

Love and Marriage

Dr. Alfred Adler

1. THE SOCIAL NATURE OF MARRIAGE

If I were asked to say what love and marriage mean, I should give the following definition, incomplete as it may be: “Love, with its fulfillment, marriage, is the most intimate devotion towards a partner of the other sex, expressed in physical attraction, comradeship, and the decision to have children. It can easily be shown that love and marriage are one side of cooperation in general, not a cooperation for the welfare of two persons only, but a cooperation also for the welfare of mankind.”

Our first finding in the problem of love is that it is a task for two individuals. For many people this is bound to be a new task. To some degree we have been trained to work alone; to some degree, to work in a group. But we have generally had little experience of working two by two. This new condition, therefore, raises a difficulty; but it is easier to solve if these two people have been interested in their fellows, for then they can learn more easily to be interested in each other. We may say that for a full solution of this cooperation of two, each partner must be more interested in the other than in himself. This is the only basis on which love and marriage can be successful.

If each partner is to be more interested in the other partner than in himself, there must be equality. If there is to be so intimate a devotion, neither partner can feel subdued nor overshadowed. Equality is only possible if both partners have this attitude. It should be the effort of each case and enrich the life of the other. In this way each will be safe; each will feel that he is

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worthwhile and that he is needed. The fundamental guarantee of marriage, the meaning of marital happiness, is the feeling that you are worthwhile, that you cannot be replaced, that your partner needs you, that you are acting well, and that you are a fellow man and a true friend.

Cooperation demands a decision for eternity; and we regard only those unions as real examples of love and as real marriages in which a fixed and unalterable decision has been taken. This includes the decision to have children, to educate them, to train them in cooperation, and to make out of them, as far as we can, fellow men, equal and responsible members of the human race. A good marriage is the best means we have for bringing up the future generation of mankind; and marriage should always have this in view. It is impossible to have the real intimate devotion of love if we limit our responsibility to five years, or regard marriage as a trial period. If we contemplate such an escape, we do not collect all our powers for the task. We cannot love and be limited.

2. SEX IN MARRIAGE

At the end of all my lectures I have to reply to questions about love and marriage, and my questioners often appear to have been misled by some psychological reading into believing that the sexual impulse is the central motive to which every other activity is related. I have never seen the reason for placing this unnatural emphasis upon single function of life. I admit, of course, its great, although very variable, importance. But to detect transposed sexual elements in a variety of manifestations is practically not very useful, even if possible.

Love is not a purely natural task, as some psychologists believe. Sex is a drive or instinct; but the question of love and marriage is not quite simply how we are to satisfy this drive.

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Wherever we look, we find that our drives and instincts become developed, cultivated, and refined.

Many men, and especially many women, through mistakes in their development, have trained themselves to dislike and reject their sexual role. They have hindered their natural functions and are physically not capable, without treatment, of accomplishing a successful marriage. This is what I have called the masculine protest which is very much provoked by the overvaluation of men in our present culture. Both men and women will overstress the importance of being manly, and will try to avoid being put to the test. We can suspect this attitude in all cases of frigidity in women and impotence in men.

The feelings belonging to sex always appear when an individual desires to approach his sexual goal. By concentration, he tends to exclude conflicting tasks and incompatible interests; and thus he evokes the appropriate feelings and functions. The lack of these feelings—as in impotence, premature ejaculation, perversion, and frigidity—is established by refusing to exclude inappropriate tasks and interests.

If the partners are really interested in each other, there will never be the difficulty of sexual attraction coming to an end. This implies always a lack of interest; it tells us that the individual no longer feels equal, friendly, and cooperative towards the partner, no longer wishes to enrich his life. People may think, sometimes, that the interest continues but the attraction has ceased. This is never true. Sometimes the mouth lies or the head does not understand; but the functions of the body always speak the truth. If the functions are deficient, it follows that there is no true agreement between these two people. They have lost interest in each other. One of them,

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at least, no longer wishes to solve the task of love and marriage but is looking for an evasion and escape.

We know that there is the possibility of a break in the relation, but this is easiest to avoid if we regard the marriage and love as a social task. We shall then try every means to solve the problem. It is important to realize that love by itself does not settle everything, and that it is better to rely upon work, interest, and cooperation to solve the problems of marriage. There is nothing at all miraculous in this whole relationship. The attitude of every individual towards marriage is one of the expressions of his style of life: we can understand it if we understand the whole individual, not otherwise.

I believe that the intimate devotion of love and marriage is best secured if there have not been sexual relations before marriage. I have found that secretly most men do not really like it if their partner is able to give herself before marriage. Sometimes they regard it as a sign of easy virtue and are shocked by it. Moreover, in the present state of our culture, if there are intimate relations before marriage the burden is heavier for the girl.

The question of birth control causes a good deal of agitation today. Humanity has no doubt become less rigorous in its demand for unlimited offspring, and many facts in our growing culture have helped to assign love, in addition to its original task of serving procreation, and almost independent of it, a new role, a higher level, an increase in happiness which certainly also contributes to the welfare of humanity. This developmental advance cannot be checked by laws and regulations once it has been gained. The question of deciding the number of children had best be left entirely to the woman. In the case of artificial interference with pregnancy both

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mother and child would probably be safeguarded if, in addition to medical considerations, a qualified psychological consultant were called in.

