

# Marital Happiness

by [Carl Nelson](#) (September 2022)



*Legend, Emil Betzler, 1962*

*What you're looking for basically, is the phenotype of your genotype.—Oscar Simmons*

**A neighbor is working on some variety of social worker degree.** As one of her school assignments, she was to interview a happily married couple, so she asked if she could interview my

wife and me. Talking about my marriage—especially with a neighbor—raises a lot of qualms.

“Well,” I queried. “How happy do we have to be?”

**Wife Poem #71**

*A Haiku Stops the World*

Nothing quite stops the world  
like a haiku.  
You can place one under your day,  
and it won't roll forward.  
If life were an armada of trucks,  
a haiku would be the size of a tire block.

We went riding last Saturday  
with two bottles of wine, our dachshund  
and a haiku.

We finished the wine,  
but some of the haiku  
still clings to us,  
singing like a nightingale

there in the dark,  
there in the bed,  
then there in the kitchen  
that next morning.

Recently we took a group tour of Canada from Calgary to Vancouver, two days of which was by rail. As our new acquaintances boarded, I became depressed. ‘They are old,’ I fretted. But, in truth, they were very near my age and turned out to be fine company. Half were in better shape than me. And all were punctual. Asking for more would be churlish. And though the scenery was spectacular, I would have to say that a

large portion of my attention and interest lay with these others. I'm a people scrutineer and find myself mindful of the various individuals who happen within my realm. Much like a cattleman might 'take stock,' I parse the sentiments they germinate, the histories taken, and then ruminate and chat with the wife over these for pleasure-filled hours. Choosing words to describe them afterwards at my desk is like picking chocolates.

Quite a number of our group, (of around twenty), were unmarried couples whose spouses had passed. (Plus, one married couple who lived apart, and a pair of lesbians, I supposed.) It looked to me that each had about as happy a marriage as their personalities would allow. Some were just lucky to be more personable. That's my eventual take.

One large framed fellow with a gray moustache and a loud voice could not stop 'contributing.' He was professorial and, like a caterpillar tractor which must be started on a cup of gas, no more invitations to speak were needed once he had switched over to diesel. His long disquisitions often ended upon some emphatic declaration, such as one regarding his study habits as a youth in answer to a compliment from his teacher, to which he had summarized: "I've studied this material so keenly simply because I intend to take the test once, and that's it. I have no interest in revisiting this material ever again." Then, on a mental sidetrack, to the same disquisition, regarding being irked by his wife having asked the waiter for something slightly different than was offered: "... so I told the waiter, I want this *exactly* as described in the menu." It goes without saying that my wife found him annoying, especially when he cranked up at 3am on our final shuttle to the airport. But I found his voice, carving its path through the semi-comatose silence of the darkened bus, hilarious. Hysterically so, as if he were Cliff on the sitcom "Cheers," mansplaining his way through another beer.

It may be hard for most to see the value in obnoxious people,

but the theatre loves them as lilies of the field. A former playwright such as myself might easily rock back and forth with laughter at his good fortune.

However, my estimate of the fellow's marriage would be that it wasn't very good—or rather, the marriage was fine—but it was the two, themselves, who did not appear happy. Nevertheless, from what was said, it appeared their marriage had lasted years and left them with children and grandchildren with whom the man claimed to be very pleased and whom he had judged to be excellent and prime individuals.

His wife was plain, stout, and dour. And, after a first morning's outburst of manic gregariousness in which her hair flew all over as she lunged to connect with us all urgently, she rarely spoke. About four days in, the two must have had words, because (for a day at least) he said almost nothing also. So, on the face of it I would have to judge that their marriage wasn't happy—at least just then.

But hey! Neither is my car. (If I had to make the call, I'd judge my Subaru's mood to be mostly "stolid with a few psychological overlays.") The simple beauty of a car though is that literally anyone can hop in and drive one (new or used) off the lot.

Marriage is like this. There are no restrictions. You can create a family with one. You will have a partner throughout life. You can combine your income and halve your expenses. Free sex! How many people are too ugly to find a car? None. How many people have too disgusting of a personality or frankly just smell too horrid to drive a car? None. How many people are just too downright mean and/or spiteful, jealous or even homicidal, to be allowed a car? None! Bank robbers use cars all the time.

