

The Rules of Marriage:

An Inquiry into the Nature of Being Married, by Samantha Thomas

Getting married is HOT! The newest trend to sweep the nation — bigger than Starbucks Coffee or cellular phones — is America's mania for marriage. The media, diligently selling what America wants to buy, is presenting romance and dating and weddings. Television programmers treat us to the "reality" of the *Bachelor*, the *Bachelorette* and several similar shows that allow viewers to participate voyeuristically as a man or a woman selects someone to marry. Morning news programs present short news briefs followed by long, featured segments on planning one's wedding, as a lucky, winning couple prepares for their own wedding "live on the set." Wedding makeovers. Celebrity weddings. Fantasy weddings. It is inescapable. Even couples preferring to structure their relationships in non-traditional ways are having commitment ceremonies, so as not to miss out on the wedding. America has gone *wacky* for weddings in a postmodern return to romanticism.

Meanwhile government statisticians report (rather unromantically) that roughly fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. The data are difficult to interpret: every year in the United States, there are roughly two million marriages and roughly one million divorces. However, since the process of ending one's marriage is usually lengthy and involved, at any given time, the number of people actively ending a marriage may be quite close to the number of people beginning a marriage. In addition, it is impossible to estimate how many people are simply suffering through their marriages. Any way one looks at it, in this culture marriage is a high-stakes game with *very low* odds.

Strange as it may seem, those pesky statistics haven't deterred people from getting married nor curbed their enthusiasm. Clearly the benefits one hopes to accrue from getting married far outweigh the risks. These expectations are apparently lofty enough to fade the facts into insignificance. From where do these expectations arise? Essentially these expectations emerge, coalesce and take shape as the individual progresses through childhood and adolescence. That is to say that these expectations are based in one's past. The primary source of these marital expectations is the memory of one's parent's marriage.

From the perspective of a child, the parent's marriage looms large. It is the context of the child's birth and early life. Since an infant or young child depends on his or her parents for survival, the child pays a lot of attention to the parents' relationship with each other, and would certainly see any trouble in their marriage as a dangerous threat. These childhood memories may take on the quality of either fantasy or nightmare, and serve as a powerful example of what marriage should be or shouldn't be, and perhaps in various aspects, both. Since much of what goes into a

marriage is hidden from the child's view, these memories are of incomplete observations and include a childish sense of wonder or mystery.

Marriage thus becomes even more interesting, attractive and desirable for the child, as he or she matures. Additional incomplete and unrealistic images of marriage from other people's marriages, as well as movies, books and television shows expand and reinforce these expectations. By the time one arrives at marriageable age, a unique and individualized set of expectations has been established. This set of expectations forms a mental image or picture of marriage, *as it should be*.

This picture of how marriage ought to be is a work of art. The picture is painted with a palette of ideals and values with which the individual identifies. In other words, the ideals and values people have are a useful way in which people identify themselves to themselves. For example, a woman who has the ideal, "A good wife should be self-sacrificing," and believes she has that value, "I am self-sacrificing," identifies herself to herself as a potential good wife. This is just as real to her and much more significant than, "I am five feet, eight inches tall," or "My name is Samantha." People are very attached to their pictures and ideals and values. They believe in them, rely on them, base their behavior on them. Life is measured against the picture. People imagine that if their marriage in real life matches the picture of how it should be, then the marriage will work and they'll live happily ever after (the way they're *supposed* to.)

It is a necessary inconvenience that, by definition, a marriage is the union of *two individuals*. Each individual brings his or her unique and individualized picture of how it should be, along with all the ideals and values that go into it. Both of them simultaneously measure their experiences of each other and the relationship against their distinctly individual pictures, and frequently come to distinctly different conclusions. The husband of the wife identifying herself as "self-sacrificing" may conclude that she is "manipulative," when he measures her against his ideal that "a good wife should communicate her needs directly."

