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Reinventing Marriage

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In 1980, my father was approaching the age of 70 while I was coming up on 40. One day I said to him, "Dad, it seems like everyone I know has been divorced." "Son," he responded, "I don't know anyone who is divorced. We all stayed married." He was referring to the dozens of close friends a much-loved, suburban, upper middle-class businessman like himself had accumulated over his lifetime.

Our societal myths about marriage blind us to an astonishing reality: In just one generation an institution in which most of us still believe has been largely abolished -- even as we continue to marry and divorce, dutifully carrying on as if nothing had happened, like Pod People in a trance.

"I believe in marriage and will keep doing it till I get it right," said a 50-year-old friend some years ago, his life in ruins after a disastrously unhappy third marriage that had left him bankrupt, living in a tiny apartment and with little reason to believe that he would get it right the fourth time.

This blind devotion to the institution of marriage and the nuclear family is, from a "rational" perspective, nothing short of amazing. We have accepted fundamental changes in dozens of other institutions and customs once thought immutable -- slavery, Jim Crow, child labor, the horse and buggy, virginity, male-only suffrage and sports teams, world wars -- the list is endless.

But we have been unable to accept the changes that are occurring in marriage.

Our politicians, church leaders and many parents continue to speak of the institution as it existed a century ago even though they themselves, not to mention most citizens, are no longer living it. In fact, the failure of the conventional marriage has produced a curious paradox. Those politicians and preachers who speak most of preserving it are in fact its greatest problem -- since the version they promote has become unviable. Only those willing to challenge the current orthodoxy and experiment with marriage offer any real hope of saving it. Marriage will fundamentally change or die in coming decades, and only those willing to change it can hope to preserve it.

Conventional marriage's continuing "irrational" hold on our minds, even as it works less and less in our lives, is rooted in something very deep and beautiful in the human psyche. The romantic ideal, Joseph Campbell reminded us, goes back to the Middle Ages and the tales of King Arthur's court. Something deep within us longs to meet our Beloved, who will complete, love, honor and care for us in sickness and in health till death do us part. My perfect mate will understand and accept me: We will always be able to tell each other

the truth, make beautiful love, laugh, sing, and take romantic walks in the moonlight.

How beautiful it is for those couples who achieve these ideals! We all know a few. And yet, how very, very sad it is for the rest of us, the vast majority, who have not met that perfect mate and/or been unable to sustain a relationship with them.

The issue isn't just the "divorce rate" hovering at 50 percent, but the "marriage satisfaction rate" among the 50 percent who remain married. I've asked hundreds of people over the years the same question: "Think of the married couples you know. What's your gut feeling about the percentage who are truly happy?" The answer is rarely more than 10 to 20 percent; my own instincts put the number even lower among those I know.

Our society, in short, is promoting an institution that only works, to be generous, for some 10 to 20 percent of us.

The situation demands compassion more than anger or ridicule. Hillary Clinton was right when she said that people were "mean" (not to mention hypocritical and self-serving) in how they treated the problems she and her husband were experiencing in their marriage. This reaction is, unfortunately, fairly typical. There is something about dealing honestly with marriage that triggers people's defensiveness and anger as do few other issues.

That something is suffering.

Unwilling to face the pain in our own marriages, we often attack people and situations that evoke it. The widespread attacks on those who criticize conventional marriage are evidence of the unhappiness it is producing. For if our suffering is precisely the distance between our reality and our expectations, there is probably no institution that is causing more pain in America today. We expect to meet the perfect mate. The reality we encounter is something far different.

And that gap between expectation and reality spawns more ills than one can bear to enumerate: first and foremost the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children, the insecurity they are forced to endure as their parents spend much of their time bickering, fighting, living emotionally deadened lives often resembling zombies -- and often wind up divorcing anyway.

And the toll on the adults: the constant lying, arguing, repressed anger, passive aggression, adultery, physical and emotional abuse, addictions to cigarettes, alcohol and drugs of all kinds including skyrocketing anti-depressant use, stress, workaholism, obesity, health problems and, most frightening of all: addiction to routines, television and emotional deadness that amount to a kind of death years before our physical death.

