

Royal Love
February 13, 2011

Between the latest hit film, *The King's Speech*, (with its twelve Oscars nominations), and the announced wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton in April, I feel awash in the trials and tribulations of love among British royalty. *The King's Speech* and the upcoming wedding serve as bookends: The 1936 ordeal when King Edward VIII abdicated the throne to marry a commoner forcing his brother to unexpectedly succeed him despite his bothersome speech impediments - - and the present day situation where Prince William will marry a commoner but this time to the joy of most everybody save the persnickety few who insist that blue blood must never be diluted by marriage to someone outside the fold.

But the past seventy-five years since Edward walked off the royal stage with his beloved American, Wallis Simpson from Baltimore, reveal a new openness to marrying a commoner which makes every little girl's wish of someday becoming a princess more viable. Just as every American black child can now dream realistically of becoming president, (God help them), Kate Middleton has opened the floodgates for commoners to dream of finding their prince.

The trappings of royalty seem somehow better suited for storybooks. The world of kings and queens, the prince and princess, a duke, and an earl, all trying to lead real lives despite their unique pedigree of privilege. A cursory glance at their lives reveal that even royalty cannot escape the slings and arrows of love's unpredictable nature. And their lives, though replete with lavish homes and hunting lodges, the best education and servants who do their bidding, they live under the microscope of profound scrutiny. The commoners, always suspect among royalty, still reserve the right to judge their monarchs and hold them accountable to tradition and suitable behavior for those who live in castles funded by the tax burden of those who may never have entry.

One of the great pressures of royalty, first manifest by Henry VIII, is providing heirs to the throne. Henry had this nasty habit of chopping off the queen's head every time she failed to provide a suitable heir to the throne. My heart always had a special affection for Anne Boleyn, whose fun loving and sensuous presence still failed to provide the king with a son.

But gender was not the issue in 1817 when people began to worry about the royal succession of King George III despite his having twelve living children. But none of them had any offspring who were eligible to inherit the throne. Even Parliament took a deep interest in this all and urged the four unmarried sons to find wives quickly. The 50-year old son, Duke of Kent, took the task to heart and hastily married a German princess in May 1818 named Victoria of Saxe-Coburge. She was a 31-year old widow with two children, but that would not suffice. The following year

(fortunately ten months after the nuptial event) a daughter was born who would eventually become Queen Victoria at age 18, and rule England for the next 64 years.

Queen Victoria married her first cousin, Albert, who was the prince of Saxe-Coburg. Marrying true royalty obviously limits the pool of eligibility. But they went on to have nine children and when Victoria married Albert she was the first bride to wear a white gown. Prior to her it was common for brides to wear colorful dresses or even black dresses. The concept of having a white gown that could only be worn for that one occasion manifested a wild extravagance that no one could imagine before Victoria. But what would royalty be without extravagance? Prince William will offer a daringly new touch of color at his marriage on April 29th. He will wear red, and I have the feeling that my upcoming summer season of weddings might see a lot of red among the grooms.

We may well wonder what love has to do with any of this, like Victoria's father marrying someone virtually per order of the British parliament. When asked directly if he loved the German princess, he said they fell in love eventually. I hope that was the case, sooner rather than later, because he died just eight months after Victoria was born. Our own mortality makes finding true love more urgent, to experience the splendor of romance and love and affection where the chemistry between two people allows for a transformation of mind, body, and spirit.

Edward VIII obviously knew of love and was not about to forfeit the only person whom he could ever consider marrying and living with happily ever after. Even if it cost him the throne, real love as he experienced it with Wallis Simpson meant that nothing would interfere with his love's fulfillment. As a divorced commoner and remarried while flitting about with Edward, theirs was a scandalous romance opposed by Parliament for religious, legal, political, and moral reasons. So Edward gave up the throne to "marry the woman I love" and the couple were then down-sized to Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and lived in exile from England together for the rest of their lives. She was undoubtedly the right woman for him.

The Edward scenario has prompted much conversation among my male friends. Would we really give up the throne for the "right" person? It gives us pause, quite honestly. We're talking about being King for God's sake. Should love exact such a hefty price? Of course the right answer is to marry for genuine love, but it's not like giving up your day job.

In my adolescence whenever a young lass broke my heart, my father who had no gift for words tried to regale me with the old cliché that there are many fish in the sea. I never really liked fish very much and never quite grasped his point at first, but those words now swim in my head as I wonder if I would abdicate the throne for marrying outside my royal lineage. After all, there are many fish in the sea. But tossing all that hypothetical stuff aside, age has taught me that no price is too great when genuine love hangs in the balance.

The years teach us that love inevitably requires some sacrifice if it is to be sustained. We give up something, or we make compromises with our partner because the relationship proves more meaningful than the pursuit of self-interests. Abdicating the throne may be of a scale beyond our comprehension, but it reflects well on romantic love: Willing to live with less because without one's partner, it wouldn't be worth living at all.

Prince William's marriage to a commoner, Kate Middleton seems a bit of a misnomer. It is only in England where a fabulously wealthy heiress can be considered "common." I have some personal interest in their wedding because Kate's mother is Carole, nee Goldsmith. I think I'll check my family tree. If I get an invitation to the wedding I'll let you know.

