

PERMANENCE AND COMMITMENT

By SIDNEY CALLAHAN

HOW CAN LIFE-LONG PERMANENT COMMITMENT in marriage make sense today? Traditionally Catholics have looked upon marriage as a consecrated, life-long commitment to a spouse; the sacrament created by the mutual vows of marriage is recognized as creating a permanent bond within and through the Church. While the goodness of marital love, including sexuality, is now more and more understood and accepted by Christians, permanence in marital commitments is questioned. Every observer of the current scene, in and out of the Church, notes the increasing rates of divorce, remarriage and lack of continuity in family life. The change can be aptly put: we have now moved from 'a culture of marriage' to 'a culture of divorce'. Why has this happened?

Many pragmatic explanations can be offered for the breakdown of marital commitment – all of them partially valid. Yes, we do have an expanded life expectancy so that 'till death do us part' entails two or three times the span that existed in an earlier era. Divorce at forty means that more than half a life can be spent in a new marriage, and for men it offers the chance to start a new family. At the same time unsettling influences in life are on the increase: in the mobility of modern life, the breakdown of stable communities of kin which monitor and support marriage, the tenuousness of jobs that provide economic support for families and the relentless increase in the general pace and stress of life.

Time-starved adults in two-job families barely have energy enough to tend to their children's needs, much less to nourish their marital commitments. Women who work outside the home become particularly overburdened trying to do two jobs, the second shift problem, with too little support from their husbands. Yet just because women have more economic independence they are less bound by financial constraints to stay in a marriage. This development means that from the male point of view, men no longer see themselves as the sole provider for their families. Either men or women can fulfil the good provider role assigned to previous generations of men.

While all the above conditions of modern life and employment put pressure upon marriages, other, more subtle forces operate to erode permanent marital bonds. Christians too have a harder time remaining true to their belief that marriage as a permanent commitment is rooted in a mutual commitment to a consecrated way of life. Here I would like to mention two interrelated movements in the *Zeitgeist* which have changed the air we breathe and threaten the stability of marriage. The first, no surprise, is the growth of therapeutic individualism; it fuels the sexual revolution and produces new cultural expectations of behaviour and consumption. Expressive individualism maintains that a primary goal of living should be the self-actualization and self-fulfilment of each person. How often have we heard the familiar slogans: 'Go for it', 'Be all that you can be', and perhaps most telling, 'I owe it to myself'.

At the same time the older ideal of permanent commitment and consecrated promise-keeping has lost its credibility and positive appeal. A commitment to permanent commitments no longer appears possible, or able to exert its old magnetism. Let me take up these entwined problems one by one. I shall give a brief analysis of what I think is problematic in the culture and then offer some countervailing strategies for Christians to pursue.

The problem of therapeutic self-actualization

Many critics have bemoaned the excessive individualism and emphasis upon self-fulfilment in modern societies. Many accusations have been made that in modern societies the 'triumph of the therapeutic' has baptized rampant selfishness and changed standard operating social norms for the worse. All of these complaints are too familiar to need further detailed description. Suffice it to say that a destructive ideology of selfish individualism is seen to have become widespread, often marching under the banner of autonomy, individual liberty or the inviolability of human rights. Unfortunately, the declared right 'to the pursuit of happiness' has become subtly transformed into a demand for a guarantee or entitlement to happiness. Personal self-fulfilment becomes the new consecrated goal. The dignity, health and well-being of the autonomous individual person is exalted over the welfare of others. Naturally, the ideals of committed permanent bonds, obligations to family and community responsibilities will be swamped.

Such critiques of modern culture are easy to prove with abundant materials and statistics culled from the media, political debates or the halls of academe. Clearly, therapeutic individualism has gone too far and resulted in a culture teetering on the brink of selfish narcissism.

Some will blame the current decay on the adoption of individualistic psychological ideologies inherent in the growing reliance upon the practice of modern psychotherapy.¹ As tides of self-focused therapeutic talk inundate popular discourse, the consciousness of the imperial self's needs and demands grow apace. 'Are you comfortable with this arrangement?' becomes an all-purpose query. The psychological person converts questions of morality into questions of subjective response or qualitative assessments of interpersonal processes.

