The Love We Use

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I remember walking on the white slabs of cement in the breezeway between our kindergarten and elementary school when I was five, and some older kid telling me that my friend Tom's parents had split up. After that—basically after learning of its existence—I remember dreading divorce for my own family. My mom says I used to come up behind her and take her hand and put it in my dad's.

But one afternoon when I was seven, my parents, who were wearing uncustomarily nice attire for an about-the-house weekend, explained that mom was moving out. We would be spending half our time at her new place near the fire station. A few months later my dad had a heart attack, and thereafter fell deep into his inherited Myotonic Muscular Dystrophy. I'm sure that there's a lot more to say about the circumstances, but this is the basic framework for the way 1988 turned out. Truth be told the next years—the six years after the divorce and before dad died—had plenty of joy in them, as much intimacy and indulgence as my sister and I could eat up. But as you'd expect it also had a lot of misery. And dad's household was not healthy.

Children of divorce apparently react very differently from one another as far as how they feel about marriage as an institution. Tom, for example, is now very classically a husband. For others, like my friend Greg, who has watched literally every one of his siblings (he's the youngest of six) get divorced, followed finally by his parents, marriage is out of the question. I think that I've come out more like Tom. In fact, for my part I suspect that seeing this divorce and death up close may be one reason why I seem to have a hard time even addressing, in a direct way, a question like whether or not marriage is a good thing, whether it leads to a fulfilling life, etc. When I try to ask something like that, the room sort of meta-pivots around so that the question remains a half-hearted third person plural one. For myself it's more like: *I must reconstruct a marriage or … I'll die. Failing that, the TV will come on, I'll keep a living room that is a mix of love and entropy, and expire.* I guess that sounds disempowering. For what it's worth, now that I'm married and have a happy home, honestly, it doesn't feel disempowering at all. This is what I want. It feels more like I am fortunate enough to have complete clarity on the topic as it pertains to me.

I can certainly sketch out what it must be like to consider what married life offers in comparison to life without it. You get security, comforts, companionship, a day-to-day partnership for an orderly home, possibly the fulfillments of a total, lifelong intimacy over homemade meals, etc., etc. Then, over in the "cons" column, you need permission to go out with friends; you may become bored and absent. And, of course, it may fail explosively. This type of deliberation being basically unavailable to me, it will be better for both of us if in this essay I don't pretend to be engaged in it. It will be better if I take off from the question "What is marriage for?" by addressing another question related to that pragmatic one, and in a sense prior to it. I'm not convinced that many married people, or people planning to be married, actually ask themselves whether marriage is a good idea any more than I do. I have my excuse, as I've just explained. But when I look around at my married friends and family, I don't get the feeling that they have been entertaining much more real deliberation on this than I

have. Or perhaps, to be more exact, a considered point of view is much more ready on the tongues of those that don't intend to marry. The rest of us debate whether we want to own our home, or have children; but it's not quite the same with nuptials. I am interested in why that is.

Is it just that some of us, the slower, stupider ones, fail to appreciate that marriage is no longer a given? I'm sure that that's part of it. But I suspect that it also has to do with what modern marriage is, with its great weirdness: the notion that we somehow make a commitment to continue loving.

The basic point I have to make in this essay will sound sort of obvious: it is that modern marriages are romantic. But when I say that marriages are romantic, I don't exactly mean that, as we sometimes hear, our marriages are founded on love, or, say, require regular sex, though those things may also be true. I'm saying that today marriages themselves are romantic. To explain what I mean by that you'll have to indulge me for a bit of a detour.

The spring and summer when I was fourteen was indefatigably social, spent, to my memory, in certain carpeted basements. At the time I liked or "like liked"—this was the terminology we used back then—a girl named Mary. Mary and I hung around together a lot; she laughed loudly at the stupid crap I said, and one time in a movie theater ticket line she put her arm around me on a conspicuously thin pretext. In spite of these things I was hesitant. Now in what follows, you will forgive me a little if you know that Mary was improbably and basically perfectly pretty. I was an ugly semi-loser. I really don't think I'm exaggerating either of these assessments. We were in that little gap just before high school in a small sheltered town, when everyone is in late puberty and someone like Mary can, for a moment, be grossly miscategorized, attractive out of all proportion to the people she spends time with.