Generally, the same holds for marriage. Real SOB's can get married, have been married, and even STAY married. The same

goes with Crazy Bitches. Likewise, ugly people, amputees, the terminally ill, transvestites, homosexuals, incarcerated convicts—near everybody gets their chance at marriage, and oftentimes at more than one.

Then to complicate matters, there's always the question of "what is happy?" An eeyore is happiest, it would seem, as an eeyore. So of course, tossed into this happy, burbling stew of marriage, we have to account for the Mr. & Mrs. Eeyore and for the whole clan of Eeyores also. Not everyone can be the smartest person in the room. Not everyone can be the winning athlete. Everybody can't be the high school Senior Prom's King and Queen. There is a limit to excellence, even pleasure. Excellence is built upon a vast alluvial plain of failure, mediocrity and fruitless toil. The same is likely true of happiness. Not everyone is naturally happy. Not everyone has a gift for it, the luck or personality to obtain it, nor the nature to sustain it. There are many who have no talent for happiness. It eludes them like the Heffalump. Some are even disgusted by it. Some would even seem to bring and spread unhappiness like a plague—as missionaries with a black cloud trailing overhead. It's the waters they swim in. Why should we insist that these people should have (or even have to *endure!*) a happy marriage? Why make a happy marriage the gold standard, when there are many an unhappy marriage which birth the same things and are likewise productive—if not much more so? How many remarkable people have sprung from terrible family situations, and famously unhappy couplings? Life requires all sorts. Why not marriage? Theodore Dalrymple, widely-touted essayist, and quite personable interviewee, grew up in a quite unhappy family where the mother and father curiously never spoke.

Lots of people are unpleasant, fart publically, are terrible at socializing, eat their nose goobers, or just have no gift for even offering a smile. It's rather a miracle that like a lock, they might find their key in another likewise 'gifted'

individual – so that they can be perhaps unhappy together, and yet still productive.

**Wife Poem #72**

*“The Lilies of the Field”*

The Good Life is in *not* having everything the way you want it,  
but rather, in *this* manner—  
everything must be just so:

It’s not contrary  
to find just that person  
we hanker to disagree with  
over the long haul.

Nor is it easy landing that occupation  
with just the right level of complexity and frustration  
to hold our interest throughout the work day,  
and onto the next.

Or to be delivered those letters to toss,  
invitations to dismiss,  
and outmoded laws to disobey,  
with just the right amount of inconvenience  
to relish the act, and  
with just the right amount of injustice to right,  
and the wrong side of history to battle  
with enemies of such specific and delicious odiousness,  
an Oscar nominated movie could be made of it.

There is really no end to the “lilies of the field”  
because  
if the truth be known,  
they are weeds, you know?

In my personal ranking of priorities, it is far worse to be lonely than unhappy. There are so many things you can do as an unhappy person! You can reproduce. Ruminates. Drink absinthe. Be a sexual athlete. Write country music. You may even find tremendous humor in the affliction—be the toast of your friends like Dorothy Parker. Maybe create a stand-up career, write plays or even movies. Unhappiness can elicit sympathy, share intimacies, form friendships. You can join in therapy groups with like-minded others. You might become a political activist, become hateful and a demagogue, or even a philosopher famous as Schopenhauer. You may take all sorts of mood-altering drugs, lose sleep, drink alcohol, cause mishaps, misadventures, wreck the car and spout improprieties. All of this you can do married also. But what can you do as lonely? Not much, really. People can actually enjoy their melancholy, or spend pleasant lives as mystics living alone, but few can endure loneliness. Just as I've grown used to the house we live in, the car I drive, and the amount of money we have to spend, so too do people grow used to the amount of happiness available in a marriage, I believe. Because nobody has a sure definition of love, instead we search to quantify it in years passed, as if it were cured in the jar of marriage like a fine wine. I should think we might take the same notion with happiness. By this measuring stick alone, my wife and I are thirty years happy.

