

Marriage: Can A Dream Become A Reality?

I could not but admire deeply and be moved by the courage and honesty of a woman who recently wrote in one of the overseas journals of our Church about her marriage; a marriage which had begun so well but which, like so many in fact do, had threatened to end in disaster. Like most people are when they marry, she had at first been madly in love with her husband, and he with her.

"When we married, he was the most wonderful man in the world. Every waking moment was spent in thinking of ways to win his love and favour. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for him, nor he for me, just for the asking. Sometimes we didn't even need to ask; somehow we just knew. He was wonderful, or I wouldn't have married him."

As I said, and she wrote of it, it didn't continue that way. "Month by month, year by year, I 'pushed' for all the 'things' that I thought would make a dream a reality.

We each came into the marriage with certain pre-conceived, sometimes unconscious ideas of what our marriage should be. As time went on, all the things we loved about each other were obscured by the unspoken, unfulfilled and sometimes unrealized expectations. Needs were not met and love was replaced by resentment on both our parts. Needs (in fact) were disguised as demands and seemed to rob the other of freedom. So, instead of living happily ever after, we found our dream had turned into a domestic nightmare." A dream turned into a domestic nightmare. It's tragic really that that should happen to a marriage. And yet it's happening all the time. We don't need the latest divorce statistics to prove the point. It's a reality no one can deny. And even where marriages don't reach a breaking point, you often find them being endured rather than enjoyed. The early glow and single minded devotion, the one partner for the other, has gone. The love that seemed so beautiful and exhilarating is no longer there.

It's a situation which can't but pose a number of questions. And if you have been near, or, if you have been affected by, unhappiness in marriage, they are questions you have probably asked yourself many times over already. Marriage, it is clear, is ordained by the Lord. His words in Matthew's Gospel about a man leaving father and mother and, in the words of the Authorised Version, "cleaving" unto his wife, make this absolutely clear. "What God hath joined together let no man rend asunder". We believe, in fact, that it is the holiest of all human relationships.

Why then do things go wrong? Why, after the first few years, does it settle back, so often, into dull and unexciting routine? Is it just blind luck or chance, or what, that some hit it off and make a real go of it, while others don't? Or what? So much is at stake that we've got to take these questions seriously. And whilst, I suggest there are answers to them, it is important for us first to stand back and look at marriage within the overall scheme and plan of things. A moment ago I mentioned teaching in Matthew's Gospel where marriage is so beautifully set apart and sanctified by the Lord.

The teaching given through Swedenborg takes us even further than that, in that we are shown there how it is that not only was marriage set apart by the Lord, but that it has its very genesis, or beginning, with Him. There are things about the Lord which in turn explain and enable us to understand how it is that two very different people, a man and a woman, are mutually attracted and why marriage holds such wonderful potential, and the promise of fulfilment, that it does.

For the moment then, and making it our starting point here, let's talk about the Lord. (And, can I say, when I refer to the Lord I am referring to Him as our God and Creator). There are two things which constitute the very essence or nature of the Lord and these two things are His Love and His Wisdom. There is, for want of a better way of expressing it, this duality in the Lord, Love on the one hand, Wisdom on the other, though in Him they are perfectly united.

As we would expect, all of creation carries the imprint of Him who created it. And this duality, just spoken about, in the Lord, is reflected, or seen in an image everywhere. There is land and water, heat and light, acids and alkalis and, most significantly, male and female. Eastern philosophies have long spoken about the existence of the masculine and feminine principles throughout the whole of creation. And, basically, what they are saying is right. Wherever you look you find two opposites complementing each other, the one the obvious partner of the other.

That we are male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine, is, then, something that has its origin in God Himself. It is in every way a very wonderful thing and a very beautiful thing. The male human being is a form of life specially created to receive and give emphasis to the things of God's wisdom.

The female human being is a form of life created to receive and give emphasis to all that has reference to God's love. And, as Love and Wisdom are perfect partners in God, so men and women seek partnership, and the inter-action of their lives, the one with the other. We can suppress it or distort it but in fact we cannot help the attraction and deep seated longing we feel for the opposite sex. It's something that lies at the very core of our being.

That attraction, you must have realised by now, is more than a physical thing. Or, should I say, the basis of that attraction is more than a physical thing. Much more. When you get down to it, it is inherent in the minds and mental mechanisms of the two, the masculine and the feminine. Although he may not be able to verbalise it, or say exactly what it is, the male is attracted by certain mental qualities in the woman which he feels enrich, expand and complement his life. And the woman is attracted to the man for the mental qualities and characteristics she sees in him which she feels enrich, expand, and complement her life. This is the way God created us. This is the way it is meant to be. As in Matthew Chapter 19, to which I referred earlier: "He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. Wherefore they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man rend asunder."

"We can" I said, "suppress it or distort it, but in fact we cannot help the attraction and deep seated longing we feel for the opposite sex." But what we feel goes further than that, doesn't it? It is an attraction and deep seated longing for one of the opposite sex who reciprocates what we feel towards them. And this, I repeat, is there from the very way we have been created.

Why then does the system get fouled up? Why do things go wrong? Why does the magic disappear? There is a danger here, I know, of seeming to over simplify things. If people were asked there would probably be a hundred and one different reasons pointed to. ('He was only interested in his job', 'she tried to dominate me' and so on). But beneath and behind them all is this. Being what we are, and having the inclinations to selfishness that we've got, it's not surprising that the inclinations, longing and love we have for another is decidedly affected by them (by those inclinations, that is). Marriage and love too often tends to be approached in terms of what we can get out of it.

However ardently it is felt, invariably the love which flows between two people, especially at the beginning, is a very raw and unrefined love. Whether we are conscious of the fact or not, it's our own particular needs which very much hold sway with us at that time.

For a marriage to blossom and glow and become more beautiful and rewarding as the years go by, the raw and unrefined love which was there at the beginning; which first drew the partners together and sustained them for a time; must become purified and refined. The selfishness which, like ink poured into water, coloured our love at the beginning, though we will not have recognised it then, has to be expelled. As is said in the writings of Swedenborg about all higher and purer love, we must make room for it. A God fearing attitude towards the love we share, and a willingness to come to terms with the way our selfishness and self-regard can intrude, will make all the difference.

It is imagined at times that if only we could find the perfect partner all would be well. And we would live blissfully ever after. But that's being naive and unrealistic. The state of a marriage, or the quality of a marriage, can only reflect the states and qualities of the two who are involved in it. There is no such thing as a magic formula. If we want our marriage to grow and deepen, as it is meant to do, and as the Lord wants it to do, there is much that we must be prepared to do. There is just so much within ourselves that can and will damage the relationship and which has to be controlled and overcome.

The dream doesn't have to die! The promise of joy and happiness two people feel when they fall in love can become a reality. It's not a cruel illusion as the cynics, the disillusioned, and those hurt by their experience of marriage might say. The single minded devotion to each other with which a man and a woman begin their marriage doesn't have to come to an end 5 or 10 years later amidst sleepless nights, crying babies, budgetting problems, pressure at work, and all the rest. It's very much in the hands of the partners what their marriage becomes.

In case you're interested things did work out for the woman whose comments in an article she had written were the starting point for this talk tonight. The struggles she describes are too long to recount here. The important thing is that they did win through.

"We have had our ups and downs in the past five years, as is only to be expected. But now together we look to the vision of that precious jewel of life, the gift of true marriage love. We look to the Lord in all we do and strive to live all we learn. The search for the order of our lives goes on, as does the compelling of ourselves to that order. Every day I thank the Lord for giving His love to our little family and gathering us into His loving arms."

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