Anyway the particular occasion I want to talk about to make my small but important philosophical point, on the way, I promise, to one about marriage, is one night at the end of that summer. Mary called me unexpectedly and said I should sneak out of my mother's apartment and meet her. So another guy friend and I biked a few miles across town to where Mary and one of her friends had, it emerged, made a campfire in a clearing and laid out sleeping bags. I've probably augmented the scene somewhat in retrospect, but this is how I remember it. There were definitely sleeping bags. She, it seemed to me, started to smirk when I sat down next to her.

Nevertheless I did nothing for a long time, other than as usual trying to make myself seem worth it. I suppose I was in a state of shocked relief that this night, surely, I would finally find out that she "like liked" me; whatever else my mind was capable of had turned to gas and whistled out of my ears on the ride over. After about an hour I did come out of my happy daze a little: I found a way to put out vague feelers for how Mary felt about me, via a go-between. I awaited intel. It became 11:00, 12:00, 1:00,

and, oddly, my intel didn't seem to come to anything, or only in a veiled way. Other than that I tried some heavy hinting. I half-whispered pusillanimous hooey to her like: "I like this girl, but I don't know if she likes me...," one toe always just over the line in deniability. It became 2:00, 2:30.

Curiously something else was going on that was just the opposite of these things. I think I had this fantasy that in such ideal circumstances as the crackling pine needles, the campfire, crickets and so forth, Milky Way visible between the tops of the trees, the trees moving over us reclined on the faded red plaid pattern of the sleeping bags in increasing physical proximity (the result of secret shimmying), we might slide into something else; as if once ordinary non-romantic life came so close to romantic relations as to be all but indistinguishable from them then we would cross over imperceptibly, unable later to recollect with any distinctness the time when "something more" had begun. Don't ask me what this ever could have looked like in terms of actual embodied heads and hands, with, really, our non-liquored teen selves surveilling no less then than ever.

To make a lamentably short story short, the dew fell. The sun came up. Not long after this night Mary and I dropped into the big waters of high school and my beautiful friend was whisked (or leapt) away from me by (or to) a much older and more attractive athletic hero. And then I learned for sure that Mary had indeed "like liked" me that summer. She had wondered whether I felt the same way. We had wanted the same thing.

So here is my first point, on the way to that bigger point I promised: in this scene there is no reciprocity. That might seem obvious, but bear with me a moment. What there are are all the raw materials, in some sense all the parts, of a reciprocal relation. Her feelings had, it turns out, matched and mirrored mine. Very likely, next to the campfire, we were feeling these things at the same instant, pining eye to pining eye—feelings we had about the other's complementing feelings and plans: wondering whether I was likewise wondering whether she was ... and so on.

But to reciprocate is to respond in kind. A response, literally a "speaking back," answers what has addressed it. The thing that is most confusing, and most vital, about reciprocity, and, by extension—this is what I'm getting around to—erotic energy, is that reciprocity is not just the same as mere mutuality. Something is mutual when two people are engaged in the same attitude, action, etc., in relation to each other. When an artist tells another artist that she makes great paintings, the latter may reply that the respect "is mutual." But she shouldn't say "the respect is reciprocal." This is because reciprocating involves not just symmetry in attitudes, but also some causal or conditional connection between them. (She shouldn't say the respect is reciprocal unless she means to confess that this judgment has just now been corrupted by flattery.)

Reciprocity is out of place in what ought to be an objective judgment like the appraisal of an artwork. But here's the point: it is the natural form of erotic life. And that couldn't get going under the hemlocks with me a trepidatious little vole.

