

## THE ROOTS THAT SHAPED MY VIEW OF MARRIAGE

### My Parents

Marriage was something I took for granted growing up. I still have a scrap of paper on which I wrote a description of the family I intended to have—by whatever means families are created (I knew nothing of the biological and psychological realities). I had decided on twelve children, neatly spaced a year or two apart, equal numbers of boys and girls—some twins to reduce the number of child-bearing years (I note now with relief). The important task was to provide them with names, so that I could exhaust the supply of intriguing names I wanted to confer on my little tribe. And of course I had to give them alternating blonde or brunette hair and brown or blue eyes. I was ignorant of the science of recessive and dominant genes that would determine eye color.

I had a predilection for brunettes, something you may not have known. Whereas I later learned that "gentlemen prefer blondes," I was smitten with the vision of Elizabeth Taylor and her ilk. How I longed to have those dark tresses. Having hair that could not be easily classified—sort of blond, sort of reddish, and therefore nondescript, I felt cheated out of the clarity of raven-haired beauty.

Our own parents' marriage was a secure haven. I remember an incident from early childhood that typified that security for me.

*It was early morning. My mother had called us for breakfast. Dad came into the room, walking a bit hesitantly as always because of the dimness of his sight. He stretched out his arms in an awkwardly loving gesture and Mother's graceful motherly body melted into his embrace. There were hugs and kisses being exchanged and a soft murmur of endearments and gentle pats. I was only "thigh-high" at the time, so I wriggled my head into a crevice between their bodies. "Let me into the 'pig pile'," I chirped shrilly. And so I was enfolded too.*

No harsh arguments shattered my illusion of domestic tranquility, so that I was entirely unprepared for the naturalness of conflict in the intimacy of marriage. Arguing, sarcastic, critical remarks on the part of married persons chilled me to the bone. They did not belong in marriage. Just once I recall on a shopping trip to Chicago, Mother was taking a long time deciding about buying a hat. Dad was exasperated, and let her know it. It was just a tiny "huff" on his part, but I was astounded, for that split second uncovered a possible threatening chasm. I did not think my father was ever angry—especially not with his wife.

I had ample opportunity over the years to observe other marriages, but none of them appeared to question my primal assumptions. Marriage was a blissful state, only some other people did not have the same degree of harmony as my parents.

## The 1950s Professional Woman Image

As I wrote in my memoir, I gradually descended into total despair about my own ability to attract someone to enter into such a blissful arrangement with me. The cruel rejection of my first love in college unhinged me. My only recourse was to move into a 1950s feminism that was defiant, chafing under the burden of the apparent ineptness of many of the men I knew. Who would want one of them anyway? At the same time, we in Pioneer Girls smirked a bit at the distasteful fate of the married women we encountered in our work. Since many of these women were grating against the strictures of traditional marriages, confined to a suburban hell of keeping ranch houses squeaky clean with the latest cleaning paraphernalia on the market, and schlepping children from one activity to another in station wagons, we had no envy of their marital state—at least not on the surface. We referred to them as "moldy housewives" with some disdain and a small amount of pity.

On the other hand, we saw many of these same women blossom in camp. It was delightfully easy to see them separate, single again, cut free from family and house responsibilities for a glorious week. They gathered together after hours in the camp dining hall clad in their pajamas and sweat shirts, and chortled away the night, sharing stories and memories. They were college coeds again in a "dorm" outdoors, thrilled to be occupied in a purposeful enterprise. They envied me as a single woman at those times. But of course, secretly, I envied them.

We staff professionals got confirmation from our public constituency about the superiority of our performance as single women. In Denver, I was once engaged in helping local Pioneer Girls volunteer women work with Brigade men volunteers in planning a joint activity in a local church. There were great ideas floating about, and lots of details to be arranged. The women shouldered their tasks with aplomb and competence. We did not always get a complementary performance from the men. The pastor of the church took me aside the day of the event, remarking, "When Pioneer Girls staff are planning something, I always know it will turn out well," implying that he could not count on the same degree of proficiency from the men.

It was in 1959 that Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* came out. One of our volunteer staff persons in Seattle read it first, and recommended it to me. It expressed exactly her sentiments. Caught in an unsatisfying marriage, my friend devoted her considerable energy and talents into writing for our publications, and directing local Pioneer Girls camp and area activities. Our correspondence strengthened our mutual conviction that Friedan's critique mirrored experiences of women as we saw them.

Yet all the while, I was preferring the company of men in my work. As I traveled, I had the opportunity to spend quality time with pastors in their offices. Some of them took the opportunity to open their hearts to me about their work. They saw me as a professional equal. I was not demeaned or put in second place—something married women in local churches often experienced. It was heady for me, and I found

conversations with these pastors more stimulating than listening to women brag about their kids or decry the gruff put-downs they sometimes got from their husbands.

