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Priesthood and Partnerships: Some Thoughts for LDS Marriages

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There are a few stories that seem so absolutely appropriate that they must inevitably be told. I have one of those that was dredged up as I spent a busy week between necessary involvements preparing to speak to the priesthood meeting Saturday night for just a few minutes on substantially the subject I have come here to talk to you about at a little greater length. This story I heard years ago. The president of a railroad was on a hunting expedition out in the boondocks and got lost. He almost froze, but fortunately found his way to a little weigh station of his own railroad. Inside he found a young man in a cubby hole sending out wires. The small waiting room was freezing. Not identifying himself and in his rough hunting clothing, he tried to persuade the young man to start a fire in the stove. The young man, not knowing, of course, that he was talking to the president of the railroad, declined. He said, “I am too busy sending wires to start fires.” The president then said, “Please send one wire to my office.” He wrote, “By return wire, fire the man who runs this weigh station,” and signed it with his name and title. The young man looked at it, burst quickly from the room, grabbed the coal bucket, and said, “Sorry, sir, I am too busy building fires to send wires.”

I have felt like that this week, trying to distill into a few moments so significant a subject as marriage and what relates to it, but it has been enjoyable.
I think I have probably heard substantially every problem you have had to listen to. In the last two years in the temple, I have had a graduate course in trouble. It is a remarkable place to be and it needs no exposition of its beauty and joyfulness, but it also is a collection point for problems, particularly if one is willing to listen, and I am as occasion permits. It is also a marvelous place for sanctuary from coarseness and crudity and the minimization of institutions we know about which is too much with us on every television set and all about us. Walking through the airports of Asia is an education in itself in avoiding moral pollution. We are all susceptible, and the effort has to be calculated, deliberate, persistent, and consistent. The temple is a real sanctuary.

For what I have to say today, I offer as a kind of support, a letter I received 12 years ago from a psychiatrist, a strong and noble fellow with whom I was exchanging, as it were, referrals. In those times, there were few who would listen and few who believed in what some of these experts have to offer, and I both was interested and believed in some of them whom I knew well. They would send people to me to be taught the fundamental principles of faith and repentance, and I would send people to them when I felt that people needed the kind of special help they could give—which, in a sense, was also faith and repentance, but from their expert and highly qualified point of view. I have great respect for people who are in your professions, not because you are in them, but because sincere and earnest people are desperately needed in them, and I assume you are both professionally competent and sincere. If you are not, you shouldn't be doing what you are doing. The doctor wrote, and I simply read what he wrote without pride or apology, what he felt was needed:

The need for wide dissemination throughout the Church of your observation on marriage is becoming more critical each day. You have indicated in the past you may write a book on the subject. Even a booklet would help. The inundation of professional offices by families in trouble is a tragedy because it is preventable if an adequate education program can be installed to identify marriage for what it is: one of the hardest jobs for any individual to undertake, requiring tolerance, patience, and planning as well as love instead of the romanticized concepts which are found even in many of our Church publications. It
is heartbreaking to see so many fine young people destroyed on false illusions of what marriage should be. A book or booklet would be real helpful. I hope it will be available soon.

Your perceptions of my sense of inadequacy will be supported by the fact that the book was never written nor was the booklet. In a sense, I am sorry for that. Many good books and booklets have been written, and the library in my house has a suitable store. The fundamentals of which I will speak may be, in some sense, found much as they are treated elsewhere, but I would hope I may speak them with some special sense of what people in the Church can and should learn, and also of the resources available to us. I keep thinking of what Conrad Hilton said when someone asked him his biggest problem in the hotel business: "Getting people to put the curtain inside the tub." That may almost capture the homely nature of what I wish to say to you.

Let me also share a few lines from Ogden Nash at his height. He defines marriage:

Just as I know there are two Hagens, Walter and Copen [for you younger people, Walter Hagens was a great golfer], I know that marriage is a legal and religious alliance entered into by a man who cannot sleep with the window shut and a woman who can't sleep with the window open. Also, he can't sleep till he has read the last hundred pages to find out whether his suspicions of a murdered eccentric's recluse secretary were right. And she can't sleep until he puts out the light which, when he finally does, she's still awake. . . . That is why marriage is so much more interesting than divorce because it is the only known example of the happy meeting of the immovable object and the irresistible force. I hope husbands and wives will continue to debate and combat over every thing debatable and compatible because I believe a little incompatibility is the spice of life, particularly if he has income and she is patible. (I Do, I Will, I Have: Selected Poems of Ogden Nash. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1975, p. 248.)