If I could go back in time and meet my younger self that night (let me at this point acknowledge that we may be on this digression in part to resolve some stuff), perhaps when I'm just getting off my bike, and put my hand on this vole's shoulder, and tell him that I've come with some words of wisdom so that he won't fumble The Glory of My Youth, I would say something like: "Look, it matters whether or not Mary has had, is having, feelings for you; it matters how she's disposed. Of course it does. But you need to get out of your head this notion that that's, like, the matter, the material. Some scene in which your disposition and her disposition take up positions, and you come forth and beam at each other officially over the pine needles, and someone offers ambassadorially: 'Well how felicitous. Now we can get on with acting on said feelings, eh?'—that's not how these things go. What you need now is exposure. Mary, I think, is actually a big girl and unconsciously understands this. You need to say something like: 'Mary, I've been too shy to tell you: I think you're so beautiful.'"

I do acknowledge that a mini-lecture is probably not the best way to advise the anxious fourteen-year-old. Probably just insisting on the last part would do. But do you begin to see what I mean? Romance has its romantic way of being, where the rule is that arousal awakens arousal.

I'm not just talking about a kind of contagiousness—that lust leads to lust in the same way that yawning spreads from person to person, without anyone meaning for this to happen. Actually that contagiousness is something that Mary and I presumably did fall into, as we basically knew—all but knew—how the other was disposed. What I'm talking about has to do fundamentally with will and enaction and, peculiarly, a sort of work. If we think of a caress or a kiss for example—aargh ... sorry this is so embarrassing—the particular sensation on our cheek or lips might matter quite a bit, but it matters much more in self-consciously embodying what this person thinks they are up to. It is this enacted idea, this intention, that is excited body-to-body; and this is itself the idea of this very reciprocal erotic escalation. With romance we climb up out of mere dispositions and into that self-swallowing, seductive consciousness of arousal at arousal itself, which is emphatically what the kissers are implying and infecting each other with. Eventually she may be turned on by the fact that the fact that she wants him to be turned on turns him on. The latter sounds like a geeky philosopher's paradox, but it is integral to the way a kiss works.

One funny quality that romance always has—we can list it right next to its helplessness—is a kind of hyper-effectiveness, where effort, effort on its own, a manifestation of one's own will, independently of how well it is executed, can be effective. There is the wine; the wine tastes good and is, apparently, an aphrodisiac for some; but dissolved in each glass is its idea.

Speaking of "work" in this way I make it sound like all of this is orchestrated by conscious mental maneuvering. I don't mean that. When something like a kiss is happening, the thinking that ticker tapes inside a person in English, for example, is plainly obtrusive. Given that you, reader, are reading this, it is quite likely that you like me have let the intellect get so hulking it can no longer hide behind the bushes at these

times: you know how third-wheel it is: " ... Huh, well this is actually happening right now in this unremarkable room...," etc.

My son is one year old, and is very affectionate. Now he gives his big pumpkin-face grin and squints and stretches out his little arms and fingers for, it is clear, contact of the affectionate kind. Not too long ago (though it's remarkably easy to forget what he was like just a few months ago) he didn't do this in quite the same way. Now he does.

I have the feeling that it's really really tricky to put into words, in the adult rational and psychological terms we can understand, what we think is happening in a baby as this very psychological picture is itself tottering into existence. So forgive me, but as it (inarticulately) seems to me: if I say of my son that he smiles and stretches out his arms because he wants to give me a hug, well, we've got one thing. Then of course we need to add that he also wants me to hug him, and is as it were using his own proffered hug in order, in turn, to get me to hug him back. But one thing I'm pretty sure of: you can't take those two things together—to be hugging and hugged—and collect them to get an adequate account of what is up with him. He doesn't want two things, or two things together at the same time. Affection's way of being is actively awakening affection: the desire is like a tingling thing that he wants to develop in the world, and in this way, between himself and me.

As I say, he only recently started doing this. But for a long time, since he was maybe six weeks old, he's been doing a smile-and-smile-back thing, which is, I think, basically the same deal. Which is to say: it's not like what I'm describing requires ministrations which we are capable of only when we master the high concept of "other minds," or some such nonsense. For homo sapiens, erotic reciprocity of this kind is just a basic structure of emotional life that the heart works with effortlessly. Kids seem just as good at it as adults.

Abstract formulations have their use. With love and sex, such formulations always feel like one is proudly handing over a body, not realizing that it is missing organs, fluids, a face; not realizing, even, that it's dead. For what it's worth, in general terms what I think I mean by romance is that: *We manifest (and enjoy) something shared, where the shared thing is itself, in part, the causal connection between our own participation in it and the participation of the other.* I like this formula because when I stare at it long enough I occasionally catch sight of (though it's very hard to hold on to) that self-swallowing quality I mentioned, where the idea includes itself in its content, which is really the most important thing. Where I'm going with this is that I think marriages in the twenty-first century are romantic relationships in this sense, not so much because of their content as because of their structure. Because of this marriage is not normal when it comes to decision and that sort of thing.

Marrying for love is a relatively recent phenomenon. Timing-wise, the rise of the love match differs depending on where in Europe we're talking about but is generally said

to get going in a serious way at the end of the eighteenth century. This of course had to do with all sorts of things, not least the Enlightenment and changes in certain political possibilities and values. Just as fundamentally, it had to do with home economy. We can't overestimate the extent to which for most of human history to almost everyone marriage was a way of securing the basic necessities of life—like no-nonsense: food, fuel, shelter—in a way that it just isn't anymore. A big part of the nonoptional economic exchange that took place in a medieval marriage, for example, was what came from others—particularly one's parents (e.g. for the woman her dowry; for the man the inheritance of his father's farm or trade, which took place only when he married). One's parents didn't "just want you to be happy" in the way they do today. They wanted to secure the solvency of the family as a whole through time and travail, as well as the legitimacy of heirs. The community had a wedding gift too: the groom's initiation into political and economic enfranchisement. Marriage was about the brute seriousness of these transactions. Passionate erotic love was not the point, and was, at various times, even viewed as destabilizing to what marriage was supposed to be about.

To other pre-moderns, the separation of love and marriage was even more fundamental than this. The fact that men and women began not only to consider love a legitimate reason to marry but made love the centerpiece of the institution itself is one of the truly remarkable reversals in the history of our culture, and as such it is something most people have heard of. Less well known but just as interesting is the rich literary tradition that positions love and marriage as not only aloof but actually antithetical to each other. This tradition reached its most extreme expression in the "Courtly Love" of medieval Europe, but it goes back at least to Ovid. Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, a versical how-to for getting laid in the Empire, made much of coyness and closed doors. According to Ovid passionate love can only thrive as a sort of war and conquest; consummation cannot be a sure thing, and in general compulsion of any kind is out of place. So he took it for granted that his advice had no application to husbands and wives who were "obligated to share a bed."

Andreas Capellanus's *The Art of Courtly Love*, an influential twelfth-century tract written in the tradition of Ovid's poem, lays down the strict separation of love and marriage quite definitively. *The Art of Courtly Love*, for example, depicts a conversation in which a noblewoman, "A.," tells her admirer, "Count G.," that she cannot be receptive to his advances because she is already absorbed in the love she has for her husband. Count G. objects that she must be confused. Love, he says, is incompatible with what a marriage most fundamentally is. The two appeal to the Countess of Champagne (Marie of France, daughter of Queen Eleanor whose famous "Court of Love" Andreas may have been depicting), who gives the verdict:

> We declare and we hold as firmly established that love cannot exert its powers over two people who are married to each other. For lovers give each other everything freely, under no compulsion of necessity, but married

> persons are in duty bound to give in to each other's desires and deny themselves to each other in nothing.

(Elsewhere in *The Art of Courtly Love* it is explained that although there may be affection between husband and wife, love is an entirely different and incommensurable sort of feeling). In a similar vein, Heloise, the famous twelfth-century nun, adduced her aversion to marrying her lover Peter Abelard as evidence of how strong and true her passion was for him, writing to him—"You cannot but be entirely persuaded of this by the extreme unwillingness I showed to marry you."

For sure such ideas are not necessarily representative of twelfth-century conventional wisdom on the relationship between marriage and love—particularly outside the idle nobility. Insofar as we today quite explicitly and emphatically found our marriages on love—indeed, for us the social stigma is as much against a loveless home as a broken one—what the Countess of Champagne says actually poses a much more direct challenge to us than to her contemporaries. Many things have changed since the twelfth century, both for love and for marriage, but so far as I can see none of them does anything to dull the pertinence of the basic conundrum: How are the spontaneity of love and the commitments and responsibilities of something like spousehood supposed to fit together? You have to admit, even if it turns out to be unenlightened, the courtly tradition has things conceptually clear and intuitive.

When I got married I vowed to my wife, on a pulpit in front of all my friends and family, that I would continue to cherish and love her for the rest of her life. It was a kind of promise. We don't have to think of love as sexual in the mode of *The Art of Courtly Love* to see how problematic that promise is. We just have to think that we cannot control whether or not we love someone. Or we just have to think that compelled, contrived love, love delivered as promised isn't the kind of thing we would want from a lover even if it were possible. The love we want is spontaneous, underlying, underived and free. This is how it can affirm who we are. How can I commit to continue to love my wife?

I am, as I've said, about to go on to argue that marriages are romantic, that they are analogous to a kiss. How am I going to square this with what appears to be marriage's very different logic of establishment, of office and obligation?

Normally I take care of my son in the morning. The other night, however, there was a lot of teething—more than ever, in fact. He's an okay sleeper in general but that night he cried and cried; so we let him sleep in. This, in combination with the fact that I woke up early, meant that I had a rare half hour to look lower down on the to-do list past the usual a.m. tasks.

So that morning I went out and picked up the twigs and brittle branches that had fallen in the yard. We have a couple of old lichenous ash trees that are not long for this

world. They are incontinent, I guess would be the word, in that they lose large and seemingly important parts of themselves in a big wind. I broke up the gray limbs into stove-size kindling and carted them in a wheelbarrow to a pile near the living room door. From there they can be fetched for fires in the stove starting in November.

What this means to me, what keeps me leaning over and at my morning work, is, in part, quite straightforward: this is enjoyable for its own sake (snapping sticks is something I've liked to do since I was maybe two), and, of course, the work is a means to meeting one of our oldest needs: fire, warmth in winter. In fact it is these two things together. I got to take in the wet spring air and use my hands and see something literally pile up that is unambiguously useful. The archaic almost anti-ambiguousness of work of this kind—"wholesome" would be the right word if you could subtract the goody-goody connotation—is one reason I like living in the country. The old saying is that wood warms you twice.

But I do not live out here by myself. If I did, if I were a bachelor, then, even if every motion were the same, every muscle moving the same, with all the satisfactions of the productive work I just mentioned above available to me, nonetheless the work would be done in a spirit utterly unlike that in which I actually did it. You won't understand what I am doing if you don't see the action as emotionally enveloped in a relationship; which for now, since my son can't talk rationally yet, means mainly my marriage to my wife. This is action *en famille*.