3. EARLY PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE

Certainly love in all its thousand variations is a feeling of belongingness and hence is characterized by its content as a social feeling. Therefore than man and that woman will be best prepared for love, marriage, and parenthood who surpass all others in being fellow men.

When children give early evidence of their interest in the other sex and choose for themselves the partners whom they like, we should never interpret it as a mistake, or a nuisance, or a precocious sex influence. Still less should we decide it or make a joke of it. Instead we should rather agree with the child that love is a marvelous task, a task for which he should be prepared, a task on behalf of the whole of mankind. Thus we can implant an ideal in the child's mind, and later in life such children will be able to meet each other as well-prepared comrades and as friends in an intimate devotion. It is revealing to observe that children are spontaneous and whole-hearted adherents of monogamy; and this often in spite of the fact that the marriages of their parents are not always harmonious and happy.

We are always better prepared if the marriage of our parents has been harmonious. Children gain their earliest impression of marriage from the life of their parents; and it is not astonishing that the greatest number of failures in life are among the children of broken marriages and unhappy family life. If the parents are not able themselves to cooperate, it will be impossible for them to teach cooperation to their children. We can often best consider the fitness of an individual for marriage by learning whether he was trained in the right kind of family life

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and by observing his attitude towards his parents, sisters and brothers. We must, however, be careful on this point because a man is not determined by his environment but by his estimate of it. Very unhappy experiences in his parents' home may only stimulate him to do better in his own family life. He may be striving to prepare himself well for marriage. We must never judge or exclude a human being because he has a unfortunate family life behind him.

The worst preparation is when an individual is always looking for his own interest. If he has been trained in this way, he will be thinking all the while what pleasure or excitement he can get out of life. He will always be demanding freedom and relief, never considering how he can ease and enrich the life of his partner.

A child who has been pampered at home often feels neglected in marriage. He may develop into a great tyrant in marriage. It is interesting to observe what happens when two pampered children marry each other. Each of them is claiming interest and attention and neither can be satisfied. The next step is to look for an escape; one partner begins a flirtation with someone else in the hope of gaining more attention.

One of the ways in which social interest can be trained is through friendship. Training in friendship is a preparation for marriage. Games might be useful if they were regarded as training in cooperation; but in children's games we find too often competition and the desire to excel. It is very useful to establish situations in which two children work together, study together, and learn together. Dancing is a type of activity in which two people have to accomplish a common task, and I think it is good for children to be trained in dancing. I do not exactly mean the dancing we have today, where we have more of a show than of a common task. If, however we had simple and easy dances for children, it would be a great help for their development.

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The right preparation for marriage includes also the right preparation for work.

In our own cultural conditions, and only in these conditions, it is generally expected that the man should be the first to express attraction and make the first approach. Therefore, it is necessary to train body in the masculine attitude, that is, to take the initiative, not to hesitate or look for an escape. Of course, girls and women are also engaged in wooing, they also take the initiative; but in our prevailing cultural conditions, they feel obliged to be more reserved. Their wooing is expressed in their whole gait and person, in the way they dress, the way they look, speak, and listen. A man's approach, therefore, may be called simpler and shallower; a woman's deeper and more complicated.

The child gains his impressions of what is congenial and attractive in the other sex from the members of the other sex in his immediate surroundings; these impressions are the beginnings of physical attractions. Sometimes he is influenced also by the creations of art. Thus everybody is drawn by an ideal of beauty and in later life has no longer a free choice in the broadest sense but only along the lines of his training. Sometimes if a boy experiences difficulties with his mother, and a girl with her father, as happens often if the cooperation in marriage is not firm, they look for an antithetic type.

4. MISTAKEN EXPECTATIONS

When people look upon love and marriage as a solution for a personal problem, this is really making these into a mere patent medicine. We cannot look on love and marriage as a remedy for a criminal career, drunkenness, or neurosis. A neurotic needs to have the right treatment before he enters love and marriage, or else he is bound to run into new dangers and misfortunes.

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In other ways, also, marriage is entered into with inappropriate aims. Some people marry for economic security; they marry because they pity someone, or they marry to secure a servant. I have even known cases where people have married to increase their difficulties. A young man, perhaps, is in difficulties about his examinations or his future career. He feels that he may very easily fail, and if he fails he wishes to be able to excuse himself. He takes on the additional task of marriage, therefore, in order to have an alibi.

It is also a great mistake if a marriage is contracted out of fear and not out of courage. We can understand by courage one side of cooperation, and if men and women choose their partners out of fear it is a sign that they do not wish for a real cooperation. This also holds good when they choose partners who are drunkards or very far below them in social status or in education. They are afraid of love and marriage and wish to establish a situation in which their partner will look up to them.

Some people are incapable of falling in love with one person; they must fall in love with two at the same time. They thus feel free; they can escape from one to the other, and never undertake the full responsibilities of love. Both mean neither. There are other people who invent a romantic, ideal, or unattainable love; they can thus luxuriate in their feelings without the necessity of approaching a partner in reality. A high ideal of love can also be used to exclude all possibilities, because no one will be found who can live up to it.

5. CRITERIA FOR MARITAL CHOICE⁷

Every individual has his characteristic approach in wooing. In this we can see whether he is confident and cooperative; or is interested only in his own person, suffers from stage fright, and tortures himself with the question, "What sort of a show am I making? What do they think?"

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