

Introduction

I began the first edition of this book with the story of a wedding I witnessed in the Plaza at Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2000. As I was preparing this revision eleven years later, I came upon a wedding taking place while I was visiting St. Severin, an ancient church in Paris. This was a bilingual wedding, with parts recited in the groom's French and others in the bride's American English. But in most ways it was quite familiar: the wedding march music, the common biblical readings, the overlong sermon, the soloist enthusiastic but a bit flat, the bride and groom expectant and nervous. I settled in at the back row to enjoy the ritual while trying to make out the French words.

But as the bride recited her wedding vow, I sat up in my seat. I saw the guests stir as well. The vow started with the standard promise of personal love and commitment, but this bride had a bigger picture of marriage. She committed herself to having children together and launching a family that would reach through generations in time and impact. This was more than building a private life with her husband. Rather, this vow showed they were creating something that would stretch far beyond their own lifetimes. Suddenly the stakes were higher for this new marriage, the arc much longer. This many-generations vow made me recall the overwhelming moment when I learned of the birth of my first grandchild six years before. I pictured him, with good luck and improved health care, as living into the twenty-second century. I decided that if my job as a parent had been to prepare my children for the world, my job

as a grandparent is to prepare the world for my grandchildren. The arc of a marriage, like that of parenting, is very long.

For me, a striking aspect of the bride's vows was that she was the American partner, not the European one. (I couldn't make out all of the groom's vows in French, so can't report what he said.) Europeans generally have been more focused on the solidarity between past and future generations, and many young Europeans get married only when they decide to have children. Americans approach marriage mostly as a love union for the couple; children are rarely mentioned in marriage vows. Not coincidentally, divorce is considerably higher in the United States than in countries like France. The sociologist Andrew Cherlin refers to the "marriage-go-round" in the United States in comparison to Western Europe. He notes that we have higher values and expectations of marriage as a union of soul mates, but deliver lower rates of stable marriages and families.

Some people argue that the way to resolve this contradiction between our values for lifelong marriage and our divorce rate is to change our values. One book for people considering divorce referred to "the obsolete mythology of love." The foremost myth about marriage, the falsehood most worthy of debunking, the author claimed, was "the myth of forever." The truth is that marriages end, the author observed. Holding onto the myth of permanence creates unnecessary crises in self-esteem when the marriage ends. The logic seems to be that lowering your expectations going in the front door will decrease your pain going out the back door. This is probably true, but notice the lack of any sense of the consequences for others beyond the couple. No sense here of generations to come.

Psychiatrist and prominent Fox TV commentator Keith Ablow would view that marriage counselor as being too optimistic about marriage. "The vast, vast majority of men and women," Ablow writes, "are no longer physically attracted to their spouses after five or ten years (that's being kind), if they have seen one another most of that time. Human beings just are not built to desire one another once we have flossed in the same room a hundred times and shared a laundry basket for thousands of days. . . . Marriage is a dying institution because it inherently deprives men and women of the joy of being 'chosen' on a daily basis."

New Jersey wedding consultant Sharon Naylor notes that she hears in wedding vows a lot of promises to be together “as long as our love shall last.” “I personally think it’s quite a statement on today’s times—people know the odds of divorce,” she says, adding that the rephrasing is part of a more general trend toward personalizing vows. Naylor said killing the “death vow” doesn’t mean that people don’t take their marriage promises seriously. Quite the contrary. “People understand that anything can happen in life, and you don’t make a promise you can’t keep. When people get divorced, they mourn the fact that they said ‘til death do us part’—you didn’t keep your word in church (if they had a church wedding). Some people are in therapy because they promised ‘til death do us part’—it is the sticking point in the healing of a broken marriage. The wording can give you a stigma of personal failure.” For those who have expressed interest in eliminating “til death do us part,” Naylor has suggested going with “For as long as our marriage shall serve the greatest good.” “You will promise to be loyal as long as love shall last—you don’t want to promise ‘when you treat me like crap,’” she said.

