

Editorial

Is this a Marriage or a Carriage?

Megan A. Conway, PhD
RDS Editor-in-Chief

Please forgive the pun in the title. Thoughts of “care” and “marriage” were floating around in my head as I was floating around in the pool. I think about marriage a lot, partially because I am married (surprise, surprise), and partially because in my insecure moments (or when I am mad at my husband) I obsess over the role of care in my marriage. Who is taking care of who? What is “normal care” in our marriage, and what is “crip care”? I am deafblind so I don’t drive (not legally anyway). Am I asking too much when I ask my husband to do all of the driving for our family? My grandmother was not disabled and she didn’t drive. This was not atypical of her generation, as driving was often considered a “man’s job.” Was my grandfather a “carer” of my grandmother because he drove her everywhere? Or a chauffeur? Or a chauvinist?

Other things I have trouble doing independently include killing cockroaches, fixing leaky faucets, setting rat traps, scrubbing really dirty pots, barbecuing, cleaning the oven, climbing onto the roof, understanding the point of football, fixing my computer, and talking to my father-in-law. This is an impressive list of “man jobs” that somehow my liberal upbringing during the sexual revolution failed to teach me, so I do depend on my husband for these essential tasks. And no one would question his doing these tasks in his role as “husband.” Just as no one would question my doing the cooking, laundry, household management and primary childcare in my role as “wife.” I know plenty of women whose husbands do the cooking because hubby enjoys cooking. But if hubby does the cooking because his wife is disabled, that makes him a “carer” instead of “a guy who likes to cook.” If a wife does the cooking, whether her husband is disabled or not, she is just doing her job as a wife.

I recently met a couple where the wife has become significantly physically disabled during the past year. By all appearances the husband has taken on his new role as “carer” with grace, with caring, in fact. But it was also apparent that they still struggle with frustration at new barriers, with the things that the wife is no longer able to do. The “new normal” is hard to face, especially since society takes it for granted that a marriage is comprised of two people who will share equally in daily living tasks. That is an ideological view in a world where women still take on an unequal amount of household and childcare responsibilities even when they also take on an equal amount of financial responsibilities. Where is the help with childcare, transportation, cooking, bathing, and grocery shopping that this family with a single wage earner and a disabled family member needs? It does not exist. These duties are seen as the family’s responsibility, and if one member chooses to be a carer rather than dumping his useless wife off at the local multi-bed facility, that is his problem.

As I read the articles in this issue's forum on "Crippling Care" I found myself stunned by the obvious but not-talked-about-enough parallels between feminist theory and disability theory. I hope the forum will also change your thinking about how we view care.