The marriage trance

Let's be honest here, dear reader, especially we baby boomers who are, after all, approaching our deaths. No point in denying the truth anymore, at least to ourselves, even if we dare not speak it aloud to mates or children. Do you remember what you thought and hoped your marriage would be? Now, ask yourself:

- * How often do you and your mate genuinely feel and express tender love for each other?
- * How often do you honestly communicate about your vulnerabilities, fears and disappointments?
- * How much genuine, heartfelt feeling is there in your day-to-day interactions? How much time do you really spend looking at each other, crying and laughing together, genuinely "making love" rather than taking or avoiding sex?
- * How much of your marriage consists of routine, formulaic interactions, often delivered in a sing-song voice, in which you and your mate tiptoe around sensitive topics like peasants walking through a minefield?
- * How regularized has become even the times you see each other, let alone communicate: maybe an hour over dinner if the TV isn't going, sex on Saturday night, a few hours together on Sunday?
- * How much time is spent covertly or overtly trying to convince the other that they are wrong about key points you have been debating for years, and that you are right?
- * What is the gap between the accommodation your marriage has become and your original conception of what it would be?

If most of us answer such questions honestly (I don't like the answer when I ask such questions about my own marriage), we see that the wonder is not that the divorce rate is so high, but that it is so low.

The greatest tragedy of all, however, is that marriage can be a source of aliveness and love and happiness -- if we dare free up our minds and allow it to be transformed. The abolition of marriage is not a realistic solution. The romantic ideal, our genuine desire for affiliation, our dread of aloneness, the good a happy marriage can do for children, are too deeply engrained for that.

What is needed is not abolition, but a rebirth of imagination. Our society has engrained within all of us dozens of expectations, conscious and unconscious, about what a marriage "should" be: our obligation to visit our spouse's parents whether we wish to or not, the notions that couples should always spend their vacations or most of their free time together, share bedrooms and be sexually faithful to each other, that they should stay together "for the children," however miserable they may be, that living a deadened life together is preferable to taking a chance on spending significant periods apart -- the list is endless.

Each "should" is a brick in our prisons. If marriage is to be saved and re-invigorated as an institution, if our society is to be saved from the ills it spawns, each couple must be encouraged to invent their own version.

The strongest case for doing so is not only re-invigorating our own lives, but saving our children and grandchildren. One watches the nuptials of young people today with

horrified fascination, as they ardently make vows statistics indicate they will likely break -- after years of untold suffering for themselves and the children they bring into the world. Like lambs being led to slaughter, our youth today are being subjected to a kind of brainwashing caused by our failure to be able to imagine an alternative that works.

No more bricks. The only "should" that can work is that "there should be no shoulds." Those who choose to marry should be encouraged to create their own versions of marriage, based on their natures and needs, rather than a societal prescription or unsustainable romantic images from another era.

In a moment, we shall look at ways to re-imagine marriage or relationships. To really understand the imperative for doing so, however, it is first necessary to take a deeper look at why most marriages not only don't but can't work.

Why most marriages can't work

It is common to attribute the failure of marriage to societal changes since the end of World War II: rising expectations among the '60s generation for individual happiness; the impact of the sexual revolution and the Pill; growth eroding the economic imperatives that forced many pre-war couples to stay together; women's liberation; less willingness to delay gratification, perhaps partly caused by growing up in the shadow of nuclear annihilation, and so forth.

These societal changes, however, primarily explain the skyrocketing divorce rate. They don't really explain why sustained "marriage satisfaction" is so low. Although my father's generation did not divorce, their marriages were surely no happier than our own. Yes they stayed together -- but at what a cost!