There is a gap between the hopeful euphoria around getting married, and the day-to-day reality of *being* married. People live in this gap, where their actual experience of life, of each other and of being married gets measured against their individual, self-invented system of expectations. In this gap, complaints can often show up. In this gap, there is not much room for full satisfaction.

Trying to conduct a marriage in this gap, where the husband and the wife are operating out of their distinctly differing sets of expectations is like trying to play a game with different, shifting and mostly uncommunicated rules and objectives. As formerly stated, marriage is a very high-stakes game. To have any chance of success,

the game must have rules that are clear, concise, easily remembered and agreed upon. But what could the rules of marriage be?

Consider that the rules of marriage are the vows — those once spoken, rarely contemplated, soon forgotten words that people in Western cultures have been reciting at their weddings for generation after generation. When people get married, for the most part they are very serious and sincere about it. They recognize the importance and significance of getting married. They realize that they are making a solemn commitment. Nevertheless, they say the vows and get married with *no* rules and *lots* of expectations.

It's not that they haven't heard the vows, or thought about the vows, or even talked about the vows. They have. It's just that they have no regard for them as vows. By definition¹, a vow is “a solemn promise or pledge, especially one made to God or a god, dedicating oneself to an act, service or way of life”; it is “a solemn promise of love and fidelity.”

But people have reservations.

For most people, vows are not vows — they are “vows, but.” As in, “I am willing to agree to ‘for better or worse,’ but only if it doesn't get too bad.” Or, “I can commit to ‘until death do us part,’ but if my spouse sleeps with someone else, it's over.” Or “but if he doesn't make enough money...” or “but if she gets fat...” and so on and so on. People have *plenty* of them.

There are the vows the way they are, without any additions or subtractions, and there are the vows with reservations. These are two very different things. Vows with reservations have a totally different kind of existence from the kind of existence that vows have. The fact that people rarely distinguish this difference may be a source of the confusion about what being married requires.

Coupled with a similar collapse of the distinctions between *getting* married and *being* married, marriage begins to look like a muddle. As wants and needs and commitments and preferences and promises and expectations and vows go back and forth in front of each other in one's mind, it is almost impossible to get a glimpse through the haze. To cut through it all to get some clarity, a rigorous inquiry into the nature of being married is needed.

People think they know all they need to know about marriage. That's not knowing. That's thinking, and reality is not *really* what one thinks. This is an opportunity to inquire into the reality of marriage and the vows, agreements and

¹ This definition, as well as all definitions in this article, is adapted from *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, Fourth Edition. Copyright 2001 by IDG Books Worldwide, Inc.

commitments that go into marriage. If the inquiry is successful, it will produce the necessary distinctions to bring forth real marriages that work. To begin, it may be useful to take a look at what a marriage is and what it isn't.

In contemporary Western culture, we frequently think of marriage as a contract. We even speak of the "marriage contract." Is marriage really a contract? A contract is a legally binding agreement between two qualified parties. In the contract, one party agrees to do something or not to do something or provide something or withhold something in return for some consideration or compensation by the other party. If one party fails to adhere to the terms of the contract, the contract is automatically null and void. The party that adhered to the terms of the contract is entitled to sue the other party for relief of damages. The Court has jurisdiction to enforce the terms of the contract. It may compel a recalcitrant party to comply, and it may impose sanctions or enter a punitive judgment if that party refuses.

Each state has laws by which it regulates marriage, but it does not enforce marriages the way that it enforces contracts. The Court has very limited jurisdiction to intervene in a marriage. The Court cannot, for example, enter a judgment if she has a headache or if he is not aroused. Neither does it conduct divorce proceedings the way that it conducts other civil contractual matters. If marriage were a contract, it would be handled in the way contracts are handled.

Now examine the terms of the marriage vows²: "...to have and to hold from this day forward; for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honor, cherish and obey, until death do us part." Obviously, the person speaking is promising to provide for and relate to someone in particular ways, beginning now and continuing until the moment of death. There are *no* provisions for compensation or consideration in return from the other party.

