

Two socialist rituals from 1924

[Source: David Fowler Summers, “The Labour Church and Allied Movements of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries”, PhD Diss. (Edinburgh, 1958). Summers in turn cites *Socialist Sunday Schools – A Manual* (Gateshead: National Council of British Sunday Schools, 1924).]

1. Ceremony for the welcoming and naming of a child

[Summers notes: “R. W. Sorenson, M.P. reports that this was a solemn occasion. Often a silver spoon, engraved with the child’s name, was presented. This naming service was often in place of Baptism, but it did not necessarily conflict with or displace the Christian rite as administered by Church or Chapel.”]

(The parents and immediate friends of the child should sit in the seats nearest the Conductor of the service. Instrumental music might be played at the beginning and end, but the selections should be somewhat short, and of the quieter order of music, as befitting the presence of the central figure of the ceremony, namely a small child. No solos should be sung.)

1. *Song sung by all the assembly.*

2. *Conductor speaks:-* Neighbours, friends, and fellow-citizens, we assemble here to-day in order to give loving and respectful greeting to the most beautiful symbol of humanity’s progress and future – a little child. The life of our race is three-fold – past, present, and future. The past is, in truth, a living past. The record revealed in history is the record of forefathers and foremothers who laboured and suffered, who struggled and hoped, and who have not vanished forever. Their work remains in our civilisation. The very language we speak was given to us by our ancestors. To them we owe our flesh and blood. We are the very spirit and heart of their existence and time, renewed in a generation which we call the present.

In like manner we are the begetters and creators of the age yet to come. Is not that a reason – the best of all reasons – why we should each contribute our service, each co-operate, and each try to improve both himself and the world?

All are architects of fate,
Working in these walls of time;
Some with massive deed and great,
Some with ornaments of rhyme.
Nothing useless is, or low,
Each thing in its place is best:
And what seems but idle show
Strengthens and supports the rest.
For the structure that we raise
Time is with materials filled;
Our to-days and yesterdays

Are the blocks with which we build.
Build to-day, then, strong and sure,
With a firm and ample base;
And ascending and secure
Shall to-morrow find its place.

– Longfellow

This child, brought here by its parents and kinsfolk and friends, is a representative of the morrow, of humanity's capacity to pass from the old to the new, from the good to the better. We who are gathered about it in affection, therefore, do not merely regard it as a happy addition to a family, but above and beyond that, we salute it as an emblem of the hope, the faith, and the forward looking courage of humanity at large. We meet in this public manner in order to testify our conviction that every child born to our race, of whatever nation or colour, should be honoured as a new member of Humanity. It has been nobly said that "The whole succession of men during the ages should be considered as One Man, ever living and ever learning." This child we look upon as a cherished part of that One Man of All the Ages.

As spokesman of the community, I ask by what name you wish this child to be known.

(A parent or kinsman recites the name or names, and hands the child to the Conductor who says, while all the company stand:)

On behalf of all this company present, and of society generally, I welcome this child, *(repeat full name)* into the membership of the human family, and express a heartfelt desire that its life may be blessed with health and joy, and that it may render service, in a humble sphere or in the public sphere, to the social commonwealth, its fellowship, its order, and its progress.

(The child is handed back.)

To you, parents and kinsfolk, I put the question before all this assembly: Do you promise that, so far as in you lies, you will train this child, and cause it to be trained, for a career of self-respect and self-reverence, and service to mankind?

(Parents etc.: - We promise.)

3. Song: "Hail to thee, hail to thee, child of humanity", or any other suitable selection.

(The company resume their seats.)

The joyous and homely ceremony we have just collectively performed should act as a reminder to us of our relation and our duty towards all the children born into human society, and especially in our immediate environment. The Romans had a saying that "The greatest reverence is due to a child." It is our part not only to show love and good-natured favour to children, but unfailing respect. With due allowance for the young soul's limitations and inexperience, we should, in effect, show as genuine respect to a child as to an adult. Disrespect evinced towards these little ones is, at bottom, disrespect to the supreme humanity of which we are all the offspring. Let us therefore honour the young and immature life by providing it with the best material comforts and aids, and the most efficient and humane education for which the city and the nation possess the means. No social and civic energy and wit are so well laid out as the energy and wit applied to the training of the feeling, reason and character of our young citizens. Here and now, therefore, we combine the gladness of a welcome to this child and young neighbour, with an acknowledged public and solemn obligation towards all its sisters and brothers in the community at large.

(The proceedings may close with instrumental music.)

2. Marriage ceremony

We are gathered together here, in a circle of friendship, to witness the joining of two lives. A..... B..... and C..... D..... are here to take each other's hand in the spirit of affection and honour, and to say before us (parents, brothers, sisters, and acquaintances) that they will henceforward live under the same roof, smile at the same pleasures, grieve over the same trials, face the same temptations, combine in mutual duty, and contribute a joint help to the life of the community. And the ceremony that we here perform is not a subject of interest to themselves alone. It has a meaning for each of us who support them by our presence. Their marriage is the affirmation of a principle which is the very life and health of humanity. The love which marriage expresses is the only bond of true union among the members of the great human family. When the churches say "God is love"; when the Christian teacher says, "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren"; when Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic says, "We are made for co-operation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids"; and when man and woman, in openness and sincerity, declare their affection one for the other, their voices utter, in differing words, the central truth that love is the only principle upon which society can stably rest. And that is why we, by our very presence here, are witnesses, not only of a legal form, but to the importance of an essential truth.