Many experts suggest that phenomena like child sexual abuse, alcoholism and domestic abuse were as high as or higher than today -- they were simply less discussed. The fundamental reason we had a sexual revolution was that people were so sexually frustrated in the pre-'60s era, or were forced to live lives of even greater lying and hypocrisy than today. Betty Friedan's call for the liberation of the American housewife would have been ignored if middle-class women were really happy doing the laundry and washing the carpets. And the repression of emotions, the lack of honesty, the inability to discuss problems openly, the failure to even tell kids "I love you," let alone live it, was far higher.

No, to understand why marriage so rarely works in our society one must go far deeper than bashing either the '60s or the conservatives who are now trying to close the barn door after the horse has left.

One thinker/practitioner who has gone deep enough to offer a comprehensive explanation for both the near-universality of our outward devotion to marriage and its inner dissolution is Dr. Robert Firestone, a Santa Barbara-based psychiatrist who has been practicing for nearly 40 years and written seven books, including works on relationship, child-rearing, suicide and therapy. His latest book, *The Fear of Intimacy*, tackles the issues of divorce and marriage head-on. To summarize, Firestone believes the following:

* We are all emotionally injured by our parents as infants (because they were injured by their parents), and to preserve our sanity develop defenses to protect ourselves.

When we learn we will die, usually between age 3 and 8, this knowledge reinforces our defenses as we must now not only protect ourselves against parental neglect but our deaths.

* Our primary defense is the "fantasy bond," in which we form an illusion that we are bonded with our parents, that they will always give us the emotional love and security we desire, and protect us from discomfort and death.

* When we become adults, we carry this fantasy bond with us into our relationships and marriages, looking to our mates to provide the nurturance we wished from our parents. The most dramatic example is when we "fall in love" with people we barely know, clearly demonstrating the fantasy and emotional hunger that we bring into our marriages.

This analysis clearly explains why the present form of marriage doesn't work for most of us. For marriage to genuinely succeed, each partner must be committed to the growth of the other. But most of us come into the relationship projecting our emotional hunger and need for security onto our partner -- a role he or she declines and in fact wishes we will play for them. It is clearly a recipe for disaster. Most of us have neither the training nor desire to provide the ingredients needed to make the marriage work: a willingness of both partners to (1) challenge their own defense systems and support the other's desire to individuate; and (2) practice emotionally alive and honest communication.

To Firestone's analysis we may add the delicate issue of sexual fidelity. We are the first generation to feel that we have a "right" to good sex, a view that is reinforced by our movies, TV shows and music. Most couples, however, find that they do not remain sexually attracted to their partners over time, in part because of routine, in part because of the deadening effect of maintaining each other's defenses.

The Clintons, Gingriches, Kennedys and Gary Harts are only the most visible tips of the iceberg that results. There may be no single issue causing more unhappiness, emotional chaos, deadening of feeling and "death before dying" today than our difficulty in reconciling our sexual expectations with the reality of marriage.

Firestone suggests that the fundamental problem for our marriages is our fear of intimacy. We fear the genuine intimacy that results from making oneself vulnerable. We are unwilling to challenge the defensive systems responsible for our psychological survival to date; to separate emotionally; to give our partner their freedom and pursue our own destiny without the false props of imagined security; tolerate the anxiety that comes with freedom; and, above all, to develop a simple, honest marriage that more closely approximates our relationships with our best friends than our fantasy about the perfect mate or ultimate rescuer.

Firestone believes that if we are willing to take these risks, to undergo this "hero's journey," it may well be possible to transform failed marriages into healthy and vital ones.

What he and others recommend as necessary to do so, however, amounts to a virtual reinvention of the institution.

Can this institution be saved?

How might we transform marriage into an institution that works? What alternatives might we want to experiment with? Nowhere is our failure of imagination about marriage more evident than in the lack of serious national debate on such questions. Most of our marriage counselors seek more to adapt people to a failed institution than create a new one. Prozac may reduce the pain of a difficult marriage. It is unlikely to stimulate the creativity needed to reinvent it. Given the lack of serious debate, none of us can claim to know what will work.

