The Promises We Make

As most of you know I have only recently finished all of the requirements necessary to become a UU minister, and was at long last ordained in April of this year, so in many ways 2009 has had somewhat of an air of celebration for myself and my family. And so it was over last year’s Christmas holidays, as we visited with family and friends up in Boston. A member of my extended family was talking to me about all the steps involved in ministerial formation, all the classes and internships and reading and paperwork, and she asked me, “Well, were all those requirements useful? I mean, were you just jumping through hoops they put up, or did you really learn from all that stuff?”

I laughed out loud, thinking immediately back to a little over five and a half years ago when the idea of ministry first occurred to me. Oh my goodness, how little I knew! How much was in store for me! Did I learn from those years, did I need them to be the minister that I have become? Most assuredly, yes I did.

Upon reflection, however, I realized that the education I got, although abundant, was never very straightforward. I could never predict what I was going to learn from any particular class or field experience, no matter how large those learning goals were up there at the top of the page. As I was talking with this family member my mind leaped to one surprising ministerial epiphany, one that happened a couple of years ago during my internship at the River Road UU Congregation when I started to perform weddings.

Those of you here in the congregation who have been married in Unitarian Universalist ceremonies may have had ministers who provided a packet or handbook of materials to choose from, various vows and readings and blessings and so on. When I was an intern I performed two weddings using the standard wedding packet that my internship site provided, but then decided that it was time for me to have my own selection of materials to offer, words that I especially believed in and could stand behind with authority. So I went about reading all the wedding materials I could find, to decide what should go in this official Megan Foley ministerial wedding packet of mine.

Many of you who have been involved in a wedding ceremony will already know how wide the range of readings or other materials can be. Most challenging can be the request to pick a reading for a wedding. What should the tone be? Should you go traditional, biblical, poetic, contemporary, humorous? And beyond choosing a form, which is complicated enough, what should the message say? What do you want to tell the marrying couple? What do we really believe about marriage? What are we doing in a wedding ceremony, anyway?

This is the point in my own wedding-material selection process where I had to come to a stop and do some serious thinking about what I was doing as a minister when I married two people. Regardless of whether you think modern times are good or bad, it is pretty obvious that in this day and age that you hardly need a marriage certificate to fall in love, to live together, or even to have children. People can and do act just like married couples for years, for their entire lives, without...
actually being recognized by church or state. Yet not only are weddings still performed, but the quest for equality in marriage rights is a hot political issue – and rightly so. But why? Why do we continue to marry, and what do I, as a minister of a liberal faith tradition, have to say about the purpose of marriage in such a liberal social climate? A question loomed very large for me, all of a sudden, as I began to select these wedding materials: What do I as a minister have to say about the purpose of marriage?

The wedding materials themselves have some of the answers, in all their diversity. Some readings are about the nature of love, since presumably – and this is a fairly modern presumption about marriage – but presumably love is what has brought the couple to the wedding day. I would be surprised if most in this room haven’t heard about love being patient, kind, bearing all things, and so on, straight from the mouth of Paul in First Corinthians. These words of Paul’s formed the lyrics for our first hymn this morning.

Other readings talk about what love can bring to the couple, and how the presence of love can help the couple through both good times and bad. Perhaps you’ve heard this poem as well, which I’ve heard attributed to both the Apaches as well as to the Salish [say-lish] Indians:

“Now for you there is no rain
For one is shelter to the other
Now for you there is no sun
For one is shelter to the other.
Now for you nothing is hard or bad,
For the hardness and the badness is taken, by one
For the hardness and the badness is taken, by one
For the hardness and the badness is taken, by one

It’s a beautiful poem, embodying the best of what love can bring to our lives. And yet still, neither this poem, nor First Corinthians, in all their commendation of the qualities of love, answers the question of why get married? Why take this beautiful thing these words describe called love, and turn it into a marriage? Given current divorce rates, couldn’t we say that marriage is, well, sometimes bad for love?

And some readings are about warnings, frankly, warnings about what life has in store and what does and doesn’t make for a good marriage. These warnings can be found in the most traditional religious vows, which remind us that life is not only for richer, in health and for our whole lives, but also for poorer, in sickness, and ends with inevitable death. UUs love Khalil Gibran, with good reason, and Gibran does some lyrical warning to marrying couples. Here it starts, in his book The Prophet: Love one another, but make not a bond of love; fill one another’s cups, but drink not from one cup; give one another of your bread, but eat not from the same loaf...let there be spaces in your togetherness..., and so on.

I think of these sorts of readings as your straight-talking old grandma at the wedding, the one who was married for fifty years and is going to tell it like it is. There is much value to that grandma, so much wisdom from those with more experience to be gleaned: and yet, these warnings, for all their helpfulness around how to stay married, do not answer the question of why, in this day and age, why get married in the first place, especially if marriage is the sort of thing you need to be warned about right off the bat.

My sense was that there was something more to marriage than these sorts of readings indicated, more that needed to be explored in a wedding ceremony than merely the nature of love and some sound advice to the marrying couple – as valuable as those messages may be. This sense came largely from my own married experience. My first husband and I married very young, with all the gushing emotion and good intentions of any young couple in love – and six years later I was called
upon to nurse him through a great illness and on to his death. What kept me going through that experience, what laid my work out in front of me? I found it was the promises that I had made during my youthful, impromptu wedding ceremony. I suddenly found myself in the phase of love that was not about “you complete me,” not about my personal fulfillment and happiness – and all those warnings and vows, sickness and health and all that, I was in the middle of all that, those warnings were true, but they didn’t tell me what to do.

