

The Experts' Story of Marriage

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This essay is a criticism of recent expert opinion on marriage and, more broadly, of expertise rooted in social scientific understandings of marriage. In making this criticism, I will consider two questions: First, what story do experts tell us about the meaning and purpose of marriage? If the expert literature represented our only cultural narrative on marriage, how might we regard the institution? And, second, how does expert opinion, rooted in the tradition of scientific inquiry, shape our contemporary thinking and discourse on marriage?

The expert story of marriage, as told in the scholarly and textbook literature, represents a failure of critical thinking, a betrayal of the intellectual's role, and a destructive departure from a long-established tradition of thought on marriage. The result is an impoverished body of thought and an enfeebled public discourse on marriage.

This essay is divided into four sections. The first describes the scholarly assault on marriage in the 1970s and 1980s. It focuses on academic sociology. The second attends to the narrative, or story-making, elements of expert opinion on marriage. It focuses on contemporary textbooks. The third considers expert opinion as a particular way of knowing about marriage. It looks at a competing epistemology of marriage rooted in humor, proverbial wisdom, and moral opinion. The final section offers suggestions for improving our discourse on marriage.

I

*"The meaning in marriage today must be independently forged by a man and woman who have the freedom to find their own resources for being and being together . . . Only by writing their own open contract can couples achieve the flexibility they need to grow."*¹

*"It seems not at all unthinkable that we may one day arrive at the idea not of an all-or-nothing marital status, or an either-or one, but one of degrees of being married. 'How committed are you?' we may ask, rather than merely 'What is your marital status.'"*²

¹ Nena O'Neill and George O'Neill, *Open Marriage: A New Life Style for Couples* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1972), 43.

² Jessie Bernard, *The Future of Marriage* (NY: World Publishing, 1972), 92.

Few would contend that marriage is an unimportant or unworthy subject for reflection. Yet when we analyze public discourse today, we find little discussion of marriage as an essential social institution or even of what it means to be a good wife or a good husband. Today's thinking focuses largely on other social and cultural concerns. Walk through any college bookstore, and you will see shelves crowded with books on abortion, gay and lesbian rights, gender issues, pornography, child abuse, AIDS, sexuality, domestic violence, self-healing, and self-esteem. Even in the section devoted to the family, where you might reasonably expect to find a book or two on marriage, you are far more likely to discover volumes on divorce, nontraditional families, or raising a child from birth to age three.

This silence on marriage comes in the historical aftermath of a relentless intellectual assault on marriage and the family as an institution.³ For at least two decades, it has been the fashion to attack marriage as the source of sickness, inequality, and unhappiness. Although this criticism comes from many disciplinary quarters, it is particularly striking in academic sociology. What makes the sociological critique so striking is its radical departure from an earlier tradition of thought. As a summary judgment, one is tempted to say that the earlier tradition of sociological thought valued marriage and sought to preserve and strengthen it -- through more scientific methods of mate selection, for example, or better measures of marital happiness. By contrast, the new critique sets out to evict marriage as an established social institution and to redefine it as a "lifestyle option."

The main contours of this critique are found in *The Future of Marriage*, a 1972 study by the sociologist Jessie Bernard. A well-respected scholar and self-described pioneer in the sociological research on marriage, Bernard had earlier written influential studies on divorce, remarriage, and sexuality. *The Future of Marriage* proved equally influential and provocative, generating attention and debate in the sociological community as well as the larger public. (An article based on the book appeared in one of the early issues of *Ms.* magazine, and Bernard became a frequent guest speaker at women's conferences and events.)

Bernard's argument is simple and arresting. She says that modern marriage is best understood, not in the conventional sense as a union between man and woman, but as separate and unequal "his" and "hers" marriages. While marriage confers health and happiness on men, it has the opposite effect on women. Marriage contributes to women's unhappiness and ill health.⁴

³ For a discussion of this tendency, see Christina Hoff Sommers, "Philosophers Against the Family," in George Graham and Hugh La Follette, eds., *Person to Person* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 82-105; Christopher Lasch, *Haven in A Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (NY: Basic Books, 1977); Philip Abbott, *The Family on Trial: Special Relationships in Modern Political Thought* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981).

⁴ Bernard's description of gender differences in marital happiness did not go unchallenged. Sociologist Norval D. Glenn, for one, took issue with her view. Reviewing national survey data, Glenn showed that both married men and women report greater global happiness than any category of unmarried persons, and that there is a stronger relationship of marital happiness to global happiness for wives. Glenn observed that if Bernard's thesis were correct and thousands of American young women who marry each year were acting against their long-term interests, their behavior would constitute a phenomenal example of mass irrationality. "The Contribution of Marriage to the

Compared to unmarried women, married women are more likely to suffer from a host of mental and physical problems, including inertia, insomnia, trembling hands, nightmares, fainting, headaches, dizziness, phobias, and heart palpitations.⁵

At the heart of women's unhappiness is traditional marriage, and particularly the restrictions of the housewife's role. Marriage deforms women just as the Chinese custom of foot-binding deformed girls' feet. "We do not clip wings or bind feet," Bernard writes, "but we do make girls sick. For to be happy in a relationship which imposes so many impediments on her, as traditional marriage does, a woman must be slightly ill mentally."⁶

Although Bernard identifies the separate spheres division of labor as the source of women's mental suffering, her proposed solution goes far beyond a reformation of separate spheres within marriage. Instead, she seeks to change relationships between men and women in marriage by revolutionizing the institution itself. Her blueprint for change calls for an end to the monopolistic sway of traditional marriage in favor of a new "future of options." In Bernard's vision, marriage exists as just one point on a continuum of possible choices, including celibacy, singlehood, trial marriage, group marriage, open marriage, nonsexual marriage, geriatric marriage, and marriage with divorce by mutual consent and no financial responsibility for one another. The most characteristic aspect of marriage in the future," she writes, "will be precisely the array of options available to different people who want different things from their relationships with one another."⁷

Needless to say, this "future of options" requires limited commitment to any single option, since it is in the nature of options to change as circumstances change. As a result, the marriage option is far less stable and permanent than the marriage bond.

Bernard's argument was strongly influenced by the contemporary feminist critique of marriage. In the concluding chapter of the book, she acknowledges that her consciousness had been raised by feminist thinkers. "I did not start out with the conviction that marriage was bad for wives. Nor did I expect this book to turn out to be a pamphlet on the destructiveness for women of marriage ..." But, she goes on, "the message of the radical young women had reached me."⁸

But feminist influences represent only part of the intellectual underpinning of her argument. Pervading Bernard's argument is a boundless optimism about the plasticity of human nature and human institutions. She asserts that "human beings can accept almost any kind of relationship if

Psychological Well-Being of Males and Females," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 37 (August, 1975), p. 594.

⁵ "Marriage: His and Hers," *Ms.*, 1 (December 1972), p. 48.

⁶ Bernard, *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

they are properly socialized into it."⁹ Moreover, marriage is an institution in motion: "there is no Ideal Marriage fixed in the nature of things that we will one day discover ... Every age has to find its own ... any form of marriage is transitional between an old one and a new one."¹⁰

Though marriage is constantly changing, Bernard emphasizes the progressive character of change. Generally speaking, marriage is evolving in a positive direction. Many of the cruelties and restrictions of marriage in the past have been eliminated, and there is every reason to believe that marriage in the future will be better than marriage in the present. There might not be an Ideal Marriage in the nature of things, but happily, we can look forward to a future of more perfect unions.

The Future of Marriage set forth, in admirably clear terms, the main themes in the sociological critique of marriage in the 1970s and early 1980s. Three ideas were especially influential.

The first is the notion of parallel (and deeply divergent) lives for husbands and wives. The idea of separate and unequal lives in marriage supports a conflictual view of marriage in which the defining experience is a power struggle, a contest for control. As Gertrude Himmelfarb explains, the "parallel lives" thesis says that "a marriage is sustained so long as there is a mutual understanding of the terms of the balance of power and mutual gains to be derived from it; it fails when the terms are violated or are no longer satisfactory, when the 'weaker member feels exploited or the stronger feels unrewarded for his or her strength.'"¹¹ Moreover, the notion that marriage is the source of unhappiness and illness for women implicitly creates a therapeutic imperative: get better by getting out.

The "parallel lives" idea challenges the traditional notion of marriage as a mediating institution in man/woman relationships. In the earlier view, marriage provides a socially instituted means for coming to terms with the eternal problem of our divided natures, reflected in sexual embodiment. The joining together of man and woman in marriage brings about a reconciliation between the sexes and a subordination of the divided self to the self made whole in conjugal union. This notion is exactly the opposite of the androgynous imperative which argues that the self incorporates both the masculine and feminine and therefore can achieve wholeness and omnipotentiality on its own.