Other cultural critics will locate the genesis of our modern malady of selfish individualism in the continuing progress of the Enlightenment project, described as a centuries-old campaign to secularize society. Assertive secular humanism encourages individuals to throw off religious constraints and the traditional authority exerted by communities to enforce conformity to obligations. In the most extreme form of subjective individualism, the individual's private subjective perception or interpretation of reality is granted unquestioned validity, solely on the authority of individual experience. The weight of communal or historical experience, external objective constancies, rational logic, the rule of law or moral norms of duty and responsibility begin to fade from a self-focused, self-enclosed world of private self-consciousness. Certainly the ideal of sacrificing or suffering for a larger self-transcendent cause begins to seem incomprehensible.

Ergo, when an individual's fulfilment or self-actualization becomes endangered by commitments to other people, causes or institutions, the individual's needs, hardly distinguished from desires, will trump other considerations. In this extreme form of individualism, a unilateral decision to end any commitment can take place at any moment. No evidence or mutual agreement about the breakdown of a marriage need be required for a divorce, and one person's unilateral choice can suffice to justify ending any relationship.

Individual autonomy and liberty become the premier private and public values which govern all commitments. Only consent and contract create obligations and when an individual's consent or choice changes then the relationship is at an end. In the most extreme cases even a person's commitments to his or her own dependent children will be seen as conditional and subservient to the self's fulfilment. And, alas, in a world built on contract and utilitarian calculations of customer satisfaction each individual must constantly examine and monitor each and every relationship. Is this personal involvement serving my self-actualization needs satisfactorily, enough to continue the relationship? Since consciousness fluctuates with changing circumstances and preferences are socially created by opportunities, few

marriages can pass the test of always producing self-fulfilment. When unilateral divorce exists as an ever present ubiquitous option it subtly changes the quality of daily marital interactions.

Countervailing strategies

While the bleak picture drawn above may be too harsh and slightly exaggerated, it applies to enough modern subcultures to be taken seriously. But is therapeutic individualism only the result of modern psychological thought and ongoing secularization? In another perspective our present focus upon the individual self can be acknowledged as an exaggerated acceptance of one legitimate strand of the gospel good news, albeit cut off from the whole Christian message. After all, Christianity affirms that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God. Human beings are told to exercise dominion over the earth and to be transformed. As the orthodox affirmation goes, 'God became man, so that man can become God'.

Christians too have affirmed that human joy and happiness, healing and relief of suffering are God's will for liberated humankind. Human beings are created to possess life in abundance. And each unique individual life is sacred, 'with every hair on your head numbered'. Respect for the dignity and value of each human life has been part of the Christian message. Indeed, it could be maintained that Christianity has taught the world to believe in individual self-actualization and inculcated the aspiration and expectations for immoderate happiness and fulfilment. Therapeutic individualism and an emphasis upon infinite self-fulfilment can trace its roots to the gospel of Christianity.

Of course crucial Christian ingredients have been left out of the modern rush toward self-fulfilment. When Christian humanism lapsed into secular humanism, the role of God in Christ was jettisoned. In the Christian glorification of the individual there is a corresponding emphasis upon a self-surrender to a transcendent God, a humble gratefulness for Christ's loving gift of redemption and an acceptance of the equal value of all of God's human family. For Christians the abundant life of individual self-actualization can only be achieved by giving other selves the same dignity, justice, respect and love that one accords one's self. One's neighbour, the poor, the human community and corporate body of the Church is the necessary matrix of a self's salvation. Individual selves are united to one another and are subject to powerful claims of obligation and duty.

Happiness and joy accompany the Christian life, but love of God and neighbour may entail suffering, sacrifice and limiting one's own will.

