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## **Reflections from a Long Marriage**

by

Roger and Susan Sawtell

This book is the text of the Swarthmore Lecture delivered at Britain Yearly Meeting in 2006.

### **Introduction**

As well as their outward and visible work for justice and peace there was a time when Quakers were recognised in public for their distinctive clothes in subdued colours and for an alternative lifestyle, both at home and work. Now, in 2006, the public witness remains strong but the contents of their wardrobes, clothes cupboards, and bathrooms are unlikely to differ much from those of the secular majority. Our own shelves are no different but, looking back on nearly fifty years of marriage we realise, somewhat to our own surprise, that we have lived a different lifestyle to most of those around us and that our experience may have relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, as a “mixed marriage” of a Quaker to a non-Quaker, it seems to us that some of the insights of the Religious Society of Friends may now be appropriate or organisations well beyond the Meeting House. For example, the decision-making process developed by Quakers over many years is particularly relevant to the kind of inter-denominational residential community in which we have lived for nearly half our married life and also relevant to employee-owned businesses such as the Daily Bread Co-operative which, since its inception in 1976, has been part of our life together. As a further example, most “communities of households”, including the one we describe hereafter, have a concern for simplicity rather than complexity and for frugality rather than the extravagance and waste that is now commonplace in the rich society in which we find ourselves.

Both of us became active Christians in our student years, before we met each other; Susan via the Iona Community and Roger via an evangelical student mission. All our married life we have been trying to discover, in practical ways, what it means to keep the faith two thousand years after Jesus. Neither of us has felt called to be a minister of religion, hardly an option for married couples, although we have benefited from close association with monasteries in several different parts of the world. However, looking for guidance in our reading of the Bible particularly to the time of Jesus’ ministry and the small groups of his followers during the subsequent 60 years during which the Gospels were written, we have felt ourselves inexorably drawn towards counter-cultural groups.

Friends will understand this because they have usually assumed that their values and testimonies would lead them towards a lifestyle significantly different from the surrounding culture. Janey O’Shea writes:

In the topsy-turvy world of the Way of God as taught by Jesus, familiar categories turn upside down, people with contagious diseases are touched and healed; a woman who prefers intellectual discussion to housework is highly valued; the unemployed get a day’s wage for a few hours’ work; a prostitute is held up as a good example to a religious leader; the good seats at a state banquet go to the street people... the charisma of early Friends was their gift to live at home in the upside down world of God’s reign.

Thus we have been more anxious when our lifestyle refuses to be upside down than the times when we have been led to be counter-cultural.

We have a problem in tackling this writing project. We are asked to write experientially rather than academically or theoretically. What can we say from our own direct experience of a long marriage? Well, for a start we can say that our marriage has survived during a period when separation and divorce have become increasingly frequent. If it were not so, we would not be writing.

In 1957, the year of our marriage, over 400,000 couples got married in the UK but by 2001 this figure had diminished by 28% to 286,000. The corresponding figures for divorce over this same period increased by 86%, from 80,000 to 157,000. One or two of our long married friends even feel they need to apologise for remaining married when those around them may be distressed or embittered by their “failure” to hold their marriages together, particularly those married with the beautiful Quaker wording:

Friends, I take this my friend N. To be my wife, promising, with God’s help, to be unto her a loving and faithful husband, so long as we both on earth shall live (*Quaker Faith & Practice* 16.36)

Friends do not take such promises lightly and the testimony to truth and integrity makes them all the more significant.

Our problem is how to write in such a way that our experience does not seem pretentious. All we can say is that we are aware of the pitfalls of marriage and have experienced one or two, but we have enjoyed being married and we still do enjoy it. We have no personal experience of separation or of divorce and do not propose to write at length about them, especially as there is a large body of literature on the subject. On the other hand, little has been written on the positive aspects of contemporary marriage and it is not fashionable to do so. We ask the forbearance of readers if we appear to make the grass too green on our side of the fence as we have no wish to cause feelings of guilt or failure among those whose marriages have not lasted, sometimes for reasons totally beyond their control.

Some books written by two people, rather than one author, appear disjointed and this may be particularly apparent in this book because we have different ways of looking at the world around us. This appears for instance on the “Myers-Briggs Type Indicator” , where the answers are formulated to classify individual personality under four headings – extrovert/introvert (E/I); sensing/intuition (N/S); thinking/feeling (T/F); judging/perceiving (J/P): Susan usually comes out as INFP and Roger as ISTJ. We have the I in common but we differ in each of the other three headings. If our writing has any value it may be because it shows how the same circumstances, a long marriage, can be seen in significantly different ways by the two people most closely involved in it. Some readers may respond to one view and some to the other. Nevertheless during this writing we have become aware of the synergy of a lifelong loving relationship. The energy of the two people in a long marriage is greater than the sum of the energy the same two people not in such a relationship.

A group of highly respected Bible scholars who spent years searching for the authentic words of Jesus came to the conclusion that his phrases were more everyday and colloquial than is sometimes gathered from reading the Authorised Version or the contemporary translations into modern English. Jesus would have spoken as a carpenter, not as an academic. A crowd

gathered to listen to him would have been more like an early Quaker outdoor meeting than a lecture room, and the people a diverse group rather than students with notebooks or church people in pews. Correspondingly, in writing this book, we understand that we are addressing a very varied readership which will include carpenters and professors, pensioners and students.

John Howard Yoder writes, “In other societies and cultures, people are plagued by anxiety, guilt, fear of judgement. In this context the good news is stated in terms of forgiveness, acceptance by God and acceptance by other (people)...But for Jesus in his time, and for increasing numbers of us in our time, the basic human problem is seen in less individualistic terms. The priority agenda for Jesus and for many of us, is not mortality or anxiety, but unrighteousness, injustice. The need is not for consolation or acceptance but for a new order in which (people) may live together in love” (Yoder 1971).

We are not academics nor theologians, so what follows is not the result of scholarly research. We write only out of our direct experience of a long marriage and an unusual lifestyle, some faltering steps towards a new order, so our language may have something in common with Jesus’ colloquialism. In his footsteps, we offer this book with all the love and understanding we can muster.

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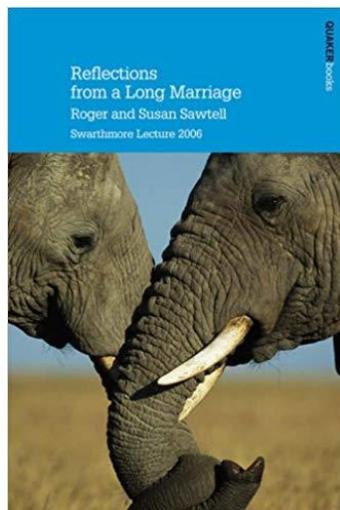
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