Within traditional sociological thought, the reconciliation of separate male and female selves is achieved in the ideal of a common life in marriage. Though earlier scholars did not deny conflict in marriage -- indeed, they took it very seriously -- they emphasized the ways in which lifelong marriage fused individual identities and interests into a larger common identity. "In a good

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272-73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹¹ *Marriage and Morals Among Victorians: Essays* (NY: Knopf), p. 5.

marriage," a 1940s college textbook noted, "each partner is all that he himself is capable of being; moreover, his personality expands and takes on, in a measure, the attributes and capacities of the partner. Both are conscious that an interdependence exists by which the two stand together, so that pleasures are enhanced through the sharing, and blows which life may offer are cushioned."¹² But as Bernard and others see it, marriage does nothing to reconcile differences, to contend, however imperfectly, with the problem of our divided selves. Quite the opposite. Marriage aggravates separateness, and the advantage lies, not in striving for a shared life, but in affirming one's separate identity and interests.

The second governing idea is the notion of marriage as one of several equally "valid" options available to men and women. This idea demotes marriage into the same arena as other private matters dictated by individual interest, preference, and choice. Additionally, the marriage-as-option idea flattens the distinction between marriage and non-marriage. Marriage no longer is an honored estate, invested with special privileges as well as special obligations; increasingly, it exists in the same domain as singlehood, cohabitation, and "alternative lifestyles" such as open marriage or group marriage.

Missing entirely is the notion of marriage as an institution devoted to purposes larger than the self, or, even more fundamentally, the notion of marriage as the source of social, rather than merely personal, goods. Missing, too, is any serious consideration of how dependent children fit into the marriage "option." Indeed, children represent the aspect of marriage most problematic to these thinkers. As Elwood Carlson points out, "a newborn does not make a good 'partner.'"¹³ Children do not fit the model of free-standing individuals exercising their lifestyle options according to limited, easily terminable, voluntary agreements. In short, parenthood raises once again the stubborn questions of dependency, gendered division of labor, hierarchical and asymmetrical spousal relationships, and limitations on personal growth and freedom -- questions that the proponents of lifestyle options are all too ready to avoid.¹⁴

The third idea is that marriage in the future will be better than marriage in the confusing present or the mythic past. If marriage is always "in transition," then marriage as it exists in the present, not to mention the benighted past, hardly merits attention. Rather, social thought and

¹² Judson and Mary Landis, *The Marriage Handbook* (NY: Prentice Hall, 1948), p. 4.

¹³ "Couples Without Children: Premarital Cohabitation in France," in Kingsley Davis, ed., in association with Amyra Grossbard-Shechtman, *Contemporary Marriage: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Institution*, (NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1985), p. 124.

¹⁴ When these thinkers do address the question of children and parenthood, they tend to challenge the notion of dependency itself. Larry Constantine, a proponent of group marriage, argues that even very young children are capable of making their own decisions and taking responsibility for their own actions. His four-year-old daughter chose her own bedtime. Sociologist Judith Lorber argues that childrearing should be separated from marriage altogether. A professional childrearing class could take responsibility for the nation's offspring or each adult in the society could take on the task of raising one child, drawn by lottery from the national child-pool. "Beyond Equality of the Sexes: The Question of Children," *The Family Coordinator*, 24 (October 1975), pp. 465-487.

energies must be directed to realizing the future of marriage. This notion encourages a speculative, utopian disposition and a fascination with the experiments in marriage alternatives. The idea that there can be equally satisfying and personally rewarding "alternatives" to marriage is, in itself, a startling notion and a dramatic departure from earlier sociological thought.

Indeed, it is hard to convey, without seeming to exaggerate or distort, the nearly voyeuristic focus in the literature on "marriage alternatives" such as "swinging," group marriage, open marriage, and the like. During the 1970s, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* devoted three special issues to "Alternative Lifestyles". Similarly, the *Family Coordinator*, the journal of the National Council on Family Relations, considered "variant marriage styles" in several issues dedicated to exploring alternative lifestyles. A new academic journal, *Alternative Lifestyles*, appeared in the late 1970s, carrying articles such as "Pedophile Relationships in the Netherlands: Alternative Lifestyle for Children" and "Polyfidelity: An Alternative Lifestyle without Jealousy?"

This discussion on marriage alternatives is accompanied by an Orwellian transformation of language. What emerges is a kind of sociological Newspeak, designed to establish equivalency between marriage and non-marriage. This radical revision of the traditional vocabulary is accomplished in much the same fashion described in Orwell's classic: certain key words, endowed with inherited meaning, are simply used less frequently or are replaced with new words and phrases. Chief among these words is "marriage" itself. Reading through the journals and textbooks of the period, one can't help but note the dwindling use of the word "marriage." Marriage becomes just one form of "coupling and uncoupling" or one possible "intimate lifestyle." Even the words "husband" and "wife" are not used as routinely as one might expect. Instead, "domestic partners," "pair-bonds," or simply "relationship" begin to denote the conjugal roles. Similarly, any language that stigmatizes any behavior threatening to marriage is altered or, more commonly, excised. "Adultery" vanishes altogether, to be replaced by "comarital sex" or "sexually nonexclusive marriage." Exotic neologisms proliferate. For example: *neogamy* - intimate pair-bonds beyond monogamy; *intimate friendship* - friendship which allows for intimacy on several levels, including sexual; and *multilateral marriage* - groups involving three or more partners each of whom is married (or committed) to more than one of the other partners.¹⁵

Obviously, not all these words found a permanent place in the sociological lexicon. But the general impulse is clear: the marriage critics seek to devalorize marriage by stripping away its inherited mantle of meaning and by erasing the linguistic boundaries between marriage and non-marriage. This amounts to cultural hardball. For language -- or, more precisely, a normative vocabulary -- is one of the key cultural resources supporting and regulating any institution. Nothing is more essential to the integrity and strength of an institution than a common set of understandings, a shared body of opinion, about the meaning and purpose of the institution. And, conversely, nothing is more damaging to the integrity of an institution than an attack on this common set of understandings with the consequent fracturing of meaning. (Consider, for example, what might happen to the institution of private property if we set out to scramble the meanings of "theft,"

¹⁵ For these and other examples, see Eleanor D. Macklin, "Nontraditional Family Forms: A Decade of Research," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 42 (November 1980), pp. 905-922.

"ownership," and "property rights." Or the institution of the military if we blurred the distinction between "sergeant" and "private.") In altering the vocabulary, therefore, these critics are not only playing with words; more fundamentally, they are purposively disturbing what might be called the moral ecology of marriage -- the largely informal, sublegal, self-sustaining code of regulations and restraints that defines and governs the institution itself.

All these ideas might simply amount to a curious chapter in recent intellectual history if marriage had subsequently re-emerged as a serious focus of scholarly attention and philosophical reflection today. But clearly, this is not the case. Marriage has receded as a central topic for scholarly consideration. Indeed, a foreign visitor to almost any college campus in America might well conclude, after scanning course offerings, reading lists, and announcements of campus lectures, that marriage is some cultic practice, quite remote from the mainstream American experience.

Within sociology itself, this continuing intellectual defection is particularly striking. It represents an abandonment of a tradition of thought, established at the beginning of this century, that made marriage the central focus of sociological study of the family. Indeed, as Christopher Lasch points out, sociological thought was so focused on marriage that it often neglected other important dimensions of the family.¹⁶ Moreover, this traditional body of sociological opinion, far from challenging norms of marital permanence and monogamy, instead set out to generate empirical and theoretical knowledge that would strengthen those norms. In contrast to this tradition, contemporary marriage critics show little affection or regard for the institution. Instead of reforming the institution, they propose alternatives to it. Instead of valorizing marital norms, they offer a competing set of ideals: personal freedom, individual choice, and personal growth. And, finally, instead of viewing marriage as a flawed, imperfect institution, they offer a vision of marriage as both infinitely perfectible and infinitely receptive to human design and invention.

What's more, the new scholarship increasingly betrays its own standards of social scientific inquiry. Expert opinion on marriage derives its authority from the authority of the scientific method and the belief that objective, factual, empirical investigation can expose the faults of existing institutions, produce new knowledge, and contribute to social progress. Consequently, one of the traditional missions of social science is to engage in enlightened social engineering. Yet, while sociological investigation often challenges the status quo, its ambitions are necessarily modest, limited by its own scientific standards of truth-seeking. Therefore, while it is one thing to seek to improve marriage through patient research, it is quite another to propagate a futuristic, speculative vision of marriage, unsupported by research. As Peter Rossi noted in his 1980 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, applied social science is not the occupation for would-be philosopher-kings. It is essentially the fine-tuning of existing social policies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lasch, *Op. cit.*, pp. 139-44, passim.

¹⁷ "The Presidential Address: The Challenge and Opportunities of Applied Social Research," *American Sociological Review*, 45 (December 1980), p. 897.

Yet Rossi's modesty was far from the spirit that animated the critique of marriage in the 1970s and 1980s. Social fine-tuning was remote from the concerns of the critics. Rather, their emphasis was on devising transformative new blueprints for the future, a future that could only be discerned by visionary social thinkers. By removing the inquiry from the realm of empirical testing and placing it in the imagined future, this futuristic and speculative approach eviscerated traditional modes of scholarly investigation. At its most extreme, this critique resembled science fiction more than social science.

Historical evidence was also evicted from this new debate. Since marriage, like human history in general, is evolving in a progressive direction, the past is suspect. It exists principally as the repository of myth, nostalgia, and retrograde sentiment. The task of the marriage scholars, therefore, is to serve in part as nostalgia police -- to issue warnings against the common but dangerous tendency of ordinary people to trust in memory, tradition, and the inherited wisdom of parents and grandparents. As these thinkers argue, it is necessary to see family crisis, conflict, and change as healthy signs of progress and growing social complexity. Marriage breakdown is not deviant, as early thinkers claimed, but adaptive, even innovative, marking a painful, but ultimately essential, step toward greater personal freedom and happiness. This notion persists. Consider the following titles of recently or soon-to-be published books: *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America*; *The Way We Never Were*; *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*; *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty*.

In appropriating a special role for themselves -- social scientist as social visionary -- these thinkers depart dramatically from the traditional model of the unbiased social scientific investigator. More than a few writers unabashedly offer up their own personal experience as evidence, even as working models, of new lifestyles. Behind the academic researcher you frequently glimpse the campus adventurer, caught in the midst of a sexual revolution and eager to engage in some lifestyle experimentation himself. In short, the new marriage critics retreat into private values and into what Michael Walzer describes as the dangerous habit of seeing "their blemishes as everyone else's, their aspirations as universal ends, their soul as the world-soul."¹⁸

More broadly, expert opinion, as represented in this influential strain of thought, does nothing to counter larger cultural, intellectual, or social forces contributing to the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Rather, it facilitates those trends. It fosters a climate of opinion inhospitable, if not openly hostile, to marriage as an institution. The new marriage experts clearly do not line up on the side of marriage; they line up against it.

In the aftermath of this attack on marriage, we have become increasingly tongue-tied in our public discourse. At a time when our divorce rate is one of the highest in the world, there is still no broad public debate on how we might strengthen marriage, nor is there so much as a well-funded public advocacy group for marriage. In contrast to other post-industrial democracies, we have never convened a national governmental commission on marriage or marriage law. And even within the debate about family and child well-being, marriage gets far less attention than family planning, foster care, and divorce mediation. We seem to accept, virtually without challenge, the idea that marriage -- like our personal checking accounts -- is nobody's business but our own. This represents an astonishing neglect of everything we know about the social purposes of marriage and the importance of marriage as a mainstay institution in the civil society. That we no longer see marriage as the source of social goods or the legitimate focus of broad public concern may be the final measure of how well the new critique of marriage has succeeded.

II

*"There is little concern now that our society would 'disappear' if people stopped marrying. Children would continue to be born, and the increase in single-parent families suggests that the wife and husband team is not the only pattern for rearing children."*¹⁹

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Basic Books, 1988), p. 232.

¹⁹ David Knox and Caroline Schacht, eds., *Choices in Relationships: An Introduction to Marriage and the Family*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1991), p. 124.

*"Some researchers suggest that we will eventually stop thinking of marriage and lifestyle alternatives to it and develop a view of sexually-based primary relationships that are expressed in a variety of forms."*²⁰

*"The beauty of the institution called family is that it is adaptable and flexible. Those persons with knowledge of themselves, the family, and their culture have the opportunity in America to build a marriage and family that will suit their own liking."*²¹

"Getting divorced can be very healthy. Watch how it improves your circulation! Best of luck!"

Hallmark Greeting Card

In this section, I turn from a consideration of the governing ideas of the marriage critique to a discussion of the constitutive, story-making side of the debate.

In *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law*, Mary Ann Glendon suggests that a body of thought can be read, not just as a set of ideas, instructions, or constructs, but as a kind of cultural narrative -- a story about who we are and why we do what we do.²²

It may come as a surprise to some scholars -- particularly those trained to avoid narrative -- that they are engaged in a story-making enterprise. Yet stories are our natural mode of discourse. Wayne Booth reminds us that:

Even those few tough-minded ones among us who claim to reject all "unreality"; even those who read no novels, watch no soap operas, and share no jokes; even those (if there are any) who echo Mr. Gradgrind and have truck only with "the facts"; even the statisticians and accountants must in fact conduct their daily business largely in stories.²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²¹ Frank D. Cox, *Human Intimacy: Marriage, the Family and its Meaning*, 5th ed. (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1990), p. xix.

²² Mary Ann Glendon, *Abortion and Divorce in Western Law: American Failures, European Challenges* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 7-9, 138-142.

²³ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 15.

If narrative is the way we order and interpret our daily experience, it seems no less true that stories shape our cultural experience as well. We have stories about what it means to be an American; what it means to be a college student; what it means to suffer from cancer; what it means to fall in love; what it means to celebrate Mother's Day.

How experts and other elites shape and transmit these cultural stories is a complicated story all by itself. But it seems manifestly clear that experts exercise a cultural authority disproportionate to their numbers, and that this authority is greater today than in the past. Witness the growing demand for experts in the media. Witness the rise of consultancies devoted to identifying good "talkers" among the nation's professoriate. (Some universities even coach scholars in the art of talking to the media.) Witness the way academic experts move from the lecture hall to the television studio to the think tank to the lecture circuit. Witness the way expert jargon has seeped into the vernacular.

Consequently, we may reasonably ask: what stories do experts tell us about marriage? What can we learn by attending to the language, imagery, character, and tone of the story? Is the story easy to remember and understand? Does it have a beginning, middle, and end? What is the point of the story?

Let me return to the sociological literature and begin, quite literally, with a textbook case -- the story of marriage as it is conveyed in today's high school and college textbooks on marriage and family life. My purpose here is not to argue that this literature has a big influence in shaping public attitudes toward marriage. (In fact, its influence is probably quite small.) Rather, my intent is to read the textbook story as canon, the condensation of generally accepted expert wisdom on the subject. The story, as I present it here, is distilled from a reading of a representative sampling of recently published textbooks.²⁴

It goes like this:

The life course is full of exciting options. The lifestyle options available to individuals seeking a fulfilling personal relationship include living a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual single lifestyle; living in a commune; having a group marriage; being a single parent; or living together. Marriage is yet another lifestyle choice. However, before choosing marriage, individuals should weigh its costs and benefits against other lifestyle options and should consider what they want to get out of their intimate relationships. Even within marriage, different people want different things. For example, some people marry for companionship, some marry in order to have

²⁴ Cox, *Op. cit.*; Knox and Schacht, *Op. cit.*; Mary Ann Lamanna and Agnes Riedmann, eds., *Marriages and Families: Making Choices and Facing Change*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991); Bryan Strong and Christine DeVault, eds., *The Marriage and Family Experience* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1992); Lloyd Saxton, ed., *The Individual, Marriage and the Family*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990); J. Ross Eshleman, *The Family*, 6th ed. (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991). The Lamanna and Riedmann, Strong and DeVault, and Saxton textbooks have a significant share of the marriage and family textbook market.

children, some marry for emotional and financial security. Though marriage can offer a rewarding path to personal growth, it is important to remember that it cannot provide a secure or permanent status. Many people will make the decision between marriage and singlehood many times throughout their life.

Divorce represents part of the normal family life cycle. It should not be viewed either as deviant or tragic, as it has been in the past. Rather, it establishes a process for "uncoupling" and thereby serves as the foundation for individual renewal and "new beginnings." The processes of uncoupling are the same for married or unmarried couples and for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships.

