

In Their Own Words

Voices From the Great Beyond

by Wanda Sue Parrott



Ruth Smythers

As the cusp is crossed linking the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, while ushering in the New Millennium, FATE will publish imaginary interviews between a contemporary journalist and a deceased pioneer whose contributions led to today's New Age. Wanda Sue Parrott, a veteran newspaper reporter, poses questions each interviewee answers in his or her own words.)

Ruth Smythers, author of *Instruction and Advice for the Young Bride* (Spiritual Guidance Press, New York, 1894), typifies the post-Victorian nineteenth century's answer to today's best-known sex therapist-counselor, Ruth K. Westheimer, informally called simply "Dr. Ruth." The similarity ends, however, with first names. Outdated taboos separating spiritual love and sexuality have been dispelled and New Age couples may now choose to enter into or abstain from triune holistic relations: mentally, spiritually, AND physically.

FATE: Mrs. Smythers, your well-intentioned pamphlet made young women sound like conniving, ma-

nipulative saints, while reducing men to creatures barely one step above instinctually driven beasts. It typifies the repressive attitudes that led to the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. You were a minister's wife. Your marriage manual denies the true facts of life by attempting to denigrate and even dispense with the physical aspect of intimacy. What exactly were you trying to teach?

RS: The conduct and procedure of the intimate and personal relationship of the marriage state...

FATE: You wrote, "Sex, when it cannot be prevented, should be practiced only in total darkness." Care to elaborate?

RS: A wise bride will make it her goal never to allow her husband to see her unclothed body, and never allow him to display his unclothed body to her.

FATE: Sweeping changes have occurred since then. Women won the right to vote in 1929. Because of the women's liberation movement, an Equal Rights Amendment is expected to be passed soon, and the sexual revolution of the twentieth century gave both genders greater rights to choose their roles. In many New Age households, the woman earns the living while the man raises the children at home and enjoys being called a "house husband." As adviser to a bride-to-be in 1894, what did you prepare her to expect?

RS: On the positive side, there is the wedding itself...

FATE: June was then, and remains, the most-preferred month for weddings. New Age couples exchange vows in parks, at beaches, or even on horseback, motorcycles, or roller skates, but the traditional wedding in which the bridal party dresses formally remains the most popular. What hasn't changed?

RS: The bride is the central attraction in a beautiful and inspiring ceremony...

FATE: What did her "starring" role symbolize to you?

RS: ...her triumph in securing a male to provide for all her needs for the rest of her life.

FATE: New Age brides often earn their own income. What else did you tell brides-to-be to prepare them for the loss of their singlehood?

RS: To the sensitive young woman who has had benefits of proper upbringing, the wedding day is, ironically, both the happiest and the most terrifying day of her life. On the negative side, there is the wedding night, during which the bride must pay the piper, so to speak, by facing for the first time the terrible experience of sex.

FATE: What would you advise a bridegroom about how to approach his new wife?

RS: While the ideal husband would be one who would approach his bride only at her request, and only for the purpose of begetting offspring, such nobility and unselfishness cannot be expected from the average man.

FATE: Why not?

RS: Most men, if not denied, would demand sex almost every day.

FATE: So, what did you tell the bride?

RS: The wise bride will permit a maximum of two brief sexual experiences weekly during the first months of marriage...

FATE: And after that?

RS: She should make every effort to reduce this frequency.

FATE: How?

RS: If he attempts to kiss her on the lips she should turn her head slightly so that the kiss falls harmlessly on her cheek instead. If he attempts to kiss her anywhere else she should quickly pull the gown back in place, spring from the bed, and announce that nature calls her to the toilet.

FATE: What if he persists in being romantic?

RS: If the husband attempts to seduce her with lascivious talk, the wise wife will suddenly remember some triv-

ial non-sexual question to ask him.

FATE: Why?

RS: ...for the greater spiritual sanctity of this blessed sacrament...

FATE: Couples of 1894 stayed together for better or worse. Today, incompatible people get divorced. How was the young man of your generation prepared for physical intimacy as both husband and lover? Describe a typical first-time bridegroom, please.

RS: The husband's home, school, church, and social environment have been working together all through his life to instill in him a deep sense of guilt...he comes to the marriage couch apologetically and filled with shame, already half-cowed and subdued.

FATE: Men must have had as difficult a time adjusting to marriage as women surely did. Does this piper they paid have a name?

RS: ...the glory of God.

Wedding Superstitions Around the World

When you are advised to wear "Something borrowed, something blue," do you know why?

In Europe people used to decorate themselves and even their livestock with blue. It went on to become a lucky color for brides as well.

When it is announced that "wedding bells are ringing," do you know what that really means? Bells were for centuries regarded as a way to drive away evil spirits, particularly the "evil eye."

It is considered very good luck if the family cat comes and sits next to the bride at a wedding at home.

In England, when the banns to announce an upcoming wedding are read, it is considered unlucky for a couple to hear their own bann.

Also in England, it is very good fortune for a bride to receive a "lucky kiss" from a chimney sweep when leaving the church after a wedding.

In the United States, as well as certain foreign countries, a bridegroom who forgets his hat is unlikely to prove an unfaithful and unreliable husband.

In a number of countries, including Russia, it was the custom of mothers to give their daughters a necklace of amber beads on their wedding day. Amber was supposed to make women smell more desirable to their lovers.

Throwing rice as the couple leaves the church could also involve throwing wheat or corn, or, in the case of Greeks, sugared almonds, and was meant originally as a fertility rite. It was intended to grant them many children.

As one superstition has it, "If you marry in Lent, you'll never repent."

According to the Scottish, if the bride breaks a dish in the course of a wedding breakfast, the marriage cannot be expected to prosper.

Seeing a hare (not to be confused with a rabbit) crossing someone's path was, in Europe, regarded as so unlucky that brides would postpone their wedding day and wait until the following day.

During Medieval times, every wedding breakfast was generously supplied with lettuce, widely considered to be an aphrodisiac. Hmmm...—Sharon Carter