In other words, a narcissistic therapeutic culture of the self accepts the Christian story of healing, happiness and triumphant humanism, but excises the cross and the community from the gospel message. When the transcendent order of divine reality is denied, the binding moral force undergirding promises, vows and claims for the reality of consecrated, permanent commitments becomes enfeebled. In the worst-case scenario a subjective ethical relativism silences any call to morality. Why be moral, much less suffer for the sake of permanent commitments, if morality is only convention or an instrumental tool of the power structure to maintain the *status quo*?

How can Christians counter such destructive beliefs and ideas? One way of course is to keep proclaiming the full story of self-actualization and persevere in efforts at evangelization. Forming and living in loving faithful Christian communities which 'turn the world inside out' is the most effective method of converting the world. 'Come and see.' The full gospel message when lived in community will nourish and correct shallow, truncated versions of therapeutic individualism. For Christians to stay married, love and forgive one another and remain committed to a loving family life becomes a countercultural act of witness to the power of consecrated vows. To prepare other Christians to marry well and stay married is a vital ministry.

But one can also make persuasive arguments in public discourse to show that individualism and self-fulfilment is implicitly based upon ultimate moral values and in actuality must depend upon deeper foundations of human community.² Reasoned analyses can reveal that individual autonomy and authenticity must be grounded in their own set of moral values transcending individual choices and preferences. Meaningful choices, to be meaningful, can not all be equally acceptable; it can also become quite clear that individuals need others and viable communities in order for selves to flourish and be fulfilled. In other words, one can start with positive secular values of individual self-fulfilment and work from this base onward to the need for commitments that transcend the self.

Here the process can be helped by those new developments in psychology which increasingly emphasize primary sociality. Individual selves are formed in the first place through intimate, affective relationships and must be sustained by community.³ From the object relations school of psychoanalysis to cognitive behaviourist approaches, to correlations of social support and health outcomes, the message is clear: 'No man is an island'. Human beings cannot be happy, healthy, or enjoy abundant full lives without secure, committed relationships of

love, affection and communication. The interpersonal social dimension of the self's ecology has been resoundingly confirmed by the pure, as well as the human, sciences.

Today many more psychotherapists have heard the message as well. They now no longer concentrate only on the individual's self-fulfilment but upon the welfare and claims of the marriage and the family. Saving the marriage and the family becomes a primary goal if one wants to help the individual and society. A dynamic systemic approach transported into psychotherapy from ecology and systems analysis has resulted in the growth of family and marital therapy. The impossibility of value-free therapy has been recognized. If therapists think they are value free in their practice it means that they are simply operating in the culture's invisible default option – and all too often that is an expressive individualism that ignores moral obligations to the bonds of community. A higher level of ethical and intellectual sophistication may slowly be making its way back into the minds of the psychological and professional élites. Instrumental rationality must bow to morality, symbolic truths and the importance of communal bonds.

In sum, the first steps in restoring a culture of commitment to others must be to recognize that other selves are always interconnected and entwined with the individual self. The next move is to recognize that other selves possess an inherent equal worth and valid claim to reciprocal respect and dignity. Once the imperial autonomous self is dethroned and reconnected with others the possibility arises of restoring the appeal of permanent commitments which have been denigrated.

Permanent commitments diminished

Permanent commitments have lost their appeal and binding force because of prevailing ideas about human nature. In a view I call the helplessness school, it is assumed that persons lack any capacity to make real promises or to keep commitments. Christians, by contrast, can keep an ideal of permanent consecration when they have faith in God's saving power operating in their daily lives. In secular, pessimistic visions humans lack freedom or power to control themselves or their circumstances; they cannot effectively act as true moral agents. Illusions of free will are comforting but false. The ever-changing unpredictable immediate or historical environment, or internal unconscious conflicts, or genetics – or all of these acting together – mean that human beings have no real self-determination. Reductionist views of the person promulgated by various intellectual ideologies proclaim as fact that human beings are merely effects of external conditions, and not causal creators or moulders of their lives.