Marriage is not handled like a contract, because it is not a contract. It is a covenant. A covenant is an agreement made without regard to compensation or consideration from the other side. It's a legally registered promise. Failure to adhere to the terms of the agreement does *not* automatically void the covenant. Marriage is therefore simply a covenant, based on a solemn promise or vow.

If marriage is a promise or covenant, defined by the vows, why does it look like a contract? Maybe it begins to look like a contract when two people recite the same vows to each other in the same place at the same time. This is just a superficial appearance. However, when this superficial, vaguely contract-like appearance is combined with the culturally supported expectation that marriage entitles one to something, the misinterpretation of marriage as a contract is confirmed. If someone

² The vows used in this article are traditional and reflect the vows in common usage between the Sixteenth Century A.D. and 1970.

were to promise to provide for, and conduct oneself toward another person as stated in the vows, and that person simply accepted the promise, it would be recognized as a promise. If the other person makes the same promise to the first person, it doesn't turn the promise into a contract, nor does it affect the first person's promise in any way. The vows constitute an independent promise, and the independent promising of two people constitutes a marriage. The words spoken do not provide any entitlements, nor are any requests made or stipulations stated. There is no guarantee of satisfaction, no loopholes, no golden parachutes.

This is not intended as an endorsement for an age-old traditional ritual. This is an inquiry into the rules of marriage. If we accept, at this point in the inquiry, that marriage is based on a promise, or more specifically a definitive set of promises called the marriage vows, then keeping these promises would essentially be adherence to the rules of marriage. Obviously it would be useful to know what one is promising. What do these words — love, honor, cherish, obey — really mean? Perhaps the dictionary can help us to gain some insight into the nature of being married. These definitions may provide an opening for us to distinguish between what we are saying and what we *think* we are saying.

Love comes from an Indo-European root word, "*leubb-*," meaning fondness and desire. To love is "to feel, express or show a deep and tender feeling of affection for, or attachment or devotion to a person." It is also "the expression of one's love." Love can also mean anything from "a feeling of goodwill" to "a strong, usually passionate affection of one person for another, based in part on sexual attraction." Loving is therefore deep and profound feeling and expressing, and there aren't any specific exclusions or constraints to that expression.

One possible expression of love is romance, and people often say that romance is an important thing to keep in a marriage. The dictionary defines romance as a "fictitious tale of wonderful and extraordinary events, characterized by a non-realistic and idealizing use of the imagination"; it is "an exaggeration or fabrication that has no real substance." While romance may be fun and desirable, the promise of love is about something "deep and tender" which is thus something of real substance. Certainly, the absence of romance should not be automatically construed as an absence of love.

The promise of love may be very difficult to break in an absolute way. Consider that love, as a real presence, is a created phenomenon. Love is always and only created. It cannot come into existence by any other process. People speak of "falling in love" as they would speak of falling into a hole. But love is not really something one falls into, nor is it something that falls out of nowhere onto a person. There's really no voodoo about it. This is an opportunity for us to be responsible for our creative power. Love is a creation that human beings can, and often do, create.

Declaration is creation as a speech act. When one creates the presence of love and declares it, the world changes. And it doesn't *ever* change back. It is impossible to un-create love or cause it to go out of existence. It is possible, however, for one to impose layers of anger, distrust, ambivalence or animosity on top of love, until the love is so buried that it can no longer be experienced or expressed as love. It is even possible to create hatred and overlay that on top of love. And still the love remains. Sometimes just a few layers of fatigue, anxiety, illness or simple crankiness are sufficient to dull the experience of love and stifle its expression. The love hasn't disappeared; it's simply not accessible.

Perhaps this promise to love, when it is fully articulated, is something truly deep and tender — something of real substance. Perhaps it is a promise to tend one's attitudes and opinions, and manage one's physical and psychological wellbeing to support the ongoing experience and expression of love. Perhaps this promise includes the willingness to dig down to the love, if something is overlaid on it. Perhaps it is a promise to be responsible for the persistence of this love that one has created and declared.