I actually wanted very much to be married, but it would not have occurred to me to have entered into the part of it which seemed to rob women of their intellectual spark. I loathed the way dinner parties ended with the women in the kitchen, the men in the living room. I always drifted in where the conversation was stimulating. How I would have avoided becoming a woman who savored the conversations about children, had I married at twenty-five and birthed two or three little ones, I can not now say. But perhaps it was a subtle factor in my not working on the issues that were preventing me from developing as a sexual and feminine person, a woman.

One by one, my friends got plucked from the line of waiting single women, courted by a male and married off. Even the more unprepossessing women whom I considered less attractive, found men who wanted to spend the rest of their lives married to them. I was astounded at the female prowess lurking beneath the surface in these simple ordinary women. How did they do it? Defensively, I quickly turned to other women—and made a life out of my work, out of camping trips (nature healed my wounds), and close sharing with other single women. It was sometimes quite good, always good enough.

### **Transformation Through Therapy**

It was therapy that made the difference. In every area of my life, I turn to those six months in 1967 when my life turned upside down. Of course it was a male therapist. I could listen to his advice, and by confiding my insecurities to a man, I was already testing myself as a woman in a male-female encounter. Therapy precipitated a major breakthrough, helping me embrace my own feminine sexuality, and prepared me to open myself to men.

As I moved into a world of dating men, it helped that I was at the University of Chicago where feminism had taken deep root and was taken for granted. Men and women together prepared for Ph.D. exams and were expected to be equally bright. In some cases, we women were brighter, having long ago learned how to "read" the professor and anticipate the questions. And in intimate matters, the sexual revolution was in full swing, so women's wishes got equal billing with those of the men.

### **The Experience of Meeting Don**

In Don, I sensed an underlying masculine strength in his very physical presence, and in his frank directness and self-assurance. It mingled with a tender deference, an almost courtly behavior at times (his mother had trained him well—"What will the neighbors think?"). He was not emasculated by my natural assertiveness.

A typical test came in the matter of driving. I had a car; he did not. On a December day, we were going some place together, so I handed him the keys—a bit of

"old school" habit, and I actually did want his protectiveness, something I had needed the day in October when we "crashed" into each other and I was needing his chivalrous care. We got into the car, and it is important to note that it was a stick shift, not an automatic like the family Buick Don was used to. At the first intersection, as he shifted, the gears jammed. Oops! I had forgotten to tell him about this quirk in the old Chevy. I leaped out of the car, lifted the hood, and knew just how to knock the lever that jiggled the gears into place just as a mechanic had shown me a few weeks before. Don took it in stride. I was the one to feel embarrassed.

Over the years of our marriage, we worked out a satisfactory accommodation: I did all the in-town driving, navigating the intricacies of winding streets; Don preferred the monotonous straight-of-way expressway stints, which bored me. This arrangement was a good example of the way Don looked at the interpretation he heard some Christians give of the Biblical injunction to wives to submit to their husbands. Don saw our marriage as egalitarian and thus capable of alternating leadership. If he is better at something, I yield. If I am better at something else, he happily lets me take the melody line. I think this is why he now feels no compunction at all about taking out the trash (what men do), doing the laundry (can be either man or woman), and doing the dishes. He won't let me in the kitchen while he plies his tasks. He refers to this as our Jack Sprat marriage.

I married someone with whom I could come into healthy conflict. Thank God. It is so much more interesting. Don had a quick temper when we married, a temper which blows suddenly and hard, then dissipates magically and leaves no residue of resentment or grudge. I knew nothing about this phenomenon, but I have come to appreciate it. The key was not to get caught up in his eruptions myself, as though his anger were directed at me, which it never was. Soon he learned to remind me of this in advance. "This has nothing to do with you," and he said it emphatically. I learned to believe him, though at first it always seemed as though there must be something in which I had failed, something I had done to trigger his outburst.

The magical solution lay within my control. I had the permission to get angry. I could explode. What a delicious thought. This startled Don at first—really strongly. Soon, his outbursts became less frequent. He no longer needed to carry that part of the marriage on his shoulders, for I fully took on my part in this dimension. It also has helped that Don was never cruel to me, always related to me as a person, and we never doubted our enduring love for each other.

### **Influences Coming Together Over Time**

So where did my childhood ideal go, of a "united front" marriage, as the books describe it. It did not disappear altogether, but its form changed, because it stands on a different basis. For actually, as we age, our marriage is remarkably similar to that of my parents. Don has remarked on this several times, and he likes the degree of calm, the absence of tension, we experience now. He sits in his chair and writes and watches TV,

much as Dad used to sit in his study reading, writing, listening to the news on the radio. And I am at the computer writing, or in the kitchen preparing a meal, or out taking a walk, a little like my mother in those years of retirement in New Hampshire. And both Mom and Dad had a sense of mission, of calling—rather than the typical idea of unprogrammed leisure. During our working years, the hours we spent together, or later individually, meeting with clients continued as a part of the flow of our life, not a separate vocation. This is much like my parents, who continued a conscious self-identity as "ministering" to others to the very end of their lives.

Perhaps the way things will end for us is to simply flow into eternity—each of us united to the Divine Lover who is God.