Let me also note from a recent issue of U.S. News and World Report: "Despite the risks, Americans remain the marrying kind. Eventually more than 90 percent of the population will marry. Even those who have endured the trauma of divorce usually make at least one more attempt to achieve wedded bliss," says sociologist Jerry Talley of Stanford. "Although people may be disappointed in
a marriage partner, they are not generally disappointed in marriage.” There are other and many interesting things. J.P. Marquand is quoted as saying, “Marriage is damnably serious business, particularly around Boston.”

Well, it is serious business, and it is the basis for much that is meaningful in our religion as in our lives. I start by noting what a good man, Sir Arthur Bryant, said, extracted from a London newspaper: “Though life in this transitory world can never, for anyone, as in fairy stories, be free of threat and trouble, the companionship of two partners, tried in the fires of life and brought together by true and lasting love can be and is the best thing by far that life offers a man and a woman.” My wife, Maxine, and I were once at the home of Robert Burns in Scotland. Under glass on his desk was a little single-sentence note he wrote to a friend in 1789: “That you may have a safe journey and a happy meeting with that dearest of all connections, your fireside circle, is the sincerest wish of your obliged humble servant, Robert Burns.” I have had that in mind ever since, “That dearest of all connections, your fireside circle.” In a beautiful sealing room in the temple one day, I talked with a little boy dressed in white ready to join his parents and brothers in the sacred ordinance. I said to him, “Why is your family here in the temple?” He said, “To be sealed.” I said, “What does it mean to be sealed?” He said, “To be a forever family.” Oh, I said, “You’re going to be a family forever? You must have a good family, a happy family, if you want to be with them forever. Do you have a happy family?” (His parents and brothers and sisters and others were there.) “Yes, sir.” This fine lad had already begun to understand two of the most important principles anyone could ever know: (1) That our Heavenly Father has provided for marriage and family ties which may be established permanently, to endure forever, and (2) That a marriage that we can joyfully look forward to forever must be a good marriage here. Such a marriage is the heart of a happy home and family.

There is another truth of which I also would wish to testify: that the principles of the gospel, particularly those of the temple, are the best possible basis on which to build a strong marriage and that such a marriage never just happens. The sealing ceremony in
the temple is to us beautiful and indispensable, but it does not automatically assure a successful marriage. Such a marriage is brought about, not by circumstance or chance, but by two mature, loving adults who are able and willing to learn the principles upon which a genuine and durable marriage may be fashioned and who, day-by-day, year-by-year, earnestly make the effort, building on the solid foundation of the covenants of the temple.

I note these five basics: (1) temple marriage as the basis for (2) a happy eternal union, (3) built on the solid foundation of gospel covenants (4) by two mature adults who are learning and growing together, and (5) with the priesthood as the authority through which these covenants are administered and as a commission for leadership in the home in the spirit and after the pattern of the principles which were central in the life of the Savior. The “Holy priesthood after the order of the Son of God,” I am saying, is not a commission to superiority or dictatorship or domination. It is a commission in one instance to seal by God’s authority and it is—and for all of us ought to be understood to be—a commission for leadership in the home in the spirit and after the pattern of the principles and life of Jesus Christ—“The Holy priesthood after the order of the Son of God.”

As to temple marriage, I believe deeply that honorable marriage with honorable people involved, wherever and however performed, is acceptable to God. I believe God honors honorable marriage and blesses it with His love and spirit. But He Himself has established and made available to some, and given them the responsibility to teach others, a more excellent way, a more excellent hope. There is a best way to start such a significant and demanding enterprise as marriage. He would like us all to know about that and choose it. That is the reason for missionary work. That is the reason for the expansion of temples. Of eternal marriage, the scriptures teach us that marriage is ordained of God for His children, and we who truly love a husband or wife and live in some kind of a respectable, respectful, growing, developing relationship could not contemplate an eternity without marriage and family. Much of everything lovely and eternally significant relates to those who are closest and dearest to us, and we could not really think of heaven absent their
association and their love. This week, I chanced upon some
Whitman lines that I will share: “Oh, to make the most jubilant
song. It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time. I will
have thousands of globes and all time.”

