

Married love: Forgiveness comes first

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Dearly beloved: Recent surveys report that adults in their 20s have high hopes for themselves and marriage, but a low appraisal of marriage in general.

You have high hopes for yourselves. You have found in each other a soulmate, a person with whom to share the joys and sorrows of life and practice the art of love. But the institution of marriage is in crisis. Your peers have deep reservations about “happily ever after.” One in two marriages end up in divorce, while those partners who stay together often end up “sleeping with the enemy.” You are about to embark upon a most wonderful journey, yet dangers lurk.

For some people the crisis of marriage is a crisis of authority. They respond by bolstering the rule of the husband. The man should command, the woman should obey. If he is above and she below, order and stability will reign. But this is a questionable strategy. Unless the man is a saint—and no man is—the woman will either be oppressed or seek surreptitiously to subvert the husband’s rule and exercise dominion.

Others seek to avert a crisis by stressing equality—one partner, one vote. The wife should not submit to the husband, but each to the other. It is hard to dispute that, on the whole, equality is better than inequality, common agreement better than autocratic decisions, mutual submission better than the rule of the one over the other. But will the stress on equality steer your marriage out of crisis? It will help. Yet egalitarianism in and of itself will not make a marriage thrive. Each partner can be equal, each free, and still thinking only about himself or herself. Marriage partners are then like business partners. They make contracts with one another, and they will break them to pursue new partnerships if better returns seem likely.

A good marriage is not a contract, but a covenant. Contracts are conditional: we are obliged to keep the terms only if our partners are doing the same. Covenants, however, are unconditional. We are obliged even if the partners break the terms. Contracts are temporary: we are bound by them only as long as it suits us (provided we pay the consequences of breaking them). Covenants are durable: we are bound

by the marriage covenant “until death do us part.” Contracts are governed by the pursuit of one’s interests. Covenants are governed by the demands of love.

Love between partners is a sparkle in the eye, a warm feeling, a throbbing desire of the flesh and the soul. Erotic love is God’s wonderful gift, and I hope that you won’t let its flame die out. But love is more than eros. It has to do with how you treat each other when dishes need to be washed or garbage taken out, when misunderstandings arise and when one has transgressed against the other. Love is not the desire to be united with the other, but action on behalf of the other, and constancy in pursuit of his or her well-being. Such love “makes all things equal,” as the ancients knew. But such love entails more than just the practice of equality.

Here is one way to put it. Soon you will want to purchase a home. If you are lucky, you’ll get a good deal—you’ll pay less than the house is worth. If you are unlucky, you’ll get a raw deal, and discover that you paid more than you should have. If you are equitable, you’ll hope for a fair deal and your contract will oblige you to pay what the house is actually worth.

But with love it is different. To give less than you expect to receive is selfishness, no matter how warm your heart feels in the other’s presence. To give as much as you receive is to be fair. But to love is to give more than you hope to receive. Is love a raw deal? From the perspective of contractual relations it is. But love has its own rewards. Remember that Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. The return that I get when I practice self-giving love is not more to me, but more to *us*—more to the beauty of our common love.

This kind of love will be most difficult after you have injured each other. At this joyous hour, you may find the thought of injury negative, even morbid. Yet if the joy of this moment is to be a celebration of love and not just of some fuzzy feeling, you need to anticipate injuries and think about what will be needed to heal them.

In an old Jewish story about creation, God decided to create the world, then foresaw all the sin that human beings would commit against God and each other. The only way God could continue was to decide to forgive the world before creating it. Strange as it may seem, the commitment to forgive comes before creation. Similarly, commitment to forgive comes before marriage vows.

I know that you will not rely on the rule of the one over the other. I hope that you’ll do more than insist on equal rights. Commit yourself to the adventure of a love that

seeks to give more than it wants to receive. Then the miracle of a lasting and fulfilled marriage will be yours.