



BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

READING GROUP GUIDE

MARRIAGE
and
OTHER ACTS
of
CHARITY

A memoir by

KATE BRAESTRUP

KATE BRAESTRUP
ANSWERS SOME OF THE QUESTIONS
SHE'S FREQUENTLY ASKED BY
READERS OF
MARRIAGE AND OTHER
ACTS OF CHARITY

1. *Do you have any concrete advice for married persons as to how we are supposed to demonstrate love—agape—to a spouse?*

Yes. But you might not like it.

The principle I arrived at, after oh! so many struggles, goes like this: My husband is a good, sane, moral man. Not a perfect man, perhaps, but a good man. Not only do I love him, but I trust and admire him. Therefore, *he can have anything he wants from me*. If it is mine to give, all he has to do is ask.

When I declare this, most people seem to respond with an almost comical expression of guarded skepticism. “*Anything?*” someone is sure to enquire, making sure.

Anything.

“Well . . . like what?” my interrogator demands, and I am always tempted to ask what dreadful spousal demand he

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or she has in mind. Your left arm? The contents of your bank account? Weird sex?

The best example I can offer is this: A couple of years ago, my husband Simon asked me what he might give me for Christmas. My answer was unexpected and, frankly, unwelcome.

“You know that intersection on Route 235?” I said. “The one where the speed limit drops to twenty-five, because the road coming in from the right isn’t visible until you’re right on it?”

“Yeah . . .,” said Simon, in a voice filled with foreboding.

“For Christmas, I would like for you to always go the speed limit whenever you drive through that intersection. It scares me to think of you getting into an accident right there, because you usually drive through it too fast.”

“I don’t . . .,” Simon began, and then stopped. “You know, I might just decide to go the other way to Camden for the whole year, and skip that intersection altogether.”

“I know,” I said. “And that would be fine, too.”

Simon could have taken this as an attempt to control him, or as my attempt to make my neurotic worry into his burden. He could have laughed it off, or ridiculed me. Instead, because he knows me to be a good, sane, moral person, someone he admires and trusts as well as loves, he gave me what I wanted. The gift itself (not having to worry that he would be killed in a car accident going through that intersection) and the fact that he was willing to give it to me made this into one of the best Christmas presents I’ve ever had.

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2. *Well, and if you give unconditional love to your spouse, they'll give it back to you. Right?*

Not necessarily. What made my own experience (and thus my argument) into a religious experience was the revelation that love must be given simply because it's love. There is no quid pro quo, no actual or implied demand for reciprocity along the lines of: "If I give you 'slowing down at the intersection' for Christmas, you've got to give me 'not chewing ice' in return." It's not that there isn't room for this kind of negotiation in marriage (or any other relationship), only that a negotiated settlement isn't a gift. It's not *caritas*. Offering *caritas*, or unconditional love, to someone makes it somewhat more likely that they will do the same . . . but if you think of it that way, you'll end up quantifying something that cannot and should not be quantified. ("I gave you unconditional love 16 percent more often than you gave me unconditional love. . . . Buddy, you owe me!")

Further, we are called to offer our love to all kinds of people who are never going to be in a position to pay us back, even if they wanted to. The expectation, let alone the demand, for recompense is actually anti-love.

So the harsh lesson remains: Why love? Because you can love. Amen.

3. *What if your spouse asks you for permission to sleep with someone else?*

Emotional reaction first: I would punch him in the snoot.

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Spiritual/religious reaction: Strange as it may sound, the vows we make at a wedding are not ultimately about our relationship with the person we are marrying. They are about our relationship with God (however you want to interpret that).

My spouse doesn't need *my* permission to cheat. He needs *God's* permission to cheat—that it is okay to violate a promise made knowingly and in all good conscience, and that this violation (the breaking of a commandment, remember) will not define him as cheater, liar, adulterer.

For the same reason, I can't give my husband permission to murder me or steal from me. I can't tell my neighbor that it's all right with me if he enslaves me or dehumanizes me. Nor may I tell my children they can go ahead and dishonor me. These are not my gifts (if they are gifts) to offer. It's an important distinction.

Let me illustrate it this way: The commandment says, quite clearly, *thou shall not kill*. I work with police officers who, as part of their commitment to the public's protection, are put in a position where they might have to break that commandment. But ultimately it isn't the government, or the American public, or the chaplain who can give them permission to kill, nor can any of us grant them absolution afterward. Only love—as motivation, as intention, as character, as response—can declare that this officer, though he has killed, is not a killer.

4. *What about abusive spouses?*

My husband is not an abusive spouse. If he were an abusive spouse, the best possible gift I could give to myself, my children,

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his future relationships (if any), *and to him* would be to refuse to allow him to abuse me. This is the only gift I can give to anyone who would hurt me: I can't reform him/her or fix him/her, I can't make him/her into the person he or she might be and may even want to be. The only contribution I am capable of making to the healing of the abuser, the mugger, the rapist, the bigot, the terrorist, or the dictator is my resistance to victimhood, and my attempt to protect other potential victims.

5. *What is your opinion about gay marriage?*

My opinion of gay marriage is exactly the same as my opinion of straight marriage: It's impossibly difficult and sure to end in agony. So I say: "No more of this uncommitted fiddling around! Everyone should grow up and git hitched."

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the source of the tensions in Kate Braestrup's first marriage? How does her view of the discord differ from that of her husband?
2. What, in Braestrup's opinion, can a good marriage provide? How is this different from what you expect marriage to give you?
3. Braestrup mentions several times that she helped people who had been placed in her path. What does it mean to help those who have been placed in your path? Why do you think Kate and the taxi driver help the injured woman who makes racist remarks (page 16)?
4. Can it be argued, as Braestrup claims, that "our society has moved beyond the stage of requiring the sort of social cohesion that religious practice is capable of producing" (page 68)? Discuss the role of religion in your life, and in the lives of your family members or your friends.
5. How is the definition of *caritas*, or love, different from our modern conception of love? Do you think that love is selfish or selfless?

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6. Why does Braestrup change her thinking from “Why me?” to “Why not me?” when she is misdiagnosed for multiple sclerosis? How does her thinking change when she is introduced to her nephew, Bagna, or when she learns she is, in fact, healthy?
7. What does Oscar mean when he says that Jesus is the window, rather than the view? What do you think it means to “worship the pane” rather than the view (page 102)?
8. What does it mean to earnestly desire the achievement of wholeness? Have you ever felt this way toward someone?
9. Braestrup claims that all relationships end, and asks us to consider: What are we to do in the face of loss (page 137)? Discuss how you have dealt with loss in the past and how you might deal with it in the future.
10. Why is Kate Braestrup’s advice for a broken heart to love even more? Does this make sense to you?
11. Braestrup tells Woolie’s class that they should fill in the blank for the following sentence: “*NOTHING MATTERS MORE THAN _____*” (page 156). She then tells the students that however they answer the question, it will be their working definition of God. How would you fill in the blank? Do you think this is an acceptable definition of God?
12. Discuss the book’s title. In what ways might marriage constitute an act of charity?