Honor comes directly from the Latin word, "*honor*," meaning official dignity, respect and esteem. To honor is "to show great respect for someone, to treat one with deference or courtesy — even worship." Many marriages are in breakdown simply because the husband and wife have stopped being courteous to each other. Courtesy is being considerate. Maybe it doesn't really matter if the toilet seat is up or down, or if the toothpaste tube is squeezed one way or another. Maybe it *does* matter that one takes the time and makes the effort to consider the person he or she married — really consider what he or she would like, want or need. That's the promise. Notice that the promise doesn't say anything about the other person needing to become respectable and honorable before showing him or her respect and honor. The promise is to respect and honor one's spouse *just as he or she is now*. Perhaps it would be pleasant or desirable for him or her to make ten percent more money or to weigh ten percent less, but the promise is to honor one's spouse right now and always. No exceptions. No exclusions.

Cherish comes from the Latin word, "*carus*," for dear and valued. To cherish is "to hold dear and show love for someone or something." It is also "to take good care of; to protect," and "to cling to the idea or feeling," like cherishing a belief or the memory of a person or event. Keeping this promise requires kindness, responsibility and the readiness to provide for one's beloved. Inherent in this promise is the willingness to take on a concern for the health, safety, wellbeing and comfort of one's spouse. Think of something that you consider a treasure — a family heirloom, a favorite toy from childhood, a memento of a happy time or something like that. If you don't have a treasured possession, imagine that you do. Wouldn't you do whatever is necessary to protect it, maintain it and keep it safe from harm? The

promise to cherish would have you being responsible for your spouse in just that way. Charity is related to this word, and is derived from the same root. We often think of a charity as a “good cause.” Sometimes people forget the old saying that “charity begins at home.” Perhaps being responsible for the health, safety, wellbeing and comfort of your spouse is a cause that is worthy of your time, attention and toil.

Further, the promise to cherish lays the foundation for forgiveness and trust. One who is cherished is highly valued, and that value is not easily diminished by little offenses (or even big ones). It is also useful to consider that one can cherish the marriage, as well as the spouse. What might be possible in a marriage when it is cherished as a prized asset?

In recent years, most people have dropped the word obey from the marriage vows. The promise of obedience was a casualty of the Women’s Movement. Many believed that if a woman promised to obey a man, she was submitting to a kind of bondage. The word, which has a very interesting derivation, doesn’t have anything to do with bondage. Its removal was the result of mistaken identity. The divorce rate has nearly doubled since it was removed. Obey is included in this inquiry, just in case it may have something valuable to teach us about being married.

Obey has its roots in Old Latin “*ob-*,” meaning toward, and “*audiere*,” meaning to listen. *Audiere* is also the root of our word, audience, which originally meant a meeting with royalty (such as a King or Queen) or high clergy (such as the Pope or a Cardinal). So in its original derivation, to obey is to listen toward someone as though one were in an audience with the King or Queen. It is also useful to consider that servants (or even slaves) always surrounded Kings and Queens, but servants were never said to be “in audience” with them. Only highly regarded subjects or foreign dignitaries could be *granted* an audience with royalty. It’s a gift, an honor. Clearly in Medieval times, if the King or Queen, who had the power of life and death were to give an instruction or make a request, the subject would be very intent on what the King or Queen was saying. What would be possible in a marriage if husbands and wives had that level of listening toward each other?

In current usage, obey simply means to carry out orders or instructions. In a marriage, things need to be accomplished — from something as basic and mundane as taking out the trash, to something as complex, far-reaching and visionary as raising successful children. Perhaps the key, or at least one key, to accomplishment in a marriage is effective, intentional and powerful listening toward each other. There can be no cooperation without the willingness to obey. To pay attention to the wants and needs of one’s partner, as though they were the wants and needs of the King or Queen, is truly powerful. When a marriage fails in its objectives, it is often first seen in the breakdown of listening.

To truly listen to another person, one must give up for the moment any opinions or assessments of the speaker or what's being spoken. One must for the moment give up defending or justifying oneself. One must, for the moment, give up any considerations or concerns about one's own appearance or what one could be doing now instead of listening to this. One must for the moment give up thinking about something clever to say next. One must simply listen.