It is possible, however, to lay out a wide range of possibilities. If enough of us try enough of them, perhaps over time the institution can be transformed. The following list is meant to be suggestive. It is obvious that such suggestions will not work for everyone. The point is to promote a spirit of experimentation, not to pretend to have real answers -- which will only come if enough of us are willing to take enough risks for solutions to emerge out of practice.

1. Regular counseling: Although he said it with a smile, meditation teacher Jack Kornfield meant it: "The day to begin marriage therapy is the day you get married." And he was probably being too conservative. Couples could benefit by beginning the proper kind of therapy long before marriage, to see if they are willing to undertake the risks necessary to break defensive patterns and create vital connections that can be sustained. It is clear that any relationship can benefit from counseling aimed at breaking fantasy bonds and encouraging couples to create relationships without "shoulds," based on their true natures.

Firestone advocates that couples engage in both individual and group therapy aimed at (1) open acknowledgement of defenses; (2) honest communication, including open discussion of negative feelings one is experiencing toward one's mate; (3) giving up the fantasy that the other can satisfy our psychological needs; (4) pursuing one's own freedom and self-actualization, and supporting one's mate's efforts to do the same; (5) committing to remaining open and vulnerable throughout the marriage, which requires both that each mate express difficult feelings openly and that they not act them out in ways that restrict the other's honesty or freedom.

Interestingly enough, he does not recommend "couples therapy" per se. Believing that marriage problems derive from each individual's defense system, he emphasizes the need for both partners to take responsibility for their own emotional hunger and/or tendency to withdraw -- rather than using techniques that encourage each partner to accommodate the other's defense system.

If we are willing to do this work, he says, our reward can be vital and exciting marriages that are far more fulfilling than living alone. The key qualities of such marriages, he suggests, are the deepest sort of friendship and a basic simplicity and lack of drama.

2. Create friendship circles: One of the most interesting aspects of Firestone's work is the extent to which it has been developed through a circle of friends that have lived near each other and worked together for more than two decades. He reports that they have found a key to improving their marriages: having a network of friends who provide such vital functions as helping each other with child care and reducing the burden on one partner to supply all the emotional needs of the other.

If we are to save marriage and the family, we may need to explore ways of explicitly seeking to build such friendship circles, which are somewhere between the isolated nuclear family on the one hand, and the commune or extended family on the other.

3. Integrate spiritual practice into marriage: As spiritual teachers Stephen and Ondrea Levine say: When there were just the two of them, there were problems; when they brought God into their relationship, it worked. Leaving the issue of God to the side, there seems little question that a key to saving marriage can be both parties developing a spiritual practice that allows them to shift their primary identity from the marriage to something larger.

As we have seen, perhaps the primary marriage problem is conditioned behavior stemming from one's childhood. A spiritual practice can be an indispensable aid in reducing the impact of this conditioning on the couple's interactions. The author, for example, finds meditation invaluable in his marriage. Functionally, when I find myself caught up in "relationship escalation," I try to break my conditioned responses to my wife by meditating. This allows me to stop being run by my primal emotions and to try and look at things from both my wife's and my own "non-conditioned" point of view.

On a deeper level, regular meditation, prayer, yoga or other spiritual practices can shift our identity from the various roles we play in our marriage to our Higher Self, which both wants to love and be loved and is able to place the love of the marriage in the context of the love of the universe. If both partners are engaging in such practices simultaneously, it can be critical not only to reduce the negative impact of childhood conditioning but, more importantly, to create the space and light and perspective necessary for genuine love to take root.

4. Change attitudes about serial marriages:

I recently had lunch with Mike, a 16-year-old whose mother has remarried, but remains good friends with his father whom she divorced six years ago. (As with the other "example" couples in this article, Mike's name has been changed to protect his privacy.) Mike said that he was far happier with the new arrangement than when his parents had been living under the same roof all the time, loved all four of his present parents and felt loved by them, and was particularly happy that his biological father and mother had remained good friends.