In determinist systems of thought commitments are robbed of binding force because they can, at best, serve some temporary functional purpose; no human being can be expected to exercise enough power to shape his or her own future in order to fulfil a promise, much less a permanent vow or commitment. Promising for life is impossible if you deny the individual the capacity of will to keep on initiating and effecting outcomes until death. As Hannah Arendt put it so beautifully, 'A promise is a sacrament of the will'.⁴ No will, no promise.

When individuals commit themselves they give over a claim to another and undertake to bind their future actions to the service of their intention and future goal. Options, opportunities, other attractions, whether seen as good alternatives or temptations to regress, will be refused in order steadfastly to follow one's committed course. Unfortunately in certain cases it must be recognized that brute facts and natural disasters can make certain personal commitments impossible to keep.⁵ Unforeseen seismic social changes may even transform or dissolve the situation which gave meaning to a specific promise. So too, other commitments may arise, such as to do no harm, which must morally override or take precedence over a specific promise or commitment. Non-fulfilment of a promise or commitment can sometimes be morally justified.

But the occurrence of exceptional conflicts and circumstances beyond one's control does not mean that permanent commitments cannot be made, a course set, goals chosen, alternatives refused and a life shaped so that promises can, and will, be kept until death. Even if other parties break their part in a mutual commitment, an individual can keep to their own undertaking in conformity with their own moral standards of worth. Yes, it is possible to promise, commit, consecrate one's self or vow fidelity for evermore, but a sense of helplessness before changing circumstances is not the only deterrent to making permanent commitments.

Although it is possible, it can be judged undesirable or not admirable to make permanent commitments. A particular popular idea of the ideal self proclaims that one must continue to change dynamically and recreate one's self perpetually. To make a permanent commitment would curtail creativity and stunt development. The ideal self is a 'protean self', or a self unconstrained by past identities or commitments.⁶ In this view no past promise or commitment actually should bind the present person who is existentially born anew in each moment and is thereby free to choose the future anew. If you bring up a past promise I once made I will only reply that I am now a different person

and no longer that self I was. Truly to flourish, the self must remain unbound, free to seek and progress from incarnation to incarnation, from new truth to new truth, immersing itself in a variety of experiences, temporary allegiances and provisional communities.

In such an extreme ideal of perpetual creativity and growth, conventional limits and constraints from others must be overthrown in the cause of personal freedom, authenticity and self-actualization. As the notorious Gestalt therapy prayer puts it,

I do my thing, and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I,
And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful,
If not, it can't be helped.

Chance encounters must not be subverted or distorted by suffocating ties. The perpetual journey of the protean self must not be impeded by binding permanent commitments to other persons, communities or causes. Promises should never be given to others, or rigid commitments undertaken, because they will falsify the spirit of truth and constitute a refusal of life's invitations to new experiences.

In such a world-view older ideals of character, integrity, stability or steadfastness will appear as unfortunate obstacles to growth. A permanent commitment to a marriage becomes misguided if not immoral. Who would even desire to aspire to the narrowness and dead letter of the law that accompanies permanent marital promises? Fullness of life means immersion in many different encounters with many different personae, roles and changing relationships – especially of course sexual relationships. To be confined to an eternal union with one other person would be repellent. Even if the temptation to permanence may arise through inertia, routine, conformity or stagnation, the temptation should be resisted.

Countervailing strategies

Happily it is easy to point out at once that the ideal of the protean self is neither desired nor actually possible for most people in ordinary life. Empirically it can be demonstrated that the majority of human beings prefer and cling to predictability, security, familiarity and intense loyalties to their kinship groups. Intimate pair-bonding in marriage has cultural staying power. The brief infatuation with 'open marriage' during the 70s has passed. Reputable sexual research reveals

that marital infidelity is not habitually morally countenanced or generally practised. While sexual permissiveness before marriage, and between marriages, is seen as acceptable, marriage requires commitment. (Whether sexual permissiveness before marriage automatically weakens the ability to sustain subsequent marital fidelity is a moot point.) At any rate sexually experienced young persons have been returning to weddings complete with white bridal gowns and public vows before family and community. The longing for human connectedness, loyalty and secure stability is resurgent.