For good reasons that I will explain, most of us want something more than a commitment for the foreseeable future. And our children certainly want more out of our unions. Let me be clear that I am not for any couple to get married if they are not ready for marriage or interested in it. Feeling forced into marriage could be a disaster for these couples. Nor am I prescribing marriage for every couple who are cohabiting but have already made a permanent commitment to each other and told the world about it. Americans don’t respond well to being told what to do with their personal lives. I am more concerned about the new cultural pessimism about the possibility of permanent commitment in marriage, and how this pessimism, fueled by the consumer culture, by high divorce rates, and by some professional experts, is undermining the prospects for permanent commitment in marriage.

Sadly, this undermining seems to be mostly affecting people who could benefit greatly from stable marriages in an uncertain world. Over the past two decades, demographers have documented a growing marriage gap between college-educated couples and couples with less education. College-educated couples are experiencing

lower divorce rates while other groups continue to have historically high rates. What's more, college-educated couples are following a life trajectory that leads to the best outcomes for adults and children in American society: they finish their education, then marry, then have children, and then stay married while raising their children. Working-class and low-income couples across the racial and ethnic groups are far more apt to have riskier trajectories: interrupted education, children before marriage, not marrying at all, or marrying and divorcing.

Sociologists like Kathryn Edin have shown how low-income, urban women and men still aspire to stable marriage but are skeptical that they can pull it off; they see marriage as the sweet but elusive icing on the cake after they achieve a middle-class lifestyle and find a sexually faithful partner. Marriage is not so much part of the journey but a destination at the end of a journey that already includes children and multiple cohabiting partners and breakups.

Given these trends, I worry that healthy, lifelong marriage is becoming another privilege of those with lots of resources in American culture. Children don't get to choose the couple who conceive them and the environment that either supports or undermines the ability of their parents to love, honor, and cherish each other—or to move on down the road. We have to believe in something more than our own relationships if lifelong, flourishing marriage is to be widely available to future generations. It's like a commitment to good education or health care: it's not enough to support health care and schooling for one's own family; we have to support opportunities for everyone or our own family will suffer the consequences, perhaps not immediately, but in future generations.

Because everything I say in this book hangs on the value of lifelong commitment, I will make the case here for its value. For starters, there is no question that most of us still desire a lifelong marriage commitment. If you are married, chances are that you pledged to stay married as long as you both shall live, and that you meant it. If you hope to be married some day, chances are that you plan to recite a similar pledge. Polls of young people show two things: that most still want a permanent marital commitment some day but are becoming skeptical that it's possible in today's world. The longing is

still there, but the worries are greater than in any previous generation ever studied.

Why the pessimism about long-term commitment? Partly it's because of the historically high divorce rates. The younger generation has lived through their parents' experiments with marriage and divorce. Partly it's because of the growing skepticism of therapists and other professionals who have to work every day with what is real, not necessarily with what is ideal. Marriages come and go, many of my colleagues say, so let's accept that fact and make the best of it, rather than being nostalgic for an era of stable marriages that had their own dark sides. As one prominent family therapist used to say, speaking of his goals for couples, "The good marriage, the good divorce—it matters not." A sign of a cultural shift is that now he does not view his goals that way any longer, just as the minister who invented the marriage vow "as long as we both shall love" has recanted.

Family sociologists point out that the divorce rate goes up in every nation where women become educated and achieve economic independence. Let's accept the inevitability, they say, that many people will opt for divorce when they are not happy in their marriage and that many other people will avoid marriage by living together. The important thing is healthy, supportive "relationships," whether or not these are marriage relationships intended to last a lifetime.

This skeptical view of permanent marital commitment has much going for it, because it seems to fit the realities of our time. And it underlines the variety of choices now available for mating. But ultimately, it betrays our deepest longings for stable intimate bonds. It surrenders us to the "me-first" consumer culture in which keeping one's options open is seen as the key to success in life. Loyalty and permanent commitments are on the decline everywhere, from athletes to their teams and teams to their cities, from companies to their employees and employees to their companies. Why would we expect marriage to escape the pattern?

In fact, the idea of permanent commitment runs counter to everything we know about a market-based world, and especially the technology-driven, dot.com world we now live in. Success in today's turbomarket economy requires a mind-set that is the opposite of

long-term commitments. It requires ruthlessness in shedding what no longer meets current needs and desires. The old must give way when it is no longer useful. The factories that made slide rules had to close when calculators became common. Community banks are gobbled up by conglomerates or they wither and die. When a national video store company misses the window to get into Internet delivery of movies, bankruptcy soon follows. Is it surprising that the nation that leads the world in forging the new economy also leads the world in divorce?

The irony is that many experts and some sophisticated couples are giving up on permanent marriage at the very time when the scientific research is showing us that this kind of relationship is good for us. Of course some marriages are destructive, but the evidence now is overwhelming that married people are healthier physically and psychologically, live longer, have more money, have fewer bad habits like smoking and excessive drinking, and are overall happier. Demographer Linda Waite and sociologist Paul Amato, among others, have summarized this research, including studies that have followed large groups of people from before marriage to after getting married. This research makes it clear that marriage confers important benefits on individuals, benefits that increase over the years, and not just that healthier people are the ones who get married in the first place. These benefits occur for both men and women, contrary to the popular misconception that marriage benefits men but not women.

And these are just the benefits for adults. Research has demonstrated convincingly what most people have known all along: that a stable, loving, two-parent family is the optimal environment for children's health and development in our society. The only dispute is whether children are better off when a failed marriage ends in divorce or the parents stay together. The most recent studies on this subject, surveying large numbers of families followed over many years, indicate that children do better when their unhappily married parents stay together as long as the parents do not engage in high levels of conflict. In Paul Amato and Alan Booth's major book-length study, *A Generation at Risk*, seventy percent of the marriages that ended were low-conflict relationships; in these cases, children

on average did much more poorly than if their dissatisfied but low-conflict parents stayed together. In the thirty percent of high-conflict marriages, the children did better after the divorce. Other studies are pointing to the same conclusion—that children do better in homes with stable marriages as long as the parents are reasonably cooperative.

Although statistical averages do not reflect every individual experience, and no one should be expected to stay with an abusive or irresponsible spouse who won't change, the research is now compelling on the benefits of sustained marriage commitment. And these same benefits do not show up in cohabiting couples, except for cohabiting couples who are engaged to be married. The skeptics may be correct that this permanent marital commitment is difficult, but they are wrong in suggesting that most people are just as well off in other kinds of relationships. Marriage matters greatly.

Beyond what the research tells us, permanent commitment in marriage may be even more important in today's fragmented world than it ever was. Most of us do not dwell in lifelong communities where we can count on friends and neighbors being there decade after decade. Many of our grown children scatter around the continent or the world. Our siblings do the same. One of the first benefits I discovered about being married was the freedom to plan a long-term future with my wife. The marital horizon extends to the edge of our vision in a way that no other relationship does. And this allows for a degree of emotional safety to be fully ourselves, to struggle more openly than with anyone else in our lives, and to know another person more fully and deeply than is possible any other way.

Marriage with the long view comes with the conviction that nothing will break us up, that we will fight through whatever obstacles get in our way, that if the boat gets swamped we will bail it out, that we will recalibrate our individual goals if they get out of alignment, that we will share leadership for maintaining and renewing our marriage, that we will renovate our marriage if the current version gets stale, that if we fight too much or too poorly we will learn to fight better, that if sex is no longer good we will find a way to make it good again, that we will accept each other's weaknesses that can't be fixed, and that we will take care of each other in our

old age. This kind of commitment is not made just once, but over and over through the course of a lifetime. We cling to it during the dark nights of the soul that come to nearly every marriage, times when the love is hard to feel but the promise keeps us together. The playwright Thornton Wilder said it well:

I didn't marry you because you were perfect. I didn't even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them—it was that promise.