Mike's story is atypical, as is the friendship between his parents. But it can become the norm -- and indeed must be if we are to save marriage as an institution. The simple fact is that more baby boomers have been involved in serial marriages than have remained married to one person their entire life. Serial marriages have become as much a norm as single ones.

There are legitimate as well as unhealthy reasons for this phenomenon. While many leave marriages because they cannot successfully individuate, many others simply find themselves growing differently from their mates. Just as we change our friends or careers as we develop new interests, many of us find that we also want to change our partners. We may well do better the second time around, knowing more about our true nature, what we are capable of in marriage, and better able to find a mate with whom we are compatible.

The argument against promoting serial marriage as a norm, of course, is that it is harmful to the children. But as the story of Mike indicates, that is a myth. There is no real evidence, and certainly no logic, to suggest that a child is better off living in one household with two unhappy biological parents vs. growing up in two households composed of four far happier parents. And, whatever one's beliefs on this question, the fact is that serial marriages have become far more prevalent than not. Among other things, accepting the legitimacy of serial marriage could reduce the fears on the part of children that they will be abandoned if their parents divorce.

5. Lead individual lives: Karen and Arthur are a vigorous couple in their 60s who have been together for more than 30 years. They say that they are now more in love than ever before, their sex life is at its peak, and they feel more intimate than at any time in their relationship -- in large part because they now live on separate coasts nine months a year, visiting each other frequently and spending their summers together. They say that years of fighting, breakups and near-divorce could have been avoided had they chosen this option far earlier in their marriage.

As couples learn to separate psychologically and stop looking for their mates to satisfy their emotional hunger, they will likely want to experiment with leading more separate lives. The key principle is to spend time together -- voluntarily -- when both parties choose to do so. They may decide, for example:

- * to spend free time with others, of either sex, rather than their mates
- * to sleep in separate beds or rooms
- * to take separate vacations
- * to pursue separate interests
- * to live in separate homes.

Once again, this may not work for everyone or even most. But if we are to save marriage, we can no longer assume that couples "should" live together in any particular way.

6. Separate romance and child-raising: Shortly after breaking up with his girlfriend, a good friend of mine, Jerry, decided to have a baby with a lesbian psychologist. They drew up a contract and, using artificial insemination, conceived a boy who is now 8 years old. They live within a few blocks of each other, and Tom spends half a week at each home. He now has four "parents," his father and mother having both entered new

relationships. Jerry reports that the arrangement has worked extremely well.

There is a strong case for separating romance and child-rearing. The simple fact is that the people we fall in love with are often not necessarily the best parents we would choose for our child. While it can be argued that the "ideal" is a child conceived by two loving parents, life, as we noted, is far different.

There seems to be no question that Tom is far better off than had he been conceived by two parents who subsequently went through a bitter divorce -- as are tens of millions of children in America today. And, with four loving adults with a direct interest in his well-being, he is undoubtedly better off than the average child of a marriage between partners living out their fantasy bonds.

7. Make marriage harder and divorce easier: Dennis Rodman and Carmen Electra's marriage appears not to have produced progeny during its several-day duration.

And not everyone who goes through a divorce winds up homeless like the distinguished-looking, white-haired former millionaire who was too proud to borrow money from his friends, whom I once picked up hitchhiking through Florida. But nothing illustrates the sheer idiocy of our present attitudes toward marriage more than the fact that it takes little more than \$10 and shrieking hormones to get married, while tens of thousands of couples are forced to go through some of the most horrible experiences of their lives in order to dissolve miserable marriages that have tormented them and their children for years.

Our politicians and preachers preach the "sanctity" of marriage -- even as they dishonor it by making it so easy to get married and so hard to get divorced through property laws and guilt-tripping that make it as difficult as possible for people to terminate unhappy unions that should never have been entered into in the first place.

A visitor from another planet would be stunned to discover that we require our youth to study subjects like geometry and algebra that most will never use, but do not insist they take courses on marriage and child-rearing -- among the most important functions they will perform as adults.