Yet the ideal of the protean self may still attend every wedding as an uninvited ghost and continue to hover over most marriages. Banishing that shade, along with the suspicion that one is in reality helpless, will not be easy. Another more attractive image of a strong and stable self must become culturally dominant. One strategy is to point out repeatedly that human development must necessarily be embodied in particular, concrete and continuous change processes within boundaries and discrete limits. Human organisms, unlike atoms, are necessarily limited by being alive, and thereby embark on an inevitable continuous progress through time. Living beings accumulate experience which, very gradually, is brought to bear on the present by genetic adaptation. They evolve, otherwise they die.

Psychologically too, human beings are formed and function through their stored memories and acquired skills and capacities. Personal experience is past experience; creativeness in the present is recreation. There's no starting afresh in a *tabula rasa* or in a series of personal reincarnations. The only way one can break out of the limits of one's past experiences and start over is to suffer an organic brain injury affecting one's memory, or suffer a dissociative mental disorder of amnesia, fugue or multiple personality disorder. Indeed, the increase of multiple personality disorders in our present society accords all too well with the increased resistance to maintaining integrated stable identities through permanent commitments.

Admittedly, permanent marital commitments narrow attentive focus upon one relationship. But within this contained matrix problems must be confronted and worked out. Two persons grow up together by living together. Permanent vows give partners the security, space and time to mature. Love can go deeper when focused, like the fire enkindled by light directed through a magnifying glass. Growth and change must of course take place, but within a patterned form of union. Selves are enriched by being centred, specifically grounded and channelled. A stream may flow faster and deeper within bounded banks.

Yes, life is a stream, a journey, a pilgrimage of the Spirit for Christians too, for all the Christian emphasis upon eternity. The faithful have also espoused the continual growth and transforming change that accompanies faith in a God who 'makes all things new'. Dynamic change, bubbling new life, surprise and constant creation and recreation are gifts of the Spirit. But the Christian view of a protean self is encompassed within the unity, integrity, stability and eternal fidelity of a covenant. In a sense the vision and appeal of God's eternal faithfulness to human creatures informs the Christian aspiration to emulate God and make consecrated commitments. A sinner's gratitude for being eternally forgiven and never forgotten or abandoned induces the desire never to forget, never to abandon, always to persevere steadfastly in a particular love.

Basically God's faithful loving Self induces desires in humans to love fully, consecrate themselves wholly and remain faithful forever. Divine constancy attracts and divine promises of assistance embolden and empower promise-making and promise-keeping. Love is the goal and loving fidelity is the way. Permanent commitment becomes integral to personal identity and love's desire to give without conditions. Moreover, God is always creating, dynamically changing and entering into new and varied relationships fully, without diminishing God's eternal plenitude and faithful covenant. So the Christian aspires to do the same. If divine reality were only some ever-changing process without personhood, then protean selves might dismiss concrete human histories and aspire to ever-changing openness to flow. Yet the Lord Christians have met and followed is more and demands more.

In the end the questioning of lifelong permanent consecrated commitments is an argument over the psychology of human nature and the nature of God's Spirit at work in the world. Psychological conceptions of human functioning and theological beliefs about divine reality will influence a culture's lived commitments as much as pragmatic considerations. The future of marriage rests with the ideals that will capture the hearts and minds of each new generation. I do not think that the steadfast love of Christ will fail.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of the triumph of the therapeutic in professional psychology along with a prescription for change see William J. Doherty, *Soul searching: why psychotherapy must promote moral responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

² See Charles Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

³ For a discussion of the formation of the self and its relationship to moral action see Sidney Callahan, *In good conscience: reason and emotion in moral decision making* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p 237.

⁵ Margaret A. Farley, *Personal commitments: beginning, keeping, changing* (San Francisco CA: Harper & Row, 1986).

⁶ Robert J. Lifton, *The protean self: human resilience in an age of fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).