They who have eyes for the sin of the world rather than for its grace are quick to perceive the evils that darken every day – envy, hatred, jealousy, uncharitableness, painful competition, and war among men, classes and nations. They do not see that these are but the diseases which invade, but never master, the heart of humanity. Love is stronger than hatred, and the hand that presses in kindness is stronger than the hand that smites in scorn. The most powerful things in the world are the things that men reverence. Men reverence motherhood, fatherhood, childhood, friendship, pity, mutual love; and therefore motherhood, fatherhood, childhood, friendship, pity, and mutual love are the forces that ultimately triumph. Love is a kind of courage, and, in the hearts of the man and woman who here will wed, there is a silent, though unconscious, daring. For love stirs their life into a high resolution which steps into the midst of tasks, difficulties, sorrows, and darkness; and it pits the force of affection against the force of selfishness. They who wed tread the new road in faith, believing that their mutual tenderness will endow them with power to conquer.

And all men and women respect this spirit which utters itself in marriage. Even those who have failed to realise love in their own marriage will always regard, with a softened heart, the wedding of young lives. Whether happy or disappointed, we all recognise the hope that lies in love; and we know that love is the virtue that heals. The saddest soul is ready to come from the shadow when it hears the marriage song, and smile its blessing and wave its hand in goodwill.

But the noblest office of love is not to heal. Its noblest office is to create, to build, to renew. And though it bends with equal willingness over the sick bed and the cradle, yet it fulfils its function more finely in renewing the world's life than in comforting the world in pain and decay. Painters delight to portray Mary as the Mother of Consolation, but more often as the Madonna caressing the joyous child. Hence love should be the active principle of three great institutions – the Family, the City, and the Nation; and through these institutions it constructs, provides for, and defends the life of humanity. It makes the family a true society; and the table at which parents and children sit in mutual regard and consideration is the high altar, and the daily meal the sacrament. The city, which is too often a mere crowd of voters, will be made more and more into a republic of kindred souls and companions, as the spirit of the family penetrates our municipal life. And the nation will grow into a purer political wisdom as it becomes more inspired with the family ideal and pays homage rather to social love than to the prosperity of the market or the exploits of the soldier.

Thus, then, our assembly here is made significant by reminding us of a principle that affects the universal life of humanity. Because the principle is sacred, we invest it with serious form, and, in the name of the community, ask bride and bridegroom to speak, in trust towards each other, and in loyalty to the social life of which they form a part, and each in turn, to repeat these declarations:-

I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I A..... B..... may not be joined in matrimony to C..... D.....

I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I C..... D..... may not be joined in matrimony to A..... B.....

(And the second declaration, hand in hand)

I call upon these persons here present to witness that I A..... B..... take thee C..... D..... to be my lawful wedded wife.

I call upon these persons here present to witness that I C..... D..... take thee A..... B..... to be my lawful wedded husband.

(The Bridegroom places the ring on the Bride's finger.)

And this ring, given and received, is a token of that golden rule which is binding on husband and wife, as upon all men, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them."

(Bride and Bridegroom sit.)

To A..... and C..... B..... *(the married names)* we offer our heartfelt assurances of good wishes and hope.

It is only those who do not understand the meaning of human life who count, as vain and formal, the wishes we have just expressed. They will tell us that while the wish speaks of peace and perfection, the reality slowly spells out its tale of sorrow and defeat. Now, if sorrow and defeat were the chief sequel to human hope, hope itself would die; and human lips would utter no more expressions of congratulation. But our hearts are sometimes wiser than our heads; and, undaunted by the record of sorrows, they beat in glad anticipation of the future. And the instinct is sound; it tells of our inner conviction that love is not destined to yield in the struggle against unreason and passion.

These very wishes of ours show that we believe the newly-wedded man and wife have in themselves the capacity to build up a household in gracious union and purpose. We do not advise them as to their duties and responsibilities, for, as Paul has finely said, "Love is the fulfilling of the law". And when husband and wife co-operate in heart, their hands will learn the co-operation of the daily routine in due time and measure.

We therefore call upon the new-made man and wife, not to obey a code of domestic law, but to keep true to that fresh sentiment of mutual regard which brings them here today in happy pledge. To ourselves, not less than to them, we say:-

Think truly, and thy thought

Shall the world's famine feed;

Speak truly, and each word of thine

Shall be a fruitful seed;

Live truly, and thy life shall be

A great and noble creed.

– Horatius Bonar.

And so we stand with the newly-wed on the threshold of their home, glad with their gladness, hopeful with their hope, and trusting that we who pass their way, from time to time, or hear tidings of their work and health, may always be able to say: It is well.

(Note: It need hardly be pointed out that the Reader can omit passages in this address if greater brevity is desired.)