

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
“Negotiating Expectations”  
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 10, 2008

Spoken Meditation

Spirit of Life and Love

Billion-year-old continuous uninterrupted stream,  
Flowing into this moment from the dawn of life.

So many, many algae slick rocks each stream has flowed around,  
Forest pools each has rested in stillness,  
Majestic water falls each has plunged across,  
Vast rivers and oceans where each has discovered unity.

What an amazing, wondrous journey each one of us has made  
To be able to sit here this morning,  
And contemplate the vast emptiness of space  
And the intense radiance of the stars.

How can we *not* experience awe and wonder again and again.

And yet, we forget who we really are.  
Rather than seeing ourselves as a mighty river of life,  
We often see ourselves as a muddy puddle  
Someone just stepped in.  
Preoccupied with our litany of complaints,  
Life doesn't satisfy our expectations of how it "ought to be."

The stream doesn't forget us.  
It bubbles up in us like an artesian spring.  
All we need do is sit quietly on its bank  
Feeling that constant current moving along  
Urging us back into the flow again.

May all those who have become parched and dry  
Find this living water within them.  
May all those who witness drought-parched lands nearby  
Bring this living water to them.  
And may we take comfort in the endless cycle of becoming  
And appreciate the great honor and privilege  
of getting wet.

Sermon

Not long after Philomena and I were married and settling into our life together in Buffalo, we had an argument. I remember thinking she should do something she hadn't done. Philomena pointed out that I hadn't asked her to do it and she hadn't said that she would do it. I said something to the effect that I didn't have to ask because that was what I expected

her to do as my wife. I remember her looking me square in the eye and saying, “Sam, if we’re going to get along, you’ll need to lower your expectations.”

I did and we’ve been happily married for almost 18 years.

Marriage as an institution is in upheaval today with better than half them ending in divorce. Women’s liberation has changed many of the expectations couple’s have when they marry. Today, everything has to be negotiated in a modern marriage. Either partner or both can be the breadwinners. Either partner can be in charge of the household or the responsibilities can be shared. There is no dominant model for how couples should parent and divide up those responsibilities. Even the expectation of fidelity can be the subject of negotiation in some relationships, though not recommended by any means. As the institution is being remade, anything seems to go. What we do know is: without making mutual agreements, anything goes doesn’t “go” for very long.

Each year in ministry, I watch marriages fall apart and couples separate in our congregation. I witness the pain they go through as they divorce and the pain their children experience. Sometimes the couples come to talk to me as they struggle with their problems. Usually, when they *are* ready to talk to me, one partner already has a foot out the door. This causes me distress as I wonder what I, or our congregation, could have done to help them have more satisfying marriages. I don’t sit in judgment about whether couples should stay together or separate. What I do believe is that if couples learned some effective relationship skills, maybe some of those marriages could have been saved and even flourished. As anyone who has divorced knows, the problems that were barriers in one relationship are likely to tag along into the next one.

This is why I’m offering the class that will be coming up this Saturday taught by Kim Ploussard and her husband, with my assistance on relationship skills. I’m interested in strengthening my relationship with Philomena and making it even better than it already is. The reason to go to a class like this is not to fix your partner but for both of you to *get more of what you want* from your relationship by learning how to *give more* to your partner and your relationship.

Today we need some NEW rules for making marriages work. Terrence Real, internationally known family therapist, located in Massachusetts and author of several books on relationships, has recently published a book called, *The New Rules of Marriage*. The book will be the foundation for the workshop and a primary source of what I’d like to speak with you about today. Let me warn you that hearing these ideas and methods will not help your marriage. Practicing them will! So I encourage you to come to the class. The reason we need to spend time learning how to make relationships work is because the lessons about how to make them fail are all around us. Just turn on the television and watch a situation comedy if you want to learn the losing strategies.

Philomena and I enjoy watching “Everybody Loves Raymond,” a popular comedy show that went off the air in 2005 after nine seasons. For those of you may be unfamiliar with it, the setting for the show is Lynbrook, Long Island. Ray Barone, a sports writer for Newsday, is married to Debra, a stay at home mom, and they have a daughter and two twin boys. Ray’s parents, Frank and Marie live across the street and are constantly meddling in their lives. Ray and his brother Robert are regularly in conflict because Ray is Marie’s favorite son. The intrusiveness of Ray’s family drives Debra up the wall.