The Lord declared that whatsoever He does shall be forever. His
way of everlasting marriage is filled with hope and promise and is
designed to lead to happiness here and to an eternal stewardship
like that of God himself. In the beginning after the earth was
prepared, God brought man and woman together in the garden,
and the first wedding occurred. They were not yet mortal. Death
had not entered into the world, and no time limitations were
placed upon their marriage. God declared, “Therefore shall a man
leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and
they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). When Christ lived among
men, he quoted this commandment and added, “What therefore
God hath joined together, let not men put asunder.” (Matthew 9:6)
He gave his disciples power to bind in heaven that which is bound
on earth. It was later declared by Paul that “neither is the man
without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the
Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:11) In the time of the restoration of the
gospel came a renewed understanding of temples and temple
worship. The power to bind and seal in heaven has again been
entrusted to chosen servants of God. Eternal marriage, temple
marriage, marriage of the highest promise, is again performed for
time and all eternity by authorized officiators in the holy temples
of the Lord. Thus, the more excellent way is given its base, and
that which can weld, blend, and build and bless with an eternal
marriage is indispensable to our eternal happiness. Parley Pratt said
that Joseph Smith had influenced him in a way he could not have
imagined.

It was from him that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be
secured to me for time and all eternity; and that the refined sympathies
and affections which endeared us to each other emanated from the
foundation of divine, eternal love. It was from the Prophet that I learned
that we might cultivate these affections, and grow and increase in the
same through all eternity.  (Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, Salt Lake
But an eternal marriage will have to be a happy marriage, creative, progressive, gracious. Sometimes the distinctive elements of temple marriage are thought of as resting exclusively in duration and authority. Of course, everyone who comes to the temple to be married understands that it is by God’s authority for time and eternity. But the remarkable revealed ceremony at the altar in the temple contemplates much more than this. Wonderful promises are sealed upon a man and a woman in a temple marriage, blessings related to the solemn commitments the two make to each other, and the promises that they make individually and as a couple to the Lord. The commitment of each with the other is total and permanent, the whole person “as is” for the whole journey.

Now, of course, neither will remain as he or she is. That is not meant to be. They will grow and develop in a multitude of ways—or can; but the pledge they make to each other is without condition or reservation. On this solid foundation, the newly formed family undertakes to build a strong and loving union that will grow more wholesome and more glorious forever.

How will they do this? The personality and the individuality and uniqueness of each partner to marriage must be understood, accepted, protected, and preserved if there is to be happiness; but this liberty must be enjoyed in the spirit of a deep commitment to the building of the union, not chiefly in the spirit of self-concern, self-satisfaction, self-determined expectations. You are probably acquainted with the Daniel Webster saying that to me has more to do with marriage than with politics, though it has a lot to do with both. Said he, “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever.” Emerson with all of his mighty intellect didn’t quite understand that or at least unbalanced it with all the emphasis on the individual’s needs and expectations and rights of fulfillment. Lincoln understood it better. Lincoln understood that unless there is a strong union there cannot be any independence and liberty. Now, he too, of course, was talking politically, but his great mind and great heart would have understood that, like the states of the union over which he presided, unique, separate, special, individual human beings brought together in this most total, intimate, and close relationship are not obligated to surrender. They make an alli-
ance. They do give up some freedoms in order to establish and perpetuate a union, and that union becomes the base upon which their individuality may truly be accepted, appreciated, and expressed in the sense God intended it to be because each of us has been around a lot longer than the total of our birthdays. We are eternal persons and this personality is eternal. “Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever.”

