

The mystery of marriage: Secrets of joined lives

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue



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All the world's sorrows descend upon the souls of the Lamed Vovniks, the 36 righteous ones, says an old Jewish legend. Before they get that far, a goodly share of all those griefs, regrets, and torments begin as love stories whose players have somehow lost their way, and confessors of every kind receive them as broken shards of narrative poured out in search of meaning, mercy, or absolution. Healing comes through the graces of time and unburdening, but even as a child growing up in a pastor's home I sensed that many of those tangled stories never went away. They lived in the memory and in the prayers and behind the preoccupied gaze of one who knew and kept the community's secrets.

Rarely did my siblings or I ever learn the specifics of any but the most public stories that silently haunted my childhood home. Once, however, long after my parents had retired, I happened to be with them when they received a letter from someone in a congregation they had served many years earlier. Mom read the note and handed it to Dad without comment. After a few moments he looked up, met Mom's eyes, and said quietly, "Thank God that's over." Both seemed near tears.

Later that day I heard a story that has haunted me ever since, partly because my parents censored out the names, so it could have explained the lives of any number of people I thought I knew but really did not. A young man had gone off to fight in World War II and then returned to the girlfriend who had written him frequently all through that dark time. They took up where they had left off, but the reunion didn't

last. The man who survived the war wasn't the same one who had left his youth behind to become a warrior. He ended the relationship and a short time later took up with another young woman in town. Very soon those two planned to marry.

"I am pregnant," said the woman who had waited so faithfully for the soldier who jilted her. The man "did the right thing," as folks said then. He broke his engagement and married the old girlfriend. After a short time, it became obvious she carried no child. She admitted her desperate lie.

From that day on, the two of them never again slept in the same room, although they remained married for more than 50 years. *Divorce* was only a whispered word back then, something too shameful to discuss, much less perpetrate. So they lived in the same house like estranged siblings, while everyone else in town saw them as generous pillars of the community, unusual only because they remained childless.

The husband made occasional, tearful visits to the pastor's office, in which he confided, among other things, the weekly heartbreak of watching the woman he'd wanted to marry and still loved walk up the aisle in church with her husband and children, every time thinking, "That should be me by her side."

Neither my heart nor my mind can fathom the depth and expanse of loneliness and heartache in this story that ended, at least in some ways, with the note that announced that strangely faithful husband's death. Nor can I ponder that eerie narrative without comparing it to the story of another childless couple whose nearly 70-year marriage ended on my watch during the brief time I spent in ministry before becoming an academic.

They were 16 and 18 when they'd married in 1902, and they'd spent their lives eking out a living, sometimes just barely, on a small farm outside the city. They no longer came to church because neither could see well enough to keep a driver's license. They had little savings and no pension, so they still raised a few pigs, working that tiny farm as best they could with their wizened old bodies, and every month, without fail, they mailed a small contribution to the church.

One morning in the year I arrived, the wife didn't wake up at her usual time. The husband tried to rouse her, but her body was cold. This pair had outlived all their kinfolk and the few friends they'd made over the years, so only a handful attended the funeral a few days later. When the moment came for the funeral director to close the open casket, the wiry little husband, dressed in an old suit he may well

have worn at his wedding, jumped from his seat a few feet away and, before any of us could stop him, climbed into the casket and lay there clinging to his beloved. “Just bury me with her, please!” he begged, over and over, between his sobs. In all the years since, I may have done something more difficult than helping to pull a weeping old man from his last embrace that day, but I don’t know what it might have been.

Several months later that lonely old man didn’t wake up. As we buried him, without drama and with even fewer people in attendance, I likely wasn’t the only one present who uttered a wordless, silent prayer that might have been translated, “Thank God that’s over.” That prayer, like the one I would hear many years later while visiting my parents, lifted before God the mystery of marriage. Each acknowledged an end to grieving, but one celebrated the gift of incalculable riches amid abject poverty, while the other entrusted God with the sadness of two lives wasted on relentless impoverishment masquerading as propriety and abundance. In truth, however, none but those two couples themselves knew the secrets, both sweet and hurtful, that marked their joined lives.

We talk incessantly and intensely about marriage these days. Issues of justice and equality compel us to do so. Yet beyond the legalities that remind us in every generation that marriage is always and primarily a contract about property and only secondarily and intermittently about love and the banishment of loneliness, marriage remains a mystery that the countless number of marriages consummated in the long history of our species cannot ultimately define, either singly or all of them together.

