

SECOND CHANCES

If at first you don't succeed, try try again. Everybody knows that. But it's easy to apply to a simple task, much harder to a major life endeavor such as marriage. All that live one day will die—we always know that, but please not **that** one, not now, not torn away in the midst of life. If the one we love leaves this world, we just may not have the heart to go on. “One” is such a lonely number. Loss of the primary partner from divorce can be almost as devastating. A primary relationship should be forever—if we strike out, well we're still alive, but not sure who we have become. Now that the Supreme Court has changed the law of the land to guarantee marriage equality, I started wondering if same-sex couples may prove just as vulnerable as traditional pairs to marital discord and divorce.

Kentucky is not the only place where people are still living with conflict over acceptance of same-sex marriage versus the formula “one man and one woman.” That mantra is a code name for sexism, not only in marriage, but in society. *Focus on the Family* will go down in flames before they will give up on that. In their picture of marriage the husband is the head of the family, and the wife is assigned as in the old German definition, to kinder, kuchen, kirche, (children, kitchen, church). Dr. Dobson and other proponents of this model may truly believe they are conservative and biblical—to my mind they are simply out of date, the dinosaurs of marriage theory. Conflict between them and twenty-first century models of marriage may continue for years, but eventually equality will prevail, and male dominance will descend into irrelevance.

All the weddings I performed as a Methodist minister were the traditional model except for one, and that one was a violation of the Methodist book of discipline for which I could have lost my credentials. Two young women were willing to protect me from harm by keeping it secret. To this day, no one knows of the two smiling lovers in identical pink tuxedos, who stood before me, and when I said “forever and ever Amen” kissed, hugged, and wept. If they stayed together, they'd be celebrating a 30th anniversary now.

Once upon a time all kinds of taboos interfered with love and marriage. Just because a man and a woman had fallen in love did not give them the right to marry. Shakespeare protested on behalf of Romeo and Juliet, called “the star-crossed lovers” because they both ended up dead rather than let their parents tear them apart. Romantic literature is full of similar stories, couples who were unable to overcome the power of parents to USE the marriage of their children for their own purposes. Taboos forbidding love were enforced by the Catholic church, as in the passionate lifelong romance of Heloise the nun and Abelard the monk, who separated in obedience to the church, but continued loving each other as long as they lived through their letters, which are now famous. The complicated rules about marriage which Pope Francis is trying to simplify, are partly meant to prevent divorce, which many Christians believe was condemned by Jesus.

In my Methodist days I once played a mean trick on the teenagers in confirmation. What Christians call the Old Testament, the kids had come to view as rigid and legalistic, while the New Testament, especially the Gospels, is more often loving and compassionate. Which part of the Bible forbids divorce, I asked, and which part sees it as OK? Many of these teens were living with one parent,

divorced from the other, and of course they guessed the ban against divorce would be found in the law books of the Hebrew scriptures. No, I said, it's just the opposite. This surprise actually drove them to their Bibles, wanting to prove me wrong.

Having gotten their full attention, I laid out for them a condensed version of some biblical knowledge that I often shared with couples in marital counseling. Yes, it is true that Jesus is the one who said divorce is absolutely wrong, and that is the basis for the Catholic ban against it. The Hebrew scriptures, on the other hand, *recommend* divorce in certain situations and lay out the exact process for severing a marital relationship, but this process was only for men. Ordinary women never had any right to divorce. If we remember that Jesus was from Galilee, from a Hebrew family, we might realize that the context for his ministry would naturally be the traditions of Hebrew culture. When he declared that divorce is wrong, he was talking about the process given to Hebrew MEN, who had the right to instant divorce if the wife was barren or unfaithful. She could be turned out on the street with nothing--no legal steps required; in our time this would not be called divorce, but rather abandonment. This is one among many scriptures that show Jesus breaking with the laws of his culture in defense of women.

Now the Catholic church has modified its position by offering annulment, which posits that a valid marriage never existed, and that practice has also been simplified by Francis. Before this Pope, a Catholic who applied for annulment but remarried before winning approval became an outcast and could not receive communion. Hard-liners in the church are now frowning as Pope Francis frees people to *try try again*, despite the failure of the past.

