

What Matter the Vows?

(This is my offering on the topic of marriage in the form of a letter written to my niece, Morgan, on the occasion of her upcoming marriage. She had asked me what I thought the difference was between being married and living together.)

My Dearest Morgan:

I have to say, you've given me food for thought with your question last week on what is the difference between being married and living together. You did not indicate whether you wanted the short, medium or long answer, so I give this to you as it is. I have no Cliff Notes to offer.

First things first, the love we shared before we got married is what inspired us to take the next step – marriage. Grown-up love has to be in place before the deeper commitment of marriage can take hold. So, that's first and assumed – that you love each other.

There are two ways in which marriage makes a difference. One is in how the world now perceives you and the other is in what it does for the husband and wife personally.

And the wedding ceremony, with all its rituals, stands as the representation, not only to the couple, but to the community, of this sea change.

The community knows what will happen to you as the newlyweds because it has already happened to most of them. The community welcomes these changes in you for reasons I will explain.

And the couple although they can't really know because it hasn't happened to them yet, declares to each other

*You are no longer only a private unit,
you are now a public one as well*

and the community that they welcome the personal changes they are about to experience.

So, what of the community perspective and what value your getting married has to the community?

For me, the biggest difference in being married is the frame of reference for encountering the world, both from the perspective of the married couple and of everyone who encounters them. You are no longer in transition, hedging or waiting. By your act, you declare that you have entered this new state and this is how we are to refer to you from now on. You are no longer only a private unit, you are now a public one as well.

To thrive, a civilization needs stable institutions that have integrity. A marriage is the most fundamental of society's institutions, because it says the couple will work hard, stay together, live longer, create a safe haven for their children, and have a stake in the community in which they live. When you wed you make a public declaration that you

The American culture doesn't really have a good word for a person living with another person.

are now a family (regardless of how many members of the family you choose to add-children or no children). Once you say you are a family, it is a shorthand for us who live in the community with you that you will contribute to this society that we have already bought into. And you will feel us treat you that way. We welcome you into the society with all respect due you. Because we know that with that respect and honor we pay you, we know the price of your admission is that you now have higher level of responsibilities.

More stable marriages beget more stable communities.

And each of you now gets a new word, a symbol (all words are symbols) of your elevated relationship – wife, husband.

Otherwise, you would go on as you were, living together with your private commitment . . . or not. How would we know? By getting married, you are telling us that you want us to know that you are together forever and you want us to take you seriously. Without it, we don't know who you are, really. You have to go through a lot of explaining to make us understand. Without it, the world assumes that you two think that you may or may not stay together, so we have no way to know how to address you, literally and

You promise not to exit.

figuratively – the American culture doesn't really have a good word for a person living with another person, in love, but not married. Boyfriend? Lover? Partner? None seems to fit.

Your vows are no longer just between the two of you, but you now have witnesses to what you said and the witnesses are to hold you accountable for what you vowed you would do. You publicly chose to entwine yourselves to each other, not to be easily or carelessly undone. Uncoupling now will have to be as public as your

*Our responsibility as witnesses
(invited guests at your wedding) is to be sure that
we bless this union.*

coupling has become. You will have a lot of explaining to do if you choose to quit. You vow to us that you will not run out on each other or your children. You promise not to exit.

With marriage, you are telling us by this public ritual that what we think of you matters to you. The whole world knows what heretofore had been private – that Morgan and Travis are one and together forever. So, you have created a new family unit and by our witnessing it, we accept it and welcome it. See, we witnesses, we are already in the club and with this ceremony grant you admission to the club.

You are telling us by this public ritual that what we think of you matters to you.

Your job is to take your vows seriously and our job as witnesses (invited guests at your wedding) is to be sure that we bless this union. So, really, we need to find out if you two are serious and if you plan to honor your

Marriage helps the man grow up.

commitments, otherwise, we shouldn't really stand for you. (So, that is one reason for my questions for you last week). For us, as witnesses, a wedding is symbolic, especially for those of us already married. We want to know if you mean it. If you don't mean it and we attend anyway, we devalue the institution we hold sacred. So, for all of us, attending your wedding is symbolic, a much more serious act than going to your party. We declare by our presence there that we bless your union. And as the married couple, that is what you want. That is why you decide to marry in the first place and why you should choose your guest list carefully.

So, what about the changes that take place for the husband and wife personally?

The ritual of getting married bestows a blessing on the couple from their family, friends and community; a recognition that the couple has entered into a sacred vow that they openly share with those very people, to love each other and commit themselves to each other for the rest of their lives. The very saying of it, in public, in front of everyone and the act of the dear ones witnessing it is what gives it its meaning. The ceremony stands for what the couple will do from that moment on.

I remember my wedding day, standing at the top of the stairs with Curtis and I coming down together (we did it our own way back then) and everyone standing up as we entered the room) it shook me to my core –I suddenly realized in a most visceral way that I was about to make my heretofore private vow, public. I was going to promise, in public that I would become a wife to this man and he a husband to me. Our public ceremony declared that we

*If you don't mean it and we attend anyway, we
devalue the institution we hold sacred.*

wanted to stand with the other adults in the community as a married couple. By their presence, they declared that they would do that.

So, for us, the wedding ceremony was the opening act of the marriage.

Marriage helps the man grow up. Suddenly he says, I have a family to take care of and it is his honor, duty and responsibility to provide for that family. You see men all of a sudden get that academic degree or work longer hours or choose a profession and make a commitment to having children. These all require the man to step up and be counted as a man among the men of his society. The other men of the society, who have already done this, welcome him with their secret handshake, so to speak. The man makes the decision to put his wild days behind him and commit to one woman and a path of domesticity. He may have already made this promise in his heart, but now he makes it in public with witnesses who will hold him accountable if he reneges on his word.

The woman can finally let her true heart free because now she has a framework from which to chart the course of the rest of her life. There is no longer any wondering who will father my children. She can know with certainty that she will have one good man stand by her side for the rest of her life. From that feeling of safety and security, she blossoms. Suddenly, she says to herself, what can I do

to please my man? How can I be the best I can be? She has new incentive to create a home for herself and her husband and to take care of him in the ways men like to be taken care of. She does this willingly, with love.

Marriage is a social, cultural act and the reflection back on you from the culture reinforces your commitment every day. Wait till the first time someone addresses you as Mrs. Van Alostyne. It is an honor for you to become this man's wife. It is his honor to be your husband.

You are entering an honorable estate, Morgan and it is different because you will operate from a new position. You stand on what you were before, but you have new privileges and new responsibilities as well.

Don't forget, also, that we witnesses vow to assist you in any way we can to help you make your marriage a

success. It is a community act, after all. So there is that, too. There is a sisterhood among all married women as there is a brotherhood among all married men. Each of you will enter that covenant as well.

Marriage is full of obligation, responsibility and privilege. It is for adults only.

That's the best I can say it.

Love,

Aunt Patty

*Donohue Shortridge, a Montessorian since 1980 speaks and write on topics related to children and their families in the American culture.
pds@pdonohueshortridge.com*

P. Donohue Shortridge



fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture