

The True Vow: A Wedding Promise We Can Keep

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I often get betrothed folks one-on-one and ask them if they really believe the vow they are about to make, if they really mean "till death do us part." So far, the results of my poll have been overwhelming. Almost no one believes those words, or even gives much thought to the possibility that anyone could.

"Till death do us part" is a holdover from an era when individual conformity to societal constraints was understood to be obligatory. In contemporary culture, no value is more cherished than the freedom of the individual to grow and to change, guided principally by the goal of remaining true to one's self.

What marrying folks actually mean, they tell me, is that they love each other, and they hope to stay together forever. And they believe they will. But if they grow apart, it would make more sense to divorce than to live in misery.

Still, each and every one of these folks either has or is about to gather family, friends, clergy, and God to witness them promise "till death do us part." Surely, much of the devastation of divorce is due not merely to the separation, but to the breaking of such a solemn promise.

As much as we love weddings, we do sense a certain anxiety, a vague queasiness, that a big, fat falsehood has been planted right in the middle of the ceremony. We fear that someday a high price may be paid for the pleasure of today's pretending.

It doesn't have to be that way. Weddings could be just as honest as they are beautiful, if couples would simply say something closer to what they really mean. I suggest the following, which I call the "True Vow."

"We promise to each other the depth of our dreams and the height of our hopes, the tender treasures and the hidden recesses of our hearts. We promise to strive in every way to strengthen the permanence of our love, which is our greatest desire."

We could all get used to a vow like this. Most folks, I think, would come to prefer it—in large part because most folks really prefer to tell the truth. Once this honesty issue has been taken care of, everything else about the wedding, every iota of ritual and ceremony, can and should stay just exactly as it is.

People get married, first and foremost, because they mean just what is stated in the True Vow above. The next reason for getting married, close on the heels of the first, is because

they crave the surpassing poignancy of the wedding ceremony and all of its attendant accoutrements.

People who love each other and hope to stay together forever believe they ought to be able to have and to experience these things. They are right.

Couples ought to be able to have the beauty of a wedding, and a marriage, without being coerced by society into making a huge, sweeping promise which they know in their guts to contradict their entire belief systems.

People who do not believe in unchanging truth should not be manipulated into making unchanging promises.

Legally, morally, socially, in every way, a marriage is a contract. To enter into such a sacred contract, on false premises, by taking a false vow, is more than simple theft; it is a form of spiritual suicide.

My grandmother used to tell me that divorce is a sort of death. But it doesn't have to be. Because the only thing that truly dies in a modern divorce is an antiquated promise.

Out with the old vow, and in with the True Vow—Then no one need die the death of being betrayed, or becoming a betrayer.

Is it really true, though, that changing a few words can make such a difference in the devastation of divorce? Are words that important?

It helps us to realize the importance of words when we remember that language was the force which shaped our evolution. Language was a favorable adaptation, driving the evolution and determining the shape and function of our brains, skulls, jaws, and throats.

Our bodies are a product of language. Our minds, our consciousness, what we mean when we say "me," the scientists teach us that all of these things derive from language.

Even if you prefer the biblical to the scientific explanation for our origins, the significance of language remains supreme. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." [John 1:1]

Words are precisely the tools we use to make meaning of life. You may think that actions matter more than words. But you think that thought with words.

To take the meaning from our words is to take the meaning from our beings. And who can doubt that the breaking of solemn promises takes meaning from our words?

This is true even with promises we try our best to keep. It is not possible to conceive of anything more damaging to meaning itself than to intentionally make our society's most solemn vow with our fingers crossed behind our backs.

Such abuse of our language comes at a high price. It costs us our identities.

Much of the pain of divorce is due to the feeling that we have lost our very selves. I have no cure for the smaller loss, the loss of the spouse. For the loss of our selves, I have a very simple cure.

Tell the truth. Promise exactly and only what we mean.

No one need fear that the wedding would seem less meaningful without the "till death do us part" pledge. The True Vow is a beautiful vow, made even more beautiful by the sublime majesty and power inherent in truth itself.

Can there be any doubt that the bride and groom who speak the truth at their wedding will be better positioned to attain the lofty goals expressed in their True Vow?

Starting today, when we get wedding invitations, we should inquire whether the betrothed are making the True Vow or the Old Vow. We ought to boycott weddings with the Old Vow, unless we have good reason for believing those two unusual people actually mean that old-fashioned promise.

For weddings using the True Vow, we should buy double or triple the dollar value in wedding gifts, to encourage people to make promises they really mean at the moments when it matters most.