Now what is action *en famille*? One way of responding to the Countess of Champagne's challenge (a way which is not to just conclude: so much the worse for modern marriage) is to imagine marriage as a kind of metamorphosis of love. The infatuation of courtship and the calmer commitment of the achieved relationship are each given their own logic, but at different times. The endeavors of an adolescent telling a girl "I think you're so beautiful" may give way, someday, to spousehood; and one way of understanding that transition is that while the boy's erotic act aims to cross the gulf between two people, into something shared, a spousal act is done out of something standing. Not that the passions peter out exactly. Rather (according to this view, which is not quite my own), new forms of affection take over: feelings for the other such as devotion and pride, a sense that this person is in some way one's own. Above all we develop a deep, disinterested concern for this person's well-being. From this point of view, a pathos of belonging—incredibly intense and potent in its own way—would be the perfected emotional substance of spousehood.

I actually think this is almost right. I've just never been impressed with it as anything like the full picture. It is too zoomed-in to capture the whole movement of marriage. I might, in heroic morning moods, fancy that something like this is what is animating me, and that that's all there is to it. But as soon as I hear footsteps on the stairs and a human being comes into the kitchen in all her 3D reality and proves to have eyes, ears, and a mouth, the inadequacy of such disinterestedness in describing the situation is palpable. This is not because I don't care for my wife's well-being very

deeply—I do. And I suppose even if I had to keep my helpful acts of wood-gathering for her sake secret, watching over her guardian-like, I would.

But although my devotion drives me to do this—my sense that I am a husband and husbands do this—my devotion is also something I want her to feel. It is, in fact, something to be returned in kind, erotically, devotion for devotion. And the real sense of satisfaction of this work is to do it not for her sake, but for her eyes. Not literally; not that she beholds my virile act and swoons. She is upstairs. She is unlikely later to be impressed by the resulting aesthetically questionable pile of sticks. But being married, devotion belongs between us, and spousal acts bear the stamp of the living, active, commitment-at-commitment, trust-at-trust; a project that invites, implies, calls out and unfolds each of its parts.

Imagine for a moment that I really didn't care how she received and responded to my help. Imagine that she got the sense that I was indifferent to her reception of it. Whatever else this might make her feel, that I was either an angel or a self-involved douche—either way, I posit, it would make her feel like something less than a lover.

I went inside and made breakfast for the family: eggs, bacon, blueberries, leftover beet salad. If breakfast didn't have a cook, server and served, and a real need for nourishment, it would be nothing. But like the glass of wine, it is the idea of a relationship that is eaten.

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My mom moved into her new apartment in January of 1988. A couple of weeks later she came to pick us up for our first stay. I remember that once we were all packed up my dad surprised us by pulling some glass mugs out of the freezer he had frosted up for root beer floats.

Actually, though, I recall it was exciting to move (half-move) into the new place, exploring the interesting creaking old rambling antique apartment, checking out my new room (tiny, while my sister's was like a vast drinking hall). Really in my experience that trip was less strange the first time than it was on all subsequent trips, when the two houses had begun to drift further and further apart in character. It was later that, whichever place we were, it felt like the other was some dimly recollected other life.

That June my dad had his heart attack. On that morning my sister was at a sleepover or something, and it was just me and him in the house. I don't remember it very well. I didn't realize the significance of what was happening, or had happened, until several days later.

I remember that at first he thought he had eaten something bad. We had just come back from camping and had had skeezy sandwiches on the way home. Or so he thought, though mysteriously I had had the tuna too, and I was fine. Then he realized that there was something very wrong. What was in fact happening is called tachycardia—an arrhythmic speeding-up of the heart. My image is of my dad lying on his bed with his arm draped over his face, with the radio on. He was greenish-white,

mouth dry and open. He should have called 911 immediately. Instead he told me to pick up the phone and call my mom.

My mom, when I spoke to her about this recently, just thinks he called her in this crisis out of habit. I'm sure that that's part of it. My parents were technically still married at that time—they didn't divorce for another year. It was not a bitter break up. Right up until dad died in fact they remained in some respects each other's main support in life. This was a relief to me and my sister of course. But I'm not convinced my mom is familiar with all of the complexity of his house at that time. I was there (albeit eight years old, but there). That phone call, for example, felt not so straightforward to me: whether he had me call her because she lived only a mile away, or as much as a mile away; whether he wanted me to witness, mark, measure the fact that his wife was only on the other end of the telephone and not in the room—and for her to hear her son mark this. Anyway she came. We all got into her little red VW Rabbit and drove to the hospital.