Ibsen’s, The Doll House—surely in your memories—has a scene when Nora, self-sacrificially, has done something to sustain Torbin, but he, bland and inconsiderate, doesn’t really appreciate that. Indeed at the height of that dramatic moment he says to her, “I want you to understand that before all, you are a wife and mother.” Her answer is, “I believe that before anything else, I am a human being.” Now, nothing I know of in eternal marriage—and certainly not in the temple where those covenants are made—in any sense mitigates or vitiates that critical truth. You who know what you should know about marriage—and perhaps have been married long enough to get philosophical and a little whimsical—will be aware that, indeed and in fact, you have not plumbed the depths of this other individual. You’ll have that interesting day when your heart and your tear ducts and your center of exultancy and the smile muscles and all the rest will just kind of mingle in a high, holy moment when you will look at her or him and marvel. You will have learned how much deeper and better and decent and full of faith she is than you are or will ever be. And there will come the marvelous recognition that you, knowing all you know, have not penetrated the depths of this person.

A human being is sacred, for one reason, because he or she is always more than a human being, an eternal child of God.

Two human beings, as they are married in the House of the Lord, have a new life open to them with many relationships and unities which can and are meant to develop into a union.

Among the new relationships—in the sense they never have existed before—is a partnership which the two entering bring assets to and in which they recognize a need to grow with the problems, challenges, and conflicts; but the two become partners in the warm,
sweet, wonderful, sharing, learning, growing sense of marriage. Partners. Real partners. Equal partners. Sharing, valued, respected, admired partners. They become companions in a special sense, whether they are in the same room or a world apart. They are married 24 hours a day. They care about the whole person and the whole future of each other with good humor, good dispositions, and a genuine consideration of the other’s needs and desires. They set out to make it a happy life. They laugh a lot and cry a little. They are warm, considerate, and thoughtful. The note, the telephone call, the kind word, the sensitive response, the tremendous excitement of heading home to her when the work is done or the trip is over—back home to her and them and your place. And the wonderful excitement in them when you are coming home.

You get a group of grown children with their own children together and listen to what they remember and watch how they behave when their partner is arriving. Matthew Cowley wrote a beautiful little piece on the “eternal triangle: the triangle is man, woman, and God. My companion wife is one with whom I break bread, that being the very meaning of the word. The root of the word companion is bread,” and the implication obviously is that the experience will be warm, rewarding, exciting, pleasing, and thoughtful in its preparation and sharing.

Through a few words of covenant the basis is laid, but the job is not accomplished, for the two to become sweethearts. Married people are sweethearts in a special creative union, blessed with a powerful chemistry that draws them together, sometimes from next door, sometimes from a world away. The sexual union is one of the many unions or unities in marriage which is critical and significant, a divinely bestowed blessing. It is not the only flower in the garden. It must be sustained by other fundamental qualities—by respect, integrity, and loyalty to be what it is meant to be. To be able to give oneself with a complete confidence and trust and to receive the other joyfully and gratefully is a blessing that grows in meaning forever.

One of the saddest, heartbreaking moments of many hours of counseling—mostly listening, trying to help a little—came when a beautiful woman, the wife of one of my closest and best-loved
friends, sat across the desk from me—well-groomed, well-dressed—and asked me to speak to her as if she were a bride. She was desperate. The marriage had no meaning. They were not really partners although they had made a lot of money, and she could spend it, but there was no sense of sharing, nothing left of their beautiful months in one-room with a let-down bed. “We are not companions really,” she said. “He has his shotgun, his golf clubs, his friends, his handball gloves. We are not really sweethearts anymore, either. We have nothing left to express.” I swallowed a tear, and I feel like crying now. Married all those years, beautiful children, everything anyone could want, and they had ceased sharing, ceased being companions, ceased being sweethearts.

I never apologize for a personal example, although this one comes with some unease because it requires a great deal of trust in your good sense. Christmas Day—sometime since when all our children were still at home (we had four teenage daughters, the oldest about to move into her own life, and a little brother), I gave their mother a beautiful white nightgown and said to them, “Now, I don’t know that you are able to understand this, but you will remember it, and one day you will understand it. Your mother and I have been married many years and have been blessed with you five and some whom we have lost along the way. A marriage of this most intimate and total and close relationship has brought us our own prize. Having been through all of this together and knowing each other as we do, she is more pure and more beautiful to me today than she was the day I met her or the day I married her.” I repeated, “I don’t think you will understand that, but I wanted you to hear it and remember it. She is more beautiful and more pure to me than the day we met or the day we married.”

The sweetheart relationship is appropriately sustained by character, quality, consideration, the capacity to repent, and the capacity to forgive. The complete trust that a few have the capacity to have—and others don’t deserve—that beautiful sweet thing—minimized, maligned, and tragically imposed upon through centuries—is a plant established by God’s good grace which ought to flower and grow with all that sustains and blesses it.
The two become friends in the special way that married people should be best friends. The little kindnesses and constancies that are expressed will endure—the cherishing, the kindness, the thoughtfulness, and support. Married people should be best friends, because, in truth, no relationship on earth needs friendship as much as marriage.

As I walked up the aisle in the auditorium at a university recently, I stopped and said to a young man sitting on the edge of the row, “Who is that beautiful girl sitting by you?” “My best friend,” he said, right off the top of his head. “Oh, and is she also your wife?” “Yes.” I spoke to her, “Is that true? Are you his best friend?” “Yes.” “And is he your best friend?” “Yes.” I said, “Do you know how lucky you two are to be married to your sweetheart who is also your best friend?” They said, “We know.”

Friendship blows away the chaff, rejoices in the uniqueness of the other, listens patiently, gives generously, forgives freely, and is loyal. Friendship may indeed motivate one to cross the room to say, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it,” or “I didn’t understand. I love you.” Friendship will be more important than winning an argument or proving something. Friendship will endure our immaturity and our callousness. We are all adult and child, so much of our response is childish in a nonconstructive sense. Friendship will not pretend at perfection nor demand it. It will not insist that both respond exactly the same way in every situation in thought and feeling; but it will be understanding and supportive, repentant, and forgiving, respectful, trusting, and trustworthy. Friendship will say, “I am your husband, I love you. We are married. I am often responsible for behavior that isn’t quite consistent with the level of my understanding, but I love you and I am proud of you. I’ll speak well of you, and I will not betray your trust. I will delight in your uniqueness. I am your best friend.”

A good marriage doesn’t just happen. Temple marriage is not isolated. It serves both as a culmination of other ordinances and as the foundation for family and eternal future. Some of you may not know that no one can enter into a temple marriage until he or she has been to the temple previously to receive their own blessings, to personally make sacred covenants with the Lord. These covenants
center in principles that are basic in a truly Christian life and in the formulation of good marriage and family. The covenants we make in the temple, like the other sacred covenants of the gospel, commit us to the Lord Jesus Christ and His loving example. In the temple—think now of your experience—we make commitments to follow Christ in doing God’s will and keeping his commandments, in valuing others and unselfishly serving them, in loving God and our fellowman. We pledge complete fidelity to moral principle, self-control, devotion to the cause of righteousness and truth; and all of this happens through the priesthood, the holy priesthood after the order of the Son of God.

A thoughtful understanding of this single reality should automatically eliminate any false perceptions of superiority or inferiority. Men and women are of equal value before God and must be equally valuable in the eyes of each other. A true devotion in following the example of the Son of God will never permit notions of domination or dictatorship or possession or control. It will never justify unrighteousness, abuse, or foul talk, or discourtesy. Christ’s way is the way of persuasion, long-suffering, meekness, kindness, love unfeigned, pure knowledge, unselfishness, gentleness, mercy.

It is simple to see, isn’t it, that the kind of marriage we are talking about doesn’t just happen. Nobody can pronounce happiness. No one can pronounce the quality that forgives and thus expresses real love. These are elements in lives that have to be brought to the union by those involved, grown in and developed in—through the course. The foundation can be laid in the House of the Lord. The marriage can be pronounced by the authority of God, but it must be fashioned by two who are wholesome, prepared emotionally and practically, and who are honest. It requires being ready to go to a temple, being mature enough to make and keep promises and to receive holy promises and qualify for their fulfillment.

Wherever one is with respect to marriage—years from it, deep in it, close to it—the same basic principles should be understood. Keep the commandments. Be honest. In this most close and intimate relationship one is committed in the most serious and
sacred decisions of life. Temple marriage is much more than the experience of the temple, the sacred ceremony, the authority by which it is performed, and the wonderful promises sealed upon us. It involves our attitudes towards God and each other, toward marriage, toward children, toward family. It involves our preparations, our worthiness, our ability to learn and grow and graciously endure.

The inspiration for all of us is the assurance, deeply impressed upon the hearts of decent people who live as they should, that heaven will be heaven for us because this one we love the best will be there. A few days ago, we sat in a room with our five children and their eternal partners and their 16 children. Twenty-eight of us were joined in a circle of affection and appreciation. That circle established at an altar in the holy house of the Lord only a few short years ago has expanded miraculously. I sat marvelling. Now, I don’t know what you may know, but I know enough to be aware that when a magnificent phrase like “eternal lives” is repeated, it refers to that kind of life which exaltation expresses—that is, a creative life, a Godlike life on a God-like level with the Almighty. I looked at 27 other people, realized that we haven’t had a child for 24 years and will not again in this world. Yet, 28 of us were in the room with children yet to come. If God is willing, we may even live long enough to see the next generation. This stewardship of ours is expanding eternally, like the stars of the heavens and sands on the seashore. We little specks, 28 of us, are important individuals, producing life.

One who never knew his father begins to get excited about that. One who loves a mother appreciates that. I get interested in a 13-year-old boy who joined the Church—a drover, a roughneck, with crude language and all the rest who became a grandfather to me; an 18-year-old girl who stood on a street corner knowing what the elders were saying was true and also knowing her father would never permit her name to be said again in his house when she joined the church.

What an exciting remarkable vision to perceive continuity into the past and into the future: that all of us will find a place, ultimately, a loving place under the holy influence of Him whose
spirit children we are and whose holy life and sacrifice brought us the blessings of these excellent hopes.

Now, I must finish by sharing three other things very briefly. I have to say to you that of course the plan of God will be fair altogether, as He is fair. Those who earnestly desire the eternal blessings of marriage and family, but through no fault of their own are deprived of this blessing here, will ultimately have an opportunity to enjoy it. The Holy One of Israel standeth at the gate and “employeth no servant there.” The judgments and decisions of eternity will be stamped with his approval, his justice, and blessed with his influence. It is my absolute conviction that no one will be forced into an eternal relationship that is not wholesome and desirable, nor deprived of a joyful, eternal relationship which they desire and have done their part to qualify for. The plan provides for vicarious blessings to those who have no opportunities to enjoy them in this world. So also will it provide for those who are deprived of the blessing they deserve and desire.

The last thing is to just say that the glorious promises of God are summarized in a magnificent verse of scripture: “Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God, . . . the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion” (Doctrine and Covenants 121: 45–46).

What is the doctrine of the priesthood? Is it the doctrine of command, of domination? This morning we went through the temple with all the General Authorities and their wives. I listened with you in mind, especially, saw the drama, but was a little uneasy. Will someone perceive from this something more than a magnificent and needed instruction on the inevitability and beauty of free agency? Is it a lesson of hierarchial value? Who will observe the kneeling at the altar of two who take each other by the hand and look to the Lord Jesus Christ and who will make covenants—every one of which looks to Him as the holy exemplar—and think it gives some kind of domination? No one with any sense in my judgment.
I get the privilege of looking young men in the eye, and I do it regularly, and charging them to understand that simple thing: that the priesthood is a called commission to serve in the spirit and after the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ applied to your home in all the challenges you have. The doctrine of the priesthood is a doctrine of agency, of learning, teaching, blessing, receiving, storing, acting in the ordinances, becoming a Savior to our people.

I testify to you that God is fair, good, and just, and that we don't fool him any. We are dealing with realities—the people who walk through the temple with their broken hearts or with whom I sit every day if there is time. Their problem is not understanding law. Their problem is that they do not know who they are, or they have met and been involved with someone who doesn't know who he is or she is. The fundamentals of the gospel are real and true and applicable and appropriate for all of God's children.

My prayer is an earnest one for you. Either personally or counseling, repentance and forgiveness all important—so important that your life depends upon it, as mine does. And so I urge you if you have real reservations, consider the simple sweet truths in an excellent way that doesn't remove responsibility from the individuals involved, but indeed gives them a base upon which to build, formulate, and fashion. This can be done by two mature adults who really want to and who can learn—not being blessed with perfection. There are no perfect marriages, but there are some very good ones, and they are always the product of fundamental principles.