To listen in this way requires generosity. Giving yourself completely to another person's word is an exquisitely beautiful and generous gift. When one listens generously, affinity returns, partnership is possible and problems are less overwhelming. Often an argument can become a useful conversation when one person chooses to be generous in his or her listening.

Perhaps that generous sort of listening, as it is being represented in the promise to obey, has real value. Perhaps it is this curiously contradictory culture of political correctness, and its central belief that everybody is always already somebody else's victim, which puts us into bondage. This culture makes urgent and compelling demands. "You must be free," and "You must be independent," and "You *must* think for yourself!" Maybe it is precisely when one is truly free to be independent and think for oneself, that true promising becomes a possibility.

Recently, in the past thirty years or so, there has been a trend for couples to make up their own wedding vows. They usually come up with very beautiful and poetic language, filled with *ooey-gooney* romantic notions. Notice what happened to the divorce rate during this period of history. It doubled. It's not really surprising. If you think it would be difficult and demanding to keep a promise consistently for the rest of your life, consider how difficult it would be to sustain romance that long.

Perhaps the vows as stated are precisely what it takes to provide a firm foundation for marriage. But what about the people who were never formally married, and nevertheless have a great partnership? Possibly a successful marriage is based on these promises, whether they were actually recited in a ceremony or not. Maybe keeping the vows is *essential* to a marriage that works, and reciting the vows is *optional*. There is a lot of power in making these promises publicly, however. Making a declaration of your promises in front of one's relatives and closest associates puts your promises into existence in the world and enlists others in supporting you in keeping your vows.

There's more. These four promises — to love, honor, cherish and obey — are embedded in a delineation of the conditions and circumstances under which the promises are to be kept. The vows say that the promises are to be kept, "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health... until death do us part."

There is just no “wiggle room” in there at all. As previously noted, there are no loopholes or golden parachutes.

As far as the vows are concerned, this is it. Once spoken, whether in one’s own name or in the name of God, the vows take over. The vows leave no room for one’s opinions, desires, expectations or considerations about marriage. The vows have it covered. Your promise is your promise, and that is that.

These unconditional, all-pervasive vows are absolutely relentless and persistent. The vows are very specific and intentional about the promises that are included within. The vows are intentionally silent about any circumstances that might mitigate those promises. And the silence is profound.

This silence — the reticence of the vows to speak of mitigation — may appear to require married people to long-sufferingly endure circumstances that would be horrifying to the conventional, culturally agreed upon sense of fairness and propriety. Can it be that your promise is your promise, even if there’s not enough money? Can it be that your promise is your promise, even if your spouse becomes disabled or disfigured? Can it be that your promise is your promise, even if your spouse has sex with someone else? Yes. Your promise *is* your promise. Your spouse’s promise is your spouse’s promise. They don’t have any dependence on each other, no matter how much people want to believe they do.

When a marriage is having difficulties or is in danger, each side has a plausible and rational (and self-serving) story about it. People are willing to place themselves in any story, no matter how terrible, as long as they can cast themselves in the leading role. It doesn’t take much. They don’t even need to be recognized as the hero or a saint. Most people are satisfied just to be seen as the sympathetic victim of circumstances. As long as the wife can get the agreement of her friends and family members that “it’s your husband’s fault,” she can feel justified and entitled to give up, become resigned and break her vows and promises. That is, however, just the story from her point-of-view.

The husband has a story based on the same events going on at the same time in the same place, but told from his own distinctly different point-of view. In his (self-serving) story, he is the hero or saint or at least the sympathetic victim of circumstances. He also has friends and family members who agree, “It’s your wife’s fault.” This story is true only in his self-invented reality created from his point-of-view, but he feels justified and entitled to break his vows and promises.