In one episode, Debra is called in to see their child's teacher because of the disturbing things he is writing about in class. Debra's response captures the emotional misery that goes along with marital strife:

"You have no idea what I have to put up with. When I got married, I didn't just get a husband, I got a whole freak show that set up their tent right across the street! And that would be fine if they stayed there, but everyday, every day, they dump a truckload of their insane family dreck into my lap. How would you like to sit through 2 people in their 60's fighting over who invented the lawn? The LAWN! And then the brother, 'I live in an apartment. I don't even have a lawn. Raymond has a lawn.' But you can't blame him when you see who the mother is. She has this kind of sick hold on the both of them. And the father is about as disgusting a creature as God has ever dropped on this planet. So no wonder the kid writes stories. I should be writing stories. My life is a gothic novel, and until you have lived in that house with all of them in there with you, day after day, week after week, year after *friggin'* year, you are in no position to judge me!"

What you regularly see on this show are all five losing strategies in relationships. They are always arguing about who is right and who is wrong, losing strategy #1. They are always trying to control each other because they are afraid to talk to each other, losing strategy #2. Raymond is always getting into trouble because he is afraid to face his family. When typically Ray's timidity or insensitivity finally gets exposed, Debra unleashes a verbal assault holding nothing back, losing strategy #3. Her vitriol, what one might call "unbridled self-expression," typically escalates the situation. Once the tempers have flared, they pick one of two ways to respond they learned in pre-school. Either they retaliate actively or passively, losing strategy #4, or they withdraw from each other losing strategies #5. No matter what happens, both of them end up feeling like the victim of the other. And Ray's father, mother and brother are always there to add fuel to the fire.

And Philomena and I laugh. We laugh because they act out the feelings we recognize in ourselves but, most of the time, know better than to act on. "For a marriage to have any chance, every day at least six things should go unsaid," goes the old saying.

Ray and Debra rehearse the same fights over and over. Each time, their eyes are throwing daggers at each other, I hope they finally resolve their conflict and realize they really do love each other very much. Of course ... if they didn't have conflict, I doubt I'd want to continue to watch the show. And while I'm watching my brain is being influenced by their impulsive behavior.

Ray and Debra's pattern of repetitive, ongoing conflict is one we may recognize in our own relationships. In the first year of a marriage, it seems we mark our territory and begin fighting over where the boundaries are.

When Philomena and I fell in love, I was amazed at how similar we were, how many interests we shared, how we both thought about things the same way, even to the point it felt like I could read her mind. It felt like I'd met my long lost twin. The first year of our marriage was a rude awakening. In that first year we were married, I suddenly started to pay attention to the differences between us. I started to recognize that those differences were not minor anomalies that I could fix in her, but rather core differences between us I'd need to begin to learn to accept, and maybe even appreciate. Another old saying says there are three stages of love and marriage:

First, You don't know em, but you love em.  
 Second, You know em, and don't love em.  
 Third, You know em and you love em.

If we were really wise, we'd choose our partners based on their parents. Their unresolved relationship issues are likely to be inherited. Terrence Real describes the two conditions our partner must meet for us to fall in love:

1. The person's character is similar enough to that of one or both of our parents' that, with this person, we can re-create our most familiar and most unresolved childhood drama. and:
2. The person's character is dissimilar enough from that of our parents' that, with this person, the old drama carries within it, the potential for a new and healthier outcome.

In the television show, Raymond recreates his relationship with his intrusive mother with Debra but hopes to create a better outcome where he enjoys the same kind of intense, stimulating attention but with a little more freedom to be himself. The horror of marriage, which we see Raymond struggling with again and again, is recognizing you've recreated these unresolved conflicts in your marriage and feeling helpless about creating a new and healthier outcome, reliving the same unresolved conflicts again and again, relating to the worst image of your partner, not the best.