Given the high societal cost of unhappy marriages, and the pain they cause children, a sane society would obviously make it far harder to get married, requiring students to study realistic courses on marriage and child-rearing throughout high school and college; requiring people to undertake relationship counseling if not therapy before they get married; encouraging couples to live together before marriage to find if they are in fact compatible, while discouraging them from having children until the trial period had been successfully traversed.

We would at the same time move to make divorce far easier through: encouraging all people, not just the rich, to sign binding prenuptial agreements that would include joint custody agreements for any children born during the marriage; discouraging the practice of couples jointly buying homes, by having each individual put up an agreed-upon share of equity that automatically reverts to them upon dissolution of the marriage; supporting single parents raising children on their own.

8: Separate marriage and sexual fidelity: The most sensitive, difficult and potentially most important step to saving marriage is to separate it from the issue of sexual fidelity. This obviously will not work for most, and for the record this author is not there himself. But it seems obvious that the only way that marriage can be saved over the long run for many couples is if they are willing to permit each other sexual freedom. Sexual jealousy is incredibly painful. But the "death compact" that requires many young people accept sexual frustration for decades on end in order to remain married has proven even more fatal to the institution.

Reliable figures do not exist, of course, but let us estimate generously that one-third of couples are capable of monogamously achieving sustained sexual satisfaction throughout the course of their marriages. And let us assume, again generously, that although another one-third do not enjoy sexual passion in their marriage after an early phase, they are able to accommodate it because of a low sex drive and/or the satisfaction they receive from other aspects of the marriage such as children and security. That still leaves one-third of the married population forced to choose between varying degrees of sexual frustration and remaining married.

The classic solution for this group, of course, has long been adultery. But covert sex is often incompatible with vital, healthy marriages. The benefits affairs provide in reducing sexual frustration tend to be canceled out by the deceit involved. It can't be emphasized enough that honest communication and deep, soulful friendship are keys to a good marriage. It is hard to have such honest friendships when one party is lying to the other, or bottling up jealous emotions that poison them.

Joan created an interesting alternative, however unusual it may seem to the rest of us. About 15 years ago she decided that she really did love her husband and, knowing him as well as she did, that he would be far happier in life if he had the option of sleeping with other women. They agreed that they would give it a try, with two basic conditions: everything would be aboveboard and open, and Joan would know and approve of the women involved. This solution has worked for this couple, as have variations of such arrangements for a half-dozen other marriages of my acquaintance -- including women who have various sexual partners.

In each of these cases, by the way, sex happens to be one-on-one, is simple, friendly, satisfying and devoid of the psychodrama that characterizes so many adulterous relationships.

It is hard to imagine not loosening the societal prescription that marriage requires fidelity if we wish to save the institution -- at least for the significant portion of cases where one partner or the other is experiencing significant sexual frustration that they find difficult to control. Working through sexual jealousy is painful. But the alternative is often worse: a slow-growing cancer that destroys the marriage from within, whatever the external shell that is maintained.

Toward a transformation of marriage

The deepest question concerning the future of marriage and family in our society relates to the question of death anxiety. If Firestone and other existential thinkers are correct,

death anxiety is one of the key underlying causes of failure in marriage. We pull back from investing too much in the marriage in part because the loss of our spouse or children then becomes even more difficult to contemplate. And deep love can trigger painful feelings about our own deaths that we have been repressing from early childhood.

If this is correct, it may be that there can be no way to build healthy marriages unless individuals -- and eventually society -- are willing to address the issue of death anxiety more directly.

To imagine challenging our own defenses against death anxiety, and those of the pooled individual defenses we call society, is to fully appreciate how much courage it will take to transform marriage into an institution that works.

Having transformed so many other institutions and customs over time, it is time now to take on the matrimonial bond. Enough pioneers have already showed the way, often at great personal cost. It is now time for the rest of us to show similar courage. There is no formula. But each of us can demand something better for ourselves, our mates and our children -- and in so doing transform marriage the way social revolutions have always occurred: person by person, family by family, year by year.

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