People can generally be trusted to try to do the right thing. People want to be right more than almost anything else. Unfortunately, people try to do what’s right, or at least what they believe they can justify, from their own points-of-view, without

regarding any other possible points-of-view. This often leads to trouble. Often we are left wondering, “How do I get into these jams? I always try to do the right thing.” Exactly!

But they can’t *both* be right, can they? Yes and no. Yes, they each do what they do and feel what they feel and that’s all valid. No, it’s not her fault, and it’s not his fault either. We live in a culture that looks for answers. Every story has to have a clearly defined “good guy” and “bad guy.” Unfortunately, life doesn’t occur like that. Life does not play out in thirty-minute increments neatly framed within a 27-inch screen. To get at the truth, we have to *widen the frame* to include all points-of-view. Then we can see clearly. The circumstances in a marriage are produced by the unconscious and unintentional conspiracy of the husband and wife. Both of them forgot that they are responsible for the marriage and keeping their vows. They have forgotten the rules — the vows they promised to keep — and conducted their marriage out of each one’s own individual preferences and expectations. Essentially they have been living together in different marriages, or more precisely, different points-of view.

Does this mean that, since the vows are an unconditional promise, a marriage should persevere no matter how difficult it’s become? By no means. Some marriages have been damaged to the point of no return. This is not to suggest that a marriage should continue or end. This is to suggest that it is simply not useful to blame the person you married for the way the marriage is, without recognizing that you were there, too. Look at the person to whom you are married. If he or she has become a different person from the one you chose to marry, you produced that. Without being responsible, without recognizing the degree to which you failed to keep your promise, there can be no completion or resolution.

Some people lament being “unlucky in love.” They wonder how they can have the misfortune to repeatedly choose people who are difficult to be with. Without being responsible — recognizing that they are *causing* the circumstances they live in, and that *only* they can cause their circumstances, as well as complete their experience of them — they are destined to chronically fail in their relationships.

Is there no hope for marriage? Can anyone be responsible? Is anyone really willing to promise to keep a promise until they die, even in the bad times? Maybe not. Maybe we should change the laws to allow marriages to come up for annual renewal, like automobile registrations.

But marriage is not a vehicle. Marriage has no readily defined utility, no consumer use-value. What is marriage? Ultimately, this inquiry has led us to the recognition that marriage is not a thing. It is a non-thing, a nothing, a void. Marriage is a clearing, a space of possibility that is created, defined and maintained by the rules

of marriage that we call the Marriage Vows. The quality of what can show up in that space will have to depend on what holds that space open. In that space created by promise, commitment will produce accomplishment and accomplishment will support the commitment. Commitment and accomplishment can dwell together and hold open the space in which an extraordinary partnership can occur.

What if it were possible to have a marriage or relationship that shows up in the clearing formed by a real, tough, persistent promise? What would it look like to live one's life, not in pursuit of a self-serving set of expectations, but in accordance with commitments that produce accomplishments that express that kind of promise?

If you can take on promising yourself to another person at the level of creation, and really take it on and keep your word *just because you said so*, people will think you are crazy. You'll have to give up all your expectations and pictures of how it should look or how it ought to be. You'll have to give up all your romantic notions of what you're going to get out of marriage. You'll have to work hard to manage yourself to keep your promise, even when you don't feel like it. Even when you're angry or sad, you'll keep your promise. Even when you can't remember why you married this person, you'll keep your promise. Even when you regret making the promise in the first place, you'll keep your promise. Even when your friends (and even your mother) tell you that you are insane, you'll keep your promise.

If you can be that kind of uncommon person who will take marriage on in this way, without retreating to comforting reasons why you shouldn't, you will have an extraordinary life. You will have the kind of marriage that is produced by the conscious, intentional cooperation of both husband and wife. If you are willing to promise yourself like that, the author promises a life truly worth living. This is not a promise for a life of great wealth or no problems. This is a promise for loving and appreciating yourself and your spouse for the relentlessly courageous partners you both are when times are great, when you have problems, and when you get through them. This is a promise for a life of fulfillment, joy, love and completion beyond anyone's ability to imagine or predict.

And isn't that what it's all about?