It's not really fair to see divorce as a failure—that minimizes a complicated and sensitive subject. Whether marriage partners are the same sex or opposites, we hope the relationship will last a lifetime, and that does happen, which is tremendous and wonderful. But people change, and primary partners may or may not continue to be in sync as years pass. When a relationship deteriorates, most couples will talk talk talk, get counseling, make changes, maybe fall into infidelity, and finally separate, first emotionally, and then physically. Grief, sadness, confusion, blaming, self-doubt, apologies to children, other family and friends—sometimes all that finally passes and former partners become individuals again, maybe even friends. Older but maybe not much wiser, some divorcees are just too reluctant to take a second chance. No matter what, they think, *I must not go that way again*. This message is not praise for divorce, rather, it's praise for courage and faith in the future.

Grieving the loss of a career or a beloved dream can also be traumatic, like grief for a lost primary partner. I want to offer praise for the concept of the second chance by telling some true stories of people who did it. A man I'll call Buddy works as an X-ray technician. Buddy is very good at this profession, as he demonstrated when I fell and broke my knee. When I got to the hospital that day, I was in a lot of pain, and could barely tolerate moving that leg even an inch. Buddy is about six-four, thick in the chest, with hairy arms and a gruff voice. I had expected a woman in the X-ray room, someone sympathetic and patient, not a football player, and I was afraid of him. As he moved the gurney toward the X-ray table, Buddy began talking softly, asking me what happened, whether I had fractures before, interlacing these questions with checking my reactions to what he was doing (*is this OK, can you do this, is that better, just one more, we're almost done.....*) Distracted by this dialogue, I

almost forgot the pain, and asked him how long had he been doing this work. He smiled, keeping my attention as he told this story of a second chance. Originally a heavy equipment operator, he lost that job during the economic downturn, took advantage of free voc-rehab, and now had become as good a breadwinner for his family as before the change. He said that his marriage was now BETTER, as he had learned to be gentle and nurturing.

Story number two is the story of many trans-genders, really the epitome of *try try again*. Noah grew up gay, came out during his high school years, and faced a divided family. His parents accepted him but grandparents did not, causing stress and alienation. Among his many friends he shared his distress, and sometimes *almost* found a partner, but it never lasted—the comfort level just never came. One day his therapist asked him to imagine himself as female, and Noah burst into tears. I read this story online and don't know how it ends, only that Noah's dream had never been clear to him before that day when one question caused it to be broken open, becoming a resolution for the future. I want to believe that Nora found the god of her understanding, and with that help, was able to claim a second chance. Her story is told now to give support to other men and women who were born or nurtured in the wrong gender—for them the second chance is compelling.

Now this is OUR story. Of all the shared characteristics found in UU churches and fellowships, this one is seldom mentioned, and that is, we are congregations filled with people who have taken the second chance not once, but repeatedly. We value the safe and familiar, but do not fear the new and daring. We may tolerate the limitations of an inappropriate job, an unsatisfying relationship, or a superficial religious faith for a long time, but sooner or later we find a way out, breathing deeper as second chances come alive. Today this room is filled with courageous people who are giving thanks for the joy of change, and others who are contemplating changes the world may not understand, family and friends may not support. We don't quite know what to call it, but there is something in us that cannot rest with pretense or conformity. That internal push for honesty and fulfillment brought us here to the freedom of UUism, it brought us through whatever rough waters we had to overcome, and it continues to empower our journey.

As we work together in this fellowship for the things we believe in, sometimes we know each others' stories—who among us has made what life-changing decisions, and sometimes we don't. But it's safe to assume everyone has been there, done that, and the committee, team or work group we are part of benefits from the collective experience of overcoming past loss, mistakes or unrealized dreams. What we share is much more than just information, it's a window opening into the emotional and intellectual self, revealed to each other over coffee, to the community and the world by the actions of "those UUs". Advocacy for social justice that embodies our seven principles, calls for the courage to stand up and stand out. Opportunities to make a difference in the world may have passed us by when we were too occupied with personal problems, or overwhelmed by too many concerns and too little money, energy or time. Nevertheless, second chances will keep coming and we will think it through, look it over, and get ready to get up and try, try again. All across our country are small fellowships like ours, wishing they could grow in numbers, but constantly renewed and invigorated by the authenticity and tireless work of the faithful few.

A poem by Rudy Nemser calls us long-haul people.

You find them in churches when you're lucky;
Long haul people upon whose shoulders
(and pocketbooks and casseroles
and daylight/nighttime hours)
a church is built and maintained
after the brass is tarnished and
cushions need re-stitching.
The church—their church—will be here, steady and hale. |
For a long, long time. It will.
For long haul people bless a church with a very special blessing.

We can become long-haul people when we forgive ourselves for whatever went wrong, get up and stand as straight as we can, lift the chin so we can see what's coming around the bend, and resolve to try, try again. The best is yet to come. Amen.