping one. Divorce is the contradiction of marriage, not one of its proposed results.

Marriage does not invite one to solve one's quarrel with one's wife by marrying a more compliant woman. Certain limits, in short, are prescribed – imposed *before* the beginning.

Marriage is an attempt to rhyme, to bring two different lives – within the one life of their troth and household – periodically into agreement or consent.

Difficult virtues are necessary. And failure, permanent failure, is possible. But it is this possibility of failure, together with the formal bounds, that turns us back from fantasy, wishful thinking, and self-pity into the real terms and occasions of our lives.

Because the condition of marriage is worldly and its meaning communal, no one party to it can be solely in charge. What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go. It is going where the two of you – and marriage, time, life, history, and the world – will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way.

Husband and wife do not know with certainty what they are staying for, but know the likelihood that they will be staying “a while”: to find out what they are staying for. And it is their faith that they will not stay to find that they should not have stayed.

That faith has nothing to do with what is usually called optimism. As the traditional marriage ceremony insists, not everything that we stay to find out will make us happy. The faith, rather, is that by staying, and only by staying, we will learn something of the truth, that the truth is good to know, and that it is always both different and larger than we thought.

Husband and wife accept the duration and effort, even the struggle, of formal commitment. They come prepared to stay; if they mean to stay they will have to work, and they must learn the difference between good work and bad – which is to say that the capability of good work must be handed down from old to young.

This work consists of the accumulation of local knowledge *in place*, generation after generation, children learning the visions and failures, stories and songs, names, ways, and skills of their elders, so that the costs of individual trial-and-error learning can be lived with and repaid, and the community thus enabled to preserve both itself and its natural place and neighborhood.

Maturity sees that the past is not to be rejected, destroyed, or replaced, but rather that it is to be judged and corrected, that the work of judgment and correction is endless, and that it necessarily involves one’s *own* past.

The vows of marriage involve couples in the free embrace of limits. In marriage, spouses vow themselves in a covenant before God to walk the Christian journey bound to one person in a radical and exclusive way. This free embrace of limits is not an end in itself but a means for entering into the paschal rhythm of the Christian life and for witnessing publicly to the transformative power of this rhythm. We Catholics celebrate the unique intimacy of marriage, as we must. But we need also to celebrate the conversion and growth in discipleship that the vowed life of marriage demands through the limits it imposes. Those who vow themselves in marriage allow their vows to shape their very identity.

Richard R. Gaillardetz