But I had made that promise to my husband that we were in this thing called Life as one unit, and despite the fact that Life had taken us where we surely did not want to go, I figured we were in it together. We had promised that to each other on our wedding day, even though, frankly, we hardly knew what we were getting ourselves into.

This experience forms a part of me as surely as my hair or my feet are a part of me. And as I collected material for my very own wedding planning workbook, I came upon the statement that I would choose to explain why marriage is important, why indeed I remarried myself, and why I stand as a minister so willing to marry others. Those words are these:

A marriage ceremony is the public recognition of a promise two people have made to each other. It is a risk and a delight, an uncertainty, a sureness, a wonder and a continuing bond...

...To marry someone is not to be merely bound by a strong feeling, a helpless captivation. It is not something that just happens to you, but rather something you do. It is a decision; it is a judgment; it is a promise; it is a covenant.

Thus it is out of the tension between separateness and union that love, whose incredible fragility is equal only to its incredible strength, is born and reborn.

Interesting words, these. Interesting reversal, actually, of what we have come to understand as the purpose of marriage. And most interesting of all, this last statement: It is out of the wedding promise that love is born and reborn. In this view, rather than a couple coming to the wedding out of a sense of love in order to make a promise, the couple instead first makes the promise – and love grows out from that commitment.

This, in my opinion, is why we really get married – because the best of what we have to offer each other as human beings comes not just from our feelings, those feelings of attraction or admiration or happiness or a desire to be together. No, the best of what we have to offer each other is the kind of love we do, the kind of love we promise, the kind of love that radiates out from the covenant that we make with one another, and doesn’t necessarily change with every circumstance or difficulty in the way that our feelings do.

Because feelings change over time, we know that, and our affections wax and wane, often with very good reason. We aren’t in control of how we feel and who we like. We often fail egregiously in our attempts to be good to one another. But we human beings are in control of the commitments we bind ourselves by, the promises that we make – and this act of commitment, this way we have of standing by our promises, can serve us well even when our feelings or inclinations aren’t leading us down the path that is best for us. This, to my mind, is why the tradition of marriage endures even though we don’t “need” it to implement our affection for each other. I think marriage endures because people at heart know that they need more than strong feelings to maintain their connections over time; what they really need is a promise, the promise that when those happy feelings aren’t at the forefront that we’ll try to have our loving actions towards each other remain the same.

I said earlier that much of my ministerial learning was indirect, that connections were made that I never could have anticipated. Well, here’s the religious connection that happened for me, once I understood the enduring power and wisdom behind the pretty parts of the wedding ceremony: I remembered that Unitarian Universalism itself is a covenantal faith, a faith of promisemaking. We don’t come to church like perhaps other religions do, having decided in advance that we love each other and would like to move in together. Unitarian Universalism is not the religious equivalent of Match.com, where we’ve already screened each other’s profiles and have decided, based on 100
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points of common agreement, that we should make a go of it. Rather, Unitarian Universalism is the kind of church where we show up in the same place and time and we agree to get along whether or not we really love each other, whether or not we agree with one another.

Because what happens in those other sorts of churches – the kinds that are founded on the idea that everyone should agree, or that everyone likes one another? – what happens when people change their opinions, or when instead of really liking each other they find they kind of ...don’t? Worse yet, what happens when they really don’t agree at all, when they offend each other? What happens when they really hurt each other, in a way that is hard to forgive? Well, as we’ve seen in religious history and in current events, these sorts of churches do what so many married couples do when faced with hurt and change and uncertainty: They split up.

Unitarian Universalism, instead, is a church that starts with the promises we make to one another, starts with a covenantal act that binds us together. When we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every human being, for example, we UUs are making a commitment to honor each other despite clear differences of personality, theology, background or lifestyle, the normal things that bring people together. When we send ourselves out for that free and responsible search for truth and meaning, it is implied that no matter what Truth is found, at the end of the day we are always welcome back home. And when we say we respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, we are really saying that we understand that no matter how different we are from each other, no matter how unimportant we might feel to each other, deep down we know that we need each other to be whole.

And that, I believe, is what both the UU Principles and Purposes, and our own marriage vows, are really trying to say: We have found that we need each other to be whole, and despite the fickle nature of our human feelings, we promise to be together, through both good times and bad. We are giving the one thing we are capable of giving, our promise to stick it out, our commitment to the third body, as we heard in our reading, the third body of our relationship together.

We covenant to hang tough when times change and when circumstances are not ideal. If things are going well in a UU church, you won’t really see or feel this covenant. Just like in a marriage, when times are good we can spend more time talking about how much we like each other and how happy we are to be together.

But when times are difficult our true nature as a covenantal faith arises. We are not bound together by our promises because we expect us all to get along, for our time together to be full of riches, health and life. We have bound ourselves by our promises because that is how we get through our tougher times. Beloved Community, like marriage, is not something that just happens to you, but rather something you do. Beloved Community, like marriage, is a decision; it is a judgment; it is a promise; it is a covenant. And it is here, out of this very tension between separateness and union, that love is born and reborn. Love, whose incredible fragility is equal only to its incredible strength. Not only born, but also reborn after hard times, reborn after the promises are broken and re-remembered and restored, reborn in ways both unexpected and deeply felt. The kind of love that is the very best of what we human beings have to offer each other. Not the kind of love we feel, but the kind of love we do.

Let this morning be the start of our re-remembering. Let us commit again to the promises that we have made, our promises to our church and to each other. The road to the Beloved Community, the community that heals and that sustains, is down this path of promising; let us walk down it together.

So may it be; Amen.

Please join me now in singing hymn number 67, We Sing Now together. Please rise as you are able.
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