Of the spouses who shared our train ride through the Canadian wilderness only one pair really fit the generally shared Hallmark imprimatur of the happily married couple. They were sweethearts from their school days, who had become separated by distance, drifted into different marriages, had children, and then several years after both their spouses had died, were reintroduced by a common acquaintance. They were happy, relaxed and inhabited their space like a hand in glove. Ironically, they weren't married. Not that he didn't want to be, the woman allowed. But things were working so well, as it was, with them sharing a few days a week while owning homes

some distance apart, that she hesitated to alter a good thing. Wisdom allows that what moves well in life can be the sum of untold turning gears. When one is old, a lot more factors are at play within a marriage proposal than just the two lovebird's inclinations. There are families, liabilities, assets, business interests ...

Another couple were celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup>. This gruff fellow's wife was an extroverted woman with a snazzy Southern delivery who conducted what amounted to a Laverne and Shirley dialogue with the cheery woman of the plainly happy couple. Asked how they met, her gruff spouse nodded as if laying down the winning hand in at poker. "She asked me out."

Apparently it was Sadie Hawkins day, she was 15, and he was 3 years older.

"He was my third choice," she retorted.

"Shouldn't have opened the door into that line of questioning," I teased.

Later, he confided their marriage had its ups and downs, but "I wouldn't have done it any other way."

I judged their marriage as happy, if volatile.

Another couple lived separately. "I can't sleep with him in the same room." She shook her head. She was a lively person with an elfish smile. He was a rather helpless, studious lawyer, a bit of a hypochondriac with medical problems, but with a dry sense of humor who delighted in anecdotes. I liked both of them. Rather than separate, it seemed that they had found a way to keep the marriage viable. They separated and came together likewise throughout the daytime trip activities something like a paddle ball with a very long rubber string.

Another patiently happy pair were a modest couple who had run a business, birthed a family, and found humor in the mistakes



they'd made. He had wanted a farm. But she was a city girl. Their compromise was to purchase a few acres of land as far from town as she would allow. Later, they decided to buy a pony. "She looks pregnant," she told the stockman from whom they were buying the horse.

"No. She's just hay heavy," the man assured her.

'Hay heavy?' She mused. "But what did I know about livestock?" She laughed.

It wasn't that many weeks later that the wife, looking out of their kitchen window, shouted with alarm to her husband who was quiet, thoughtful and wore his hair in the ducktails of his youth: "It looks like there's a big German Shepherd running around out there inside of our fence chasing Betsy!" (Welcome the new colt.)

Of one thing I am fairly certain is that with all of these folks, their lives were richer for having been married.

As our post-modern world spins, willy-nilly off into greater and greater unhappiness hoisted upon a spiraling narrative Tower of Babel, a common denominator to the whole miserable affair seems to be the Progressive need to improve upon what is naturally provided—while ironically kicking aside all of the improvements arduously institutionalized.

One of the wisest pieces of advice I ever received was "not to try and get more out of something than there is in it." Understanding this certainly improved my relations with many people, including family. And it would seem advice applicable to the institution of marriage.

There is constant proselytizing nowadays for better marriage and such incessant criticism about the institution of marriage that younger persons are refusing to enter into matrimony unless it is the utopia advocated. A current marriage is expected to offer failsafe happiness, romance, sex,

companionship, intellectual stimulation, children or no, spiritual growth, even the correct politics ... the list just goes on and on. (Quick weight loss, or gluten-free may be the next things demanded of marriage.) Moreover, many presently marrieds drop out ostensibly for like reasons.

I propose that, actually, marriage is like a car. It will get you from here to there. Once it does this reliably, you may begin to appreciate its other features. In fact, you may grow in later years to look back with fondness on its simplicity—in contrast to the complexity of that person beside you. (“My Lord, 50 years with that screwball!”) And you’ll say to yourself, “Thank God staying married is as easy as keeping one’s word.”

After all, just getting from here to there can make a person happy.

### **Wife Poem #50**

#### *Marriage*

Living with a woman year after year  
is much like writing a series of poems  
all about the same thing.

It’s about locale, finally, I suppose;  
the slow growth of staying put.  
The roots which explore and attach  
until this locale is different from that locale.

Which is why we repeat ourselves,  
over and over.  
On the face of this,  
it may look like a lack of imagination.  
Whereas, in truth,  
it’s just the opposite.

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**Carl Nelson** has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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