

*Homily for the wedding of Amy Kroska and Robert Clark, June 29, 2001*¹

Like myself and many of the other speakers here today, they are the two of them sociologists, artisans of what some have called “the dull science,” practitioners of a craft that, in its most typical and venerated form, takes all that is beautiful and exciting about the human experience and reduces it to a cowering rectangle of numbers that is then strangled and tortured until it tells us whatever we think will get us jobs and tenure.²

One of the most famous statements about the promise of sociology is that it can help humanity understand the relationship between the biographies of individuals and the histories of societies.³ In this spirit, sociologists have long taken pleasure in showing how experiences that feel profoundly personal and special—experiences like falling in love and making a life commitment to another person—are in fact thoroughly predictable manifestations of larger patterns repeated endlessly throughout the society.

Indeed, showing that what you think is special really isn't all that special typically makes a sociologist cackle maniacally with delight.

If we want to think about the sociology of love and how it might relate to the conjugation before us today—and, just go along with me here—we can see outlines of what I'm talking about in some of the work of the early sociologist Georg Simmel, an underappreciated forerunner of the kind of sociology that Amy now does.

Even though Simmel was writing about a century ago, he saw that there is a fundamental paradox of love, which is that we all have this intense desire to feel like the love we personally have fallen into is true, special, different from how anyone else has ever loved before, even while we are forever confronted with other people falling in love and acting like they think that what they have is true and special and unique and different.⁴

What Simmel also foresaw (kind of) was that the way the world was changing—with the rise of big corporations and the mass media—was going to make the illusion that there was anything special about one's own love even harder to maintain.⁵ Today we have a mass media that tells us what to love, how to feel when we are in love, and how to

¹ Or at least as best as I can reconstruct what I said, with a few compulsive annotations added as footnotes for the couple afterwards.

² Actually, it was Michel Foucault specifically who called sociology “the dull science.” In the moment, I lost my nerve about invoking Foucault's name in the first sentence of a general-audience homily. I had also considered instead of this quote using H. L. Mencken's quote that “sociology is the outhouse in the grove of academe.”

³ This is from C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination*. Incidentally, Mills was such a believer in the need to amass more data to reveal social patterns that he bravely contributed to the studies of marriage and health by himself getting married three times and sampling four heart attacks before his death at age 45.

⁴ Of course, a citation is in order: Simmel's ideas about love and marriage can be found in the original writings collected in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, especially (but not only) pages 324-329.

⁵ I say “kind of” here because this is basically an revisionist (mis)reading that takes the themes of Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* and injects them into his writings on love. But if you can't show scholarly abandon in a wedding homily, where can you?

express our love to others—to the point where now one can stop into a corner Hallmark and pick up a card that expresses our innermost sentiments more profoundly and deeply than anything one could ever compose on one's own.⁶

The problem is, in a world where the most beautiful turns of phrase are used to sell dishsoap and luxury cars, how can two people express the genuine specialness of their feelings for one another? Every sincere statement that two people might want to say to one another has already been said more eloquently in movies by people who weren't really in love at all, but just acting. How can our own mundane passions compete with the glamorous romance of television? In this way, mass media can only feed the devouring monster that all marriages must relentlessly confront; that is, the monster of familiarity, staleness, boredom.⁷

Because directly expressing our feelings tends to make us sound like we're ripping off actors from a soap opera, the common response of our generation—the so-called Generation X—has been a retreat into irony, metaphor, endless pop culture references that recall the innocent joys and splendors of childhood.

And so, I could stand up here and talk about Amy and Rob's first meeting as being as life-changing and lucky for us all as that famous stumbling collision between two strangers, one carrying chocolate and the other peanut butter. Or I could give them complementary pet names and talk about how she is his Boardwalk and he is her Park Place, or how he is her Colonel Mustard and she is his Professor Plum.⁸ I could invoke heroism by saying that if Superman were to ever try to stop Rob, that Amy will be his Kryptonite.⁹ And that if Microwave Man ever tries to stop Amy, that Rob will be her aluminum foil.

But instead of me relying on pop cultural references to try to say something different about this delightful couple, we can also look back to Simmel.

Because Simmel believed that most of the time loving relationships took one of two forms. Love could be complete but short-lived, an early total passion that eventually gives way to the stale familiarity that comes with knowing another person completely. Alternatively, love could be longer-lived if both people hold back some of themselves, secrets and mysteries that keep passion alive while they are gradually revealed to each other. In other words, you could have either a love that was complete or one that was lasting, but not both.

⁶ The reference to Hallmark was an intentional product placement advertisement for Angie's employer as a way of compensating them for the cheap hotel rooms they helped us all score for the wedding.

⁷ This is a paraphrase of a quote by Balzac, but, as with Foucault, I shied away from explicitly identifying it as such.

⁸ I had another line here about "how she is the burnt sienna crayon that makes his box of Crayola complete" but decided it would have been too much.

⁹ I ad-libbed something here like, "Those at the rehearsal dinner last night learned from Rob's father that Rob may actually be Superman [he showed a photo of Rob in a Superman costume when he was four], and come to think of it I've never seen the two of them together."

Except Simmel believed that there were some people who could have both. And the reason that these rare people could successfully share themselves completely with another person was that they could not really share themselves completely, for they were such independent, wonderfully complicated, and ever-changing individuals that each new revelation did nothing to diminish their mystery but instead served as the starting point for the discovery of still more treasures.

Their minds and spirits were inexhaustible, and Simmel said that such persons could no more give themselves entirely away than a tree could today give up its next year's fruits.

When I think about Amy and Rob, separately and as a couple, some of the virtues that spring immediately to mind are their intelligence, their kindness, their emotional generosity, and their effortless sincerity. But perhaps what I have always found most charming about them both is their sheer and delicious unpredictability.

They're both like one of those magician's scarves, where you think you've got them figured out, but then wait there's more, that's something I didn't know, I wouldn't have expected that, there's another intriguing quirk.¹⁰

I find talking to each of them that I never know quite what they are going to say and that this is one of the many reasons that I enjoy conversation with them both so much. And I think that makes them exactly the kind of ideal pairing that Simmel envisioned, two people setting out to age marvelously with one another—sharing everything with one another and yet not becoming bored—because they each have inside themselves an ever-replenishing supply of change, growth, creativity, and surprises.

What it's like is some of the statistical models that Rob tried in vain with (my inept assistance) to use for his Master's Thesis, in that their passion for each other has the potential to run forever, busy, each actively searching for the inner parameters of one another, never arriving at some final answer but always very much enjoying the ride.

Today, as they make this commitment of marriage, they are forging before us a permanent alliance on an island from which no tribal council can ever vote them off. And I am honored not only to have been asked here to speak today but also to have the opportunity as their friend to watch eagerly how they do grow old together—their romance a sitcom that never gets cancelled, cornflakes that always stay crispy in milk, a Dairy Queen that never closes for winter.

¹⁰ I wanted to get an actual magician's scarf for this, but because I had procrastinated on writing any of this until the last minute and there are no magic shops in Madison, I was stuck just pantomiming it.