These unresolved conflicts are what limit the intimacy in relationships and can gradually destroy them. Many marriages are played out in the demilitarized zone between two warring parties. It doesn't have to be this way.

Earlier I spoke about five losing strategies in relationships. Now I'd like to talk about five winning strategies.

The first step toward a winning strategy is shifting from complaint to request. Instead of focusing on how your partner is failing, focus on asking for the change that reveals what you want. A request is not a demand or an ultimatum. A request is risky because it acknowledges the power of your partner to say yes or no. Asking makes one vulnerable to disappointment. There can be no threat behind this kind of request. A request exposes your wants and needs and invites your partner to care for you. The change from controlling behavior to requesting behavior can dramatically change a relationship for the better, for embedded within requests is caring and respect. In Leo Tolstoy's words, "What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility."

The second step is found on the other side of requests, speaking and responding with love and compassion. Cultivating the spirit of "I'm at your service. How can I help." To respond to requests by your partner effectively, listen as openly as possible for the emotions moving through your partner. There are two different and independent realities, facts and feelings. One of the greatest educations in relating to people I've had since getting married and going into ministry is learning to pay far more attention to emotional reality than to rational, logical, fact based reality. Remember this: "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be married!"

What facilitates this kind of listening is the third strategy, listening with a generous heart. When listening with a generous heart, points of contention become points of curiosity. “Oh, when I leave dirty dishes in the sink, you feel I don’t care about you. How does that happen inside you? What associations do you have with my actions?” Whether leaving dirty dishes in the sink should or should not evoke that feeling of alienation has no right or wrong answer. The emotional landscape of our partner is what really matters. That emotional landscape can be responded to generously, only if we appreciate it and feel with it. Ruth Bell Graham observes that, “A good marriage is the union of two good forgivers.” Yeats wisely put it this way, “I think a man and a woman should choose each other for life, for the simple reason that a long life with all its accidents is barely enough time for a man and a woman to understand each other and. . . to understand - is to love.”

Only when we start feeling with our partner and start to appreciate their emotional inner life, can we really begin to empower our partner, winning strategy #4. With the feeling connection reestablished, we’re ready to care about what our partner cares about and be ready to assist them in getting what they want in life. This mutual giving and receiving is embodied in this relationship mantra, “What can I give you, to help you give me what I want?” Real giving, writes author Michele Weiner-Davis, “is when we give to our spouses what’s important to them, whether we understand it, like it, agree with it, or not.”

The most powerful of all the winning strategies is the last, to cherish our partner. “The constructive power of cherishing is so great that it equals all of the preceding strategies combined.” Continually seeking ways to appreciate our partner is the lubrication that makes relationships move from good to great.

What I’ve been learning as I practice these winning strategies with Philomena, is it can be hard at times. Increased intimacy creates increased vulnerability. That increased vulnerability increases my need for trust and faith in Philomena. But, the more I know her heart, the more I appreciate her and build that trust and faith in her. The success of marriage, says John Fische, “comes not in finding the “right” person, but in the ability of both partners to adjust to the real person they inevitably realize they married. Relationship guru Harville Hendix says it best, “Marriage, ultimately, is the practice of becoming passionate friends.”

The basis for that passion is deeply spiritual, found in the common Spirit of Life we all share.

May connecting to that source, again and again, bring us sustenance as we strive to love each other better.

May we realize that *knowing* about winning strategies is useless unless they are *practiced* on a daily basis.

May our fears and vulnerabilities not limit our faith that there is indeed more love somewhere to be found ... right next to us.

And finally, may the process of learning to love more generously, while cherishing our partner, be a dance we do today!

**Benediction**

I close with the wise words on relationships from Mr Rogers:

It's you I like,  
It's not the things you wear.  
It's not the way you do your hair,  
But it's you I like.  
The way you are right now  
The way down deep inside you  
Not the things that hide you  
Not your diplomas...  
They're just beside you.  
But it's you I like,  
Every part of you,  
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings,  
Whether old or new.  
I hope that you'll remember  
Even when you're feeling blue,  
That it's you I like,  
It's you yourself, it's you  
It's you I like!

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