



About the Author

Fred Fenton graduated from Harvard College and the Episcopal Divinity School. He served for 40 years as a parish priest in the dioceses of Los Angeles and Louisiana. He and his first wife, Billie, had three sons and three granddaughters. Father Fenton is a lifelong social activist. He participated in the Selma March of 1965, led protests against racial discrimination and the Vietnam War, hired one of the first women priests during his rectorship, opened a surplus foods distribution center, performed gay marriages, and currently participates in protests demanding better treatment of border families. He and his wife, Linda, live in Seal Beach, California. Readers may contact him at fentons925@gmail.com.

About *Vintage Voice*

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Stories are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the *Vintage Voice*! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cpg.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



Marriage at 84

by the Reverend Fred Fenton

Forty years of parish ministry did not prepare me for the death of my wife, Billie, after 63 years of marriage. I was devastated. My youngest son and his wife, who lived near my home in Seal Beach, California, rallied around me. They helped with a thousand details, including plans for a celebration of Billie's life. My oldest son, who lived at a distance, talked with me on the phone every day. Some of those calls lasted more than an hour.

I kept busy during the day. But coming home to an empty apartment at night left me distraught and anxious. In my 84 years, I had never lived alone. I would turn on the TV for company and watched it late into the evening. Friends at church became like family to me. I looked forward to seeing them on Sunday and accepted an invitation to lead a weekly discussion group.

A friend recommended *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, by Pema Chödrön. It presents the Buddhist teaching to live fully in the present moment. I also read Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a beautifully written account of her experience following the death of her husband. I joined a 10-week grief support group, which included three other men who had lost their wives, and I worked through all the exercises in *The Grief Recovery Handbook*.

Yet, despite my efforts to come to terms with Billie's death, friends worried about me. I looked sad and tired. At one point, I was rushed to the hospital with blood clots in both lungs. I nearly died. One pacemaker later, I returned home. The doctors could not say why the clots had developed, but I thought I knew.

Billie had a great aunt who lived to be 103. Two years before the aunt died, we visited her at the convalescent home where she lived. We found her sitting in a wheelchair outside her room necking with her boyfriend! Love and loneliness, I knew, are powerful forces.

Living Water

One helpful constant in my life even before Billie passed away was a weekday water aerobics class. I was considered "brave" for being the only man in the class, but after years of pastoring women, I was quite at ease. I especially enjoyed talking with Linda, a retired RN. We found we

agreed about everything, including religion and politics. Linda had divorced her husband 35 years earlier and decided to remain single. She had some harsh things to say about men—and was surprised I agreed with her. Of course, I excepted myself from the criticism! I also knew men who were not guilty of the male chauvinism and bad behavior she described.

Just over a year after my wife died, Linda and I talked one day about an exhibit in Los Angeles that sounded interesting. I summoned the courage to ask if I could drive her into the city to see it. That turned out to be our first date. Things developed rapidly after that, and a mere six weeks later we announced our engagement.

We asked an attorney to draft a living trust for us. After reviewing our finances, he concluded we each were bringing roughly the same amount of investments and savings to the marriage. Further, our individual pensions and Social Security payments would give us enough to live comfortably.

Over the Moon

Where and when to have a marriage ceremony? We thought a home wedding with family and friends would give everyone a chance to celebrate with us. Wrong. It was more than a year since my wife died, and Linda and I had known each other for three years. Our friends at the pool congratulated us on our engagement and said they had seen it coming. Our families had a different reaction.

Some family members said they could not bear to see me marry so soon after Billie died. She was beloved not just by me but by the whole family and, indeed, by everyone who knew her. And why would Linda marry someone 13 years older than she? Was I being taken advantage of? And from the other side, was I taking advantage of her? It was happening just too fast and unexpectedly, they said. What was the rush? The wonder of new love and the excitement of getting married had kept us from seeing the obvious: for family, it was all too soon and too much of a surprise. They needed time.

Yet time was what we felt, at our age, we didn't have to lose. We picked a date just a few weeks away and with two friends as our witnesses, were married at a beautiful, old county courthouse not far from where we live. The words of the service followed closely those of the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer.

We soon discovered why many couples our age simply live together without being married. In addition to the new living trust, we had to revise ownership and residence records at the retirement community where we live, change banking and investment accounts, amend Social Security, and obtain a new driver's license and passport for Linda. But it was all worth it. She is now Linda Fenton.

A year later, the honeymoon is still on. There are those who say marriage doesn't begin until you have survived a first fight. By that measure we are not married yet. Linda and I have not had a single disagreement about anything. We often anticipate what the other is thinking. We have a wonderful level of physical intimacy we both find nurturing and fulfilling.

Marriage at 84? Is that possible? I have discovered to my joy that it is.



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