The Bible takes note of the mystery when it tells how the problem of loneliness catches even the Creator by surprise. “Loneliness simply won’t do,” the Lord God declares and then sets out to find somewhere an *ezer kenegdo*, a “corresponding strength,” as partner for the hitherto ungendered mud creature. Fashioned from the same mud, a host of animals appear and get interviews for the job. All fail to qualify. Plan B—and you know there’s mystery involved when the Almighty needs one of those—involves surgery. A side-ectomy results, finally, in gender, but just as important, living with someone different, but of the same bone and flesh, has the potential to banish loneliness, as two become “one flesh.”

Here we stand before another layer of mystery. One flesh? Some have seen here an image of bodies tangled together in the act of physical intercourse, others the

creation of offspring, a new life grown from the contributions of two earlier models. I have come to see it as a phrase that captures some of the truth: after a few years' worth of making their way together, partnered individuals scarcely know where their own self ends and the other begins. Neither remains the person he or she was before sharing every day and night, joy and sorrow, poverty and wealth. Even those who come to loathe each other have become one flesh. Many of us have known people who couldn't wait for a divorce to become final, only to find it impossible, at least for a while, to choose a new home. No matter what the realtor shows, the only criteria the new singleton can summon up are features the ex-spouse valued.

We sometimes imagine we understand what makes the marriages around us tick. Many of us grew up with married parents whom we could watch closely and whose secrets we could occasionally discern. Some people study married people closely and for long enough to risk hanging out a marriage counselor's shingle. Fiction addicts like me devour hundreds of novels, so many of which tell the stories and probe the inner workings of at least one marriage, and we can only imagine such tales come from experience and yet another kind of laboratory research into this most mysterious of human behaviors. Eventually, after having alternately suffered or found ourselves exhilarated for a spell inside everything from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to Updike's *Couples* to Sue Miller's *While I Was Gone*, we presume ourselves wise about these things. We know why some marriages devolve into hell on earth while others yield more than merely a taste of paradise.

And yet, as Ferdinand Mount, a longtime student of marriage habits, puts it, "It is the essence of marriage that it is private and apart from the rest of society. Its 'selfishness' or 'exclusiveness' is not its undertone but its heart and soul." History has witnessed many kinds of marriages—polygamous and monogamous, same-sex and heterosexual, arranged, Internet-brokered, purely accidental, or even the result of capture or kidnapping—and each one is different. No one from the outside can fully grasp the inner workings of any marriage. Even those inside, who lie together naked and try as best they can to bare their secrets and reveal themselves, sometimes find themselves lonely and strangers, mysteries even to themselves, and that can happen even on the best days.

So far as we know, and regardless of what happens afterward, each of us gets but one chance to pass through space and time as flesh and blood creatures on this planet. To entrust one's only body, mind, and well-being to another person, and to do so with the promise that this partnership will endure 'til death do us part, makes

the consequences as eternal as those discovered too late by the rich man of parable fame, the one who let poor Lazarus dumpster dive outside his home but who never went out to make his acquaintance. There are no do-overs, even for those who take two or three tries before getting things at least partly right.

I can no longer find the quote, although for a time I repeated it frequently in wedding homilies and attributed it to James Thurber: "If getting married is such a great idea, why didn't God try it?" Whoever asked such a question never read the prophet Hosea's oracles, in which God speaks as an anguished cuckold betrayed by adulterous Israel, but who chooses to remain faithful in spite of the shame. Christians take comfort in all sorts of circumstances by pointing to Christ's analogous experiences, and through them the assurance of God's knowing such things. Perhaps this is why so many have sought or fabricated evidence of Jesus having taken a wife.

Such searches overlook the obvious. John the Baptist calls himself the best man to the bridegroom Jesus, and immediately thereafter Jesus finds himself with a noontime thirst at Jacob's well in Samaria. Right on cue, a woman appears, and Jesus asks for a drink. We know this scene, for we have witnessed there the betrothals of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah, even Ruth and Boaz. This time, however, the prospective bride has survived five previous marriages and an unspecified sixth relationship. Jesus joins her family for the requisite hospitality, but he leaves the well without a drink and the village without a wife. We must wait until another noontime, when again Jesus will ask for a drink. This time he will receive one, and with it he takes his bride at last, the whole lot of us in every time and place.

Jesus took each of those five lost marriage stories with him to the cross, plus the sixth that went unnamed, along with every other like it, told or untold. All of them now belong to God, who alone knows the countless host of all our broken, beautiful stories of becoming one flesh, for better or for worse. For us, each of them ends, of course, which is precisely what makes the blessed among them so precious. While we might say, either in sad relief or gratitude for an end to grieving, "Thank God that's over," by this act of handing over, we acknowledge that God remembers, even cherishes, all our attempts to work with God at banishing the one thing even God cannot abide—being alone, unknown, and forgotten.