

"The impeded stream is the one that sings"

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Pope Francis [got himself in trouble](#) last week for suggesting that the “great majority” of Catholic marriages being celebrated today are “invalid” because couples do not fully appreciate that they are making a lifetime commitment. The fact that this statement would draw criticism is puzzling, on the face of it, because who would dispute this after even a cursory glance at the world we live in?

Apparently conservative critics objected to his use of the word *invalid*. Perhaps they think that this word will provide a loophole for those seeking to escape loveless marriages. At any rate, canon lawyers and media spin artists quickly went to work on words such as *invalid* and *great majority*, seeking to downplay or reframe or somehow mitigate the pope’s comments and the ways in which they might be misconstrued.

But, as is so often the case, once you sniff around a bit behind the sensationalistic headlines you discover that the point being made is actually a rather unexceptional one. And, as it happens, a desperately necessary one. Here are a few more of Francis’s comments:

‘The crisis of marriage is due to the fact that people don’t know what the sacrament is, the beauty of the sacrament, they don’t know that it is indissoluble, that it is for your entire life . . . There are girls and boys who have purity and a great love, but they are few,’ he said, adding that many young people had a materialistic and superficial approach to their wedding day, such as an obsession with choosing the right gown, the right church and the right restaurant.

As someone who has officiated at a few weddings over the years and has observed a few relationships a bit farther down the road, I can only say, “Um, yeah.” It’s pretty much impossible to dispute what Francis says here, if only for the fact that our approach to marriage often reflects our approach to pretty much everything else in life: materialistic and superficial. Couples so often put far more energy and effort

(and money) into weddings than they do to marriages. Marriage is wonderful, we think, until it doesn't meet our needs in the same way any more or until we "fall out" of love, just as we "fell into" it once upon a time (the passivity of this language is revealing in countless ways). Couples so often enter into marriage with a bizarre combination of expectations and assumptions shaped by Hollywood and Pinterest and God knows what else, and then struggle mightily when real life together proves rather more demanding than that.

There are more complex stories, obviously. Marriages die for all kinds of reasons and some *need* to die for the survival of one or both parties involved. Discussions about something as deep and painful and far-reaching a problem as the one Francis is diagnosing ought always to be soaked in mercy for real human lives torn apart, however the blame is to be apportioned or whether it's to be apportioned at all. And yet, something is deeply wrong. We know this. We're failing at marriage at unprecedented rates, which leads to incalculable social costs. We're taking as normal something that should never be normal. However we grope around to articulate it, most of us retain this lingering sense that marriage ought to be somehow more than it presently is.

I have the privilege of officiating at a wedding ceremony soon. I don't know the couple as well as I would like, but I have been greatly heartened by the seriousness with which they are taking the commitment they are making. We have been exchanging ideas and articles over the last while and one of the pieces they sent me was an article called "[Form, faith, and freedom: Wendell Berry on what poetry teaches us about the secret of marriage.](#)" Berry is comparing the form of poetry to that of a marriage. In both cases, we take an existing structure or "given" and we labor to create something of deep meaning and value, something that expresses and aligns itself with profound truths about the mysteries of life and love.

These words from Berry, in particular, stood out to me:

Marriage too is an attempt to rhyme, to bring two different lives—within the one life of their troth and household—periodically into agreement or consent. The two lives stray apart necessarily, and by consent come together again: to "feel together," to "be of the same mind." Difficult virtues are again 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.

It may be, then, that form serves us best when it works as an obstruction to baffle us and deflect our intended course. It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work and that when we no longer know which way to go we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

The idea that marriage could (or should!) serve as an obstruction to “baffle us or deflect our intended course” is surely not among the more popular themes of many weddings. But perhaps it should be. Things that are beautiful, true and good—things that bring life to the world and invite us to become more than we might otherwise have been—do not come easily, after all. Indeed, this is probably part of what makes them beautiful, true, and good, and eminently worthy of our effort and aspiration.

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