The support showered upon William and Kate reflects, I think, the belief that true love has prevailed. Royalty will marry for the "right reasons" this time, a novelty throughout history. I will always cheer for the commoner as I do for the underdog in all sporting events. But still, I can't imagine having queen Elizabeth thrust upon me as an in-law. But I'm sure Kate will manage just fine.

There is also the hope that William and Kate will help England forget the loveless marriage between Prince Charles and Lady Di and its tragic end. Back in July of 1981 as Di stood at the altar in her lavish gown with its 25-foot train, Di's nerves were apparently rattled as she recited her husband's names in the wrong order. Instead of calling him Charles Phillip Arthur George, she accidentally said Phillip Charles Arthur George which prompted Prince Andrew to quip: "By God, she just married my father." Royalty has its privileges and its challenges.

Prince Charles, as everyone knows, was prevented from marrying his true love, Camilla Parker-Bowles because she was a commoner and divorced. It took a number of highly embarrassing events for Charles and Camilla to finally be re-united. But the price of their love cost the life of a beloved princess who was beautiful and charming as any princess we may read about in a storybook.

Marrying for love confounds British royalty. Princess Margaret, the sister of Queen Elizabeth, embarked on a beautiful love story with Captain Peter Townsend: dashing distinguished, but divorced...making him anathema to the royal family. But when Margaret turned 25, with all of England expecting her to announce her engagement to Townsend anyway because she was at that age no longer bound to do what her sister told her to, she informed all that her relationship with Townsend was over.

Margaret learned that marriage to him would mean having to give up her royal rights and income and leave England for at least five years. She issued the following statement: "I would like it to be known that I have decided not to marry Captain Peter Townsend. Mindful of the church's teaching that Christian marriage is indissoluble, and conscious of my duty to the Commonwealth, I have resolved to put these considerations before any others..."

Unlike King Edward VIII who left it all behind for true love, Margaret must have felt that there were plenty of fish in the sea, and thus she could keep her royal lifestyle intact. (For those who feel women are more inclined to romanticism than men, may the lessons of Edward and Margaret help shatter such stereotypes).

In May of 1960, Margaret married Lord Snowden, Anthony Armstrong Jones, a photographer and royal bad-boy. While married to Margaret he fathered two children out of wedlock and he and Margaret would divorce by 1978 despite her revering the Christian marriage as indissoluble. Armstrong was also gay, and when confronted with this claim responded in Clinton-like fashion. He said, "I have never loved a man, but there have been a few men who have been in love with me."

Armstrong was so promiscuous that a friend said, "If it moves, he'll have it." He had a hide-a-way cottage which he fully exploited and as his relationship with Margaret deteriorated further and further he would leave her notes, one such note saying: "You look like a Jewish manicurist and I hate you." I have no idea what a Jewish manicurist might look like, but I'm sure it was highly insulting.

When Captain Peter Townsend died at age 80, Margaret acknowledged that he was the love of her life.

We make decisions all the time. And when it comes to decisions about love, we can get tripped up by the cost of love and what we're actually willing to pay. Edward left it all, Margaret couldn't reach that point. But ultimately, didn't Edward win in the end? If life offers us but one whirlwind tour, how do we plan the trip...and with whom? The romantics might say that love is the ace of spades; nothing is of higher value. But weighing in on what we are willing to let go of in order fulfill our love's quest, haunts us all universally: Neither royalty nor commoner is exempt from trying to figure out love's unreasonable demands.

What lessons might these tales of royal love hold for us commoners? Perhaps the most obvious is that love knows no barriers: royal-common, Romeo and Juliet, Westside Story, James Carville and Mary Matalin. You name it, but cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and even political differences prove inconsequential in matters of the heart.

Lord Kent's comment that he fell in love with his wife eventually feels so wrong to me. It lacks that key element which I feel must support any and all lovers joining together and that is a matter of love being genuine. Something uniquely genuine must permeate the connection or it never gets off the ground or sails particularly high. But how does one really know? One speaks of love with nebulous metaphors like "mysterious," or "chemistry."

Cupid's errant arrow might just as well serve as the definitive understanding of love. Just for kicks I googled "genuine love" and got this: "Genuine love is an indescribable

feeling.” Then it moves on to butterflies in the stomach. (That’s helpful.)

If I can point to Edward VIII’s abdication of the throne one last time, I believe its lesson is that real love enables us to transcend our temporal and material world. Suddenly the meaning of life becomes clear...a meaning that Margaret learned only too late.

Perhaps all this can best be summarized in the words of the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Han: “To love means to listen. The capacity of listening to ourselves is the foundation of the capacity to listen to others.”

I imagine he’s trying to teach us that understanding the elusive definition of love can only be discerned by deep listening to ourselves. We know of love when we have the patience to hear it understood within ourselves. And then we gain the capacity to listen to others and learn of their understanding of love.

By listening to others we might get over the hurdle that most couples’ therapists hear in their office, the voice that says: “Love who I am, not who you need me to be. If I can feel this from you, then I will feel safe to give you all that I have.”

And I think the feeling of “safety” in love lies at the heart of love’s genuineness. To love without looking over one’s shoulder is a blessed gift.

Shakespeare described love as “a madness most discreet.” Well yes, a little madness must always flow in a good love story. Because ultimately there are no rules by which we must conform. Love is there for all of us, and it’s so easy to make mistakes, whether ye be royalty or a commoner, or a commoner about to marry a prince.