And ultimately he came extremely close to death. Later he told my sister and me the story that lying in his hospital bed he had had to reconstruct the order of the tiles on the ceiling or he would die. He did reconstruct them. He didn't die. But when he finally came home three weeks later he was not the same. He was sunken all over. He had to retire from his work as an electrical engineer. Myotonia has all sorts of symptoms but the main one is that your musculature cannot properly grow or repair. So there was no going back.

As I say, it was a relief to my sister and me that my parents still loved each other. But one way of seeing the problem is that their loves no longer had to do with each other in the right way. My dad didn't have the strength to conceal from us for long that he hadn't wanted the divorce. One morning, I don't remember exactly when, on his bed, with, again, his now baggy arm draped over his eyes, he told me he was still in love with her. Meanwhile he plunged precipitously into needing help. When he got this help from her, he did not have his own love's homecoming, an answered appeal and arousal. Instead he just had her real compassion. He just had her heartfelt care and commitment, forthcomingly.

This is one way in which two people can be unwed. His love was meant for hers, and hers was merely meant for his well-being; and all his red blood leaked out of that asymmetry.

I am at my work snapping sticks, pulling some old soft moldering ones out from the clutching dead grass, for my marriage. My marriage is alive when my work explicitly and actively arouses my wife's response in kind, which is not just appreciation or approval or thanks (though those things may mark it and store it) but ultimately the transmission of erotic energy over to her reciprocal role, a response which in turn actively arouses me to rise to mine. This is, in part, how love is sustained. And it is in this that the action is captured.

We can't control love. But what I'm suggesting is that in a marriage we do want love that is at its erotic work.

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Back in the day marriage was truly an institution. Let's say an institution is an institution and not just an ideal when there is something at stake for some significant party in the integrity of the institution itself—the observation of its form and rules—over and above the vicissitudes of any particular case in question.1 This institutionality could, in turn, have to do with religion, with being integrally involved in the rest of society, or with a particular party's (e.g. men's) interest in its dominance as a norm. That generalized group concern used to be part of what gave marriage its seriousness and solemnity in our lives. All of this is fading fast from marriage as it is today.

A few months before our wedding my wife and I had a meeting with the very liberal UCC minister who was to marry us. We told him that we would be uncomfortable if he threw around the word "God" in the ceremony (J-word, it went without saying, off the table). This meeting was in the fall of 2008, basically right at the nadir of our plunge into the Great Recession. At the time I was living on my grad student stipend. My wife was teaching for not much money. And this had not much at all to do with why we were marrying one way or the other.

At this meeting I remember him asking us why we wanted to get married. The question wasn't: Why do you want to spend the rest of your lives together? It was: Why do you want to get married? Thus it was also unavoidably the question: What does marriage mean anymore anyway?—which, incidentally, given that this minister was actually about our age, he might have really been wondering.2

What I'm claiming in this essay, you'll remember, is that I don't have access to an answer to the first question, the personal one. To the latter I'm trying to make a contribution. I'm saying that the phrase "because I'm married" in the twenty-first century has its own form of solemnity, its own way of being more than, as we put it, "just a piece of paper."

In the past, marriage established two firm offices: HUSBAND and WIFE. These dictated duties over and above our own mere inclinations. The roles in progressive Western modern marriages, I submit, have a different way of taking the imperative mood. "Duty" strikes me as the wrong way to think of it. Instead, as Ben Affleck breathlessly and, it appeared, accidentally said in his Oscars speech this year, marriage is work. In particular it is erotic work. HUSBAND, whatever it was in the past, is now a romantic identity—it is characterized and known by, and only acceptable as, arousal awakening arousal.

If I could hazard an easy to misunderstand formulation as to what marriage is for, it would be: marriage is for itself. But hold on. I don't mean that it is just intrinsically or immediately valuable, valuable independently of what results from it, like the way a slice of cherry pie is valued, or the way some people think that art ought to be. My whole point is that marriage is a means. But this is the thing: marriage is a means to itself. This, I'm saying, is the right way to understand how we experience and enjoy it.

It is also the right way to understand its rules. Returning one more time to my morning work, the way in which this is romantic is not that I have some sort of look in my eye that says: "I love you" or something. I need no special look. This is because we are married. A modern marriage contextualizes (and promises) that my efforts will be of this erotic kind. If my wife were to someday turn to me and say "you're no husband," it wouldn't be because I was a deadbeat or something—it wouldn't be because any particular act was or wasn't performed. It would be because what I was doing wasn't coming from love looking for her love.

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Reciprocation literally means something like "back and forthing." But now that we have a kid, for my wife and I there is not much in the way of a temporal gap. There is no moment when we are not both acting out our reciprocal responsibilities. After breakfast was over I went out again to finish up the yard. I reached to grab a living low-hanging branch to get it out of the way, and at the last moment my eye darted before my body could change course to catch a glimpse of an outlandish caterpillar covered in red fuzz just where my hand was closing. The glimpse I recorded was of a three-inch Elmo from Sesame Street. He must have fallen from the branch as soon as I sprang back, that or exploded. I never found him and the only evidence of his existence was my fingers and palm punctured all over in red bristles.

I got many of them out. My wife had to dig out the rest, all the ones entirely buried beneath the skin, and all those stuck at odd angles between my fingers. Now my wife is always eager to do these things—she has a basically curious and let-me-get-in-there-with-the-trusty-tweezers personality for which plucking out tiny things under a magnifying glass is a nice prospect. The proper tools just sort of materialize in her hands at these times. For her too this has a very straightforward kind of satisfaction. Yet it is also the completion of a two-person movement.

One of our wedding vows, which we stole from friends, was "All that I have I give to you." One way of understanding that is: now there will be no more mine and thine. The rings we exchange here are the last things that we can ever give each other. Henceforth there is one common pool, "us." Perhaps then my wife would feel the sting of those bristles in the sensitive white webbing between my fingers, as she would be plucking them out of our own hand.

But that's not actually what the vow says. And although such merging can be very powerful and real (in fact she happens to have told me that she could feel the pain), in the end it is not at all erotic, eliding, as it does, the gap between two people, the comportment to the other as other.

What I've been trying to show, rather, is that marriage is more like an exchange: an endless exchange, all for all. Exchanging rings enacts, more particularly, a creative erotic exchange—not just the transaction of things that we already want (as in a medieval marriage) but at the same time the transmission of desire—and is just, in ceremony, the movement we will make over and over again.3

I do apologize, reader. Oscar Wilde says that us married folk should not wash our clean linen in public. But I need illustration and, being new married, can hardly be expected to share something ugly.

Now perhaps you are saying to yourself here at the end: ah, but there is a disanalogy. Whereas with a kiss, a one-person kiss truly is meaningless, a dry oddity, the acts and advantages of marriage like having someone who will dig the bristles out of your hand—these are valuable regardless of anything that has to do with love or marriage.

Now reader, it is beyond my capacity in this essay to argue about whether or not actually nourishing one's body, brushing one's teeth, money, a sunny trip to the ocean, getting up out of bed, *just feel worthwhile* to the kind of thing that we are—that the felt value of these things just floats toward us. But I really don't think that this is the case for many of us. Most of us, even. Not, for example, for me, or for my dad. We have to be giving something of ourselves to make meaning in even everyday things. And we need what we give returned.

And I think that those who get married are people like this—people like me and him. And if that's true, reader, you can see why it isn't possible for a person, today, to decide that marriage is good in his own case. If someone can, then I declare that he is not married.

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