I wrote this book because I believe that the core social and personal challenge of our time is how to make loving, permanent marriage work for ourselves and our children. I fear that no social program, no educational achievement program, no job program, no anticrime program, and no amount of psychotherapy and Prozac will solve our society's problems unless we figure out how men and women can sustain permanent bonds that are good for them, their children, and their communities. Ours can't be the marriages of our parents and grandparents, because we live in an era that aspires to greater equality between men and women and to higher levels of emotional intimacy in marriage. But our communities are no less dependent on our success in forging bonds of love and cooperation in the home.

I wrote this book because I think that while our contemporary culture celebrates the consumer pleasures of getting married, it undermines our prospects for a permanent marriage. In a "me-first" world, marriage is a "we-first" contradiction.

I wrote this book because, even if we have an unbending commitment to our mates, most of us are blind to how we lose our marriages by slow erosion if we do not keep replenishing the soil. Modern marriages require more mindfulness than marriages of the past, because we expect more of marriage, but we have not yet woken up

to that fact. We tend to focus on everything else but our marriage as the years go by. Success in marriage today requires two ingredients that no previous generation has ever had to put together: powerful commitment combined with an intentional focus on maintaining and growing one's marriage. Commitment without intentionality leads to stable but stale marriages. Intentionality without commitment leads to lively marriages that cannot endure bad weather.

I wrote this book because I think that friends and even professionals, such as psychotherapists, sometimes do more harm than good for our marriages, especially when we bring our complaints to them. I want people to be better able to find support for their marriages and to resist well-intentioned undermining from other people in their lives. A colleague told me that when she complains to her friends about her husband, their immediate response is often "Why are you still there?" She is completely committed to her marriage and is puzzled and troubled by her friends' well-intentioned but sabotaging comments.

I wrote this book to point out how we maintain too much privacy about our marriages and instead show how we can build supportive communities. A big part of my job as a marriage and family therapist is to show couples how widely shared their problems are. Think about how often most of us discuss the challenges, strategies, and joys of parenting, but how little we share the challenges, strategies, and joys of marriage. Solitary marriages are at-risk marriages in today's world. At our weddings, we take our citizenship papers in marriage as a publicly recognized social bond, but we have not learned how to practice this citizenship by taking responsibility for the welfare of all of our marriages.

This book differs from many other books on marriage because it does not deal extensively with communication skills, conflict management skills, and sexual relations. I wanted to write a book about matters that have not been emphasized as strongly in other books, in particular the themes of commitment, rituals of intentional marriage, and connections to community.

Updates to this book were based on research and cultural change over the past decade and my recent work with many couples

on the brink of divorce. When I tell the stories of married couples in this book, I have disguised their identities. Some descriptions represent composite stories.

My thanks to Kitty Moore, my editor at The Guilford Press, who dreamed up the idea for this book with me, encouraged me to say what I wanted to say, gave me wise feedback on the first edition, encouraged me to write a second edition, and went several extra miles to make sure I was saying what I wanted to say. I am grateful to the many hundreds of couples who have trusted me with their stories, their strategies, and their pains over the past thirty-five years of my work as a marriage and family therapist. Although the stories I tell in this book reflect what they have taught me, I have disguised their identities and sometimes combined the experiences of different couples.

For a man of many words, I don't know how to express the fullness of my debt to my wife, Leah. No course, no professional training or experience, no workshop, no book—and none of these combined—has taught me as much about marriage as Leah has. She is a presence on every page.

While writing this book, I have thought of myself as in a relationship with you as a reader. I even noticed that I shared more personal stories in the second half of the book, after we had spent more “time” together. I would love to hear from you if you want to share your stories, to reflect on what reading this book has meant to you, or to tell me how you are taking action for your own marriage or the marriages in your community. You can contact me at *www.takebackyourmarriage.com*.