Marriage itself is a private arena where couples wrestle with the distribution of power in their relationship, with traditional gender roles, and with communication issues. Indeed, these three aspects of married life virtually exhaust the meaning of marriage. Moreover, all three share a common feature: they depend on "articulating, negotiating, and coming to agreement on expectations about how you and your partner will behave." In contemporary marriage, nothing can be taken for granted, nothing is fixed. Every detail of married life -- from taking out the garbage to who stays home with a sick child -- is privately negotiated with attention to each partner's separate interests and rights.

There is also the larger imperative of fostering a more pluralistic conception of family and the family life course. The textbook story tells us that marriage must "catch up" with a more diverse, pluralistic society by relinquishing its claims as a special, privileged institution. Indeed, nonmarital partnerships may offer a more progressive model for adult relationships; for example, homosexual relationships often are less conflictual, less violent than husband-wife relationships. As one text tells us, "same-sex couples often adopt a 'best-friend' relationship model rather than a traditional marriage model, so that there tends to be more sharing and equality than in many heterosexual relationships."²⁵

What can we say about this story as a story? First, it is confusing. It has many characters but no heroes, not much plot, and no recognizable beginning or end. It is episodic, syncretic, and fragmented. Its central elements --love, courtship, sex, marriage, friendship, parenthood -- may appear at almost any point in the narrative, in almost any order, and then, just as randomly, disappear.

²⁵ Strong and DeVault, *Op. cit.*, p. 225.

Nor can it be said that the roles of husband and wife are central to this narrative. Indeed, the husband may be the weakest character in the story; mainly, he is a figure to be watched warily for his frequent lapses into "traditional masculinity." The character of the wife is more clearly, if narrowly, delineated; her principal responsibility is to exercise leadership in matters such as the division of household work and the distribution of power and decision-making authority in the relationship.

This narrative is driven mainly by the quest for greater personal choice and control. In fact, it is barely an exaggeration to say that the textbook story of marriage exalts individual choice as life's supreme moral good and certainly the only route to personal happiness. As one editor explains, the textbook's purpose is "to encourage you to make active choices and select courses of action for your life. By doing so, you increase the control over your own happiness and the happiness in relationships with others."²⁶

One might argue that this narrative is simply the story of our time. After all, does it not reflect the growing complexity of modern society? Isn't this a post-modern story with all the unresolved, discordant, ambiguous, fractured elements of contemporary life? Should we not view this story as richer for its wider embrace of human relationships? Is it not better to have many little stories, rather than one big narrative that excludes so many possible forms of experience?

The answer is probably not. Strong institutions must be undergirded by a strong cultural narrative. When we substitute multiple biographies for a single defining narrative, we sacrifice the institution to the individual. But more importantly, the new story ignores the question of cultural transmission. How do we tell the contemporary marriage story to a story-loving child? What message do these textbooks send to the young adults who read them?

There is some evidence that today's young people desire stable, permanent marriages and, at the same time, have diminished expectation that they will be able to achieve such unions.²⁷ In part, this may reflect the personal experiences of children of the divorce generation. But it also raises questions about the effects of a destructured, confusing cultural narrative. On the defining question of what it means to be a good husband or a good wife, today's textbook story, literally, has nothing to say.

If the testimony of Harvard undergraduates, interviewed for *Esquire's* 1992 college life issue, can be credited, confusion defines campus opinion on sex, marriage, and the family. In the

²⁶ Knox and Schacht, *Op. cit.*, p. vii.

²⁷ Norval Glenn has looked at survey data on high school seniors. These data show that the percentage of high school seniors who said they would definitely prefer to have a mate for most of their lives went from 53% in 1975 to about 61% in 1989, and those who disagreed with the statement that having a close, intimate relationship with one partner is too restrictive for the average person went from 34% in 1975 to about 45% in 1989. Those who said it was very likely they would stay married to the same person for life went down, from 65% in 1975 to about 57% in 1989. "What the Numbers Say," *Family Affairs*, 5 (No. 1-2, Summer 1992) (NY: Institute for American Values), pp. 6, 7.

words of one male student: "All our parents were experimenting with roles of who was who and who was going to do what and the kids got neglected in the process ... I always thought parents are supposed to learn stuff and pass that stuff on to their kids, but if parents can't figure out their own life and what makes them happy, then what's the point?" For a female student, who had earlier "embarked on a relationship that involved sex but no exclusiveness, no jealousy, and no romance," a serious romance poses a threat. When her boyfriend puts his arm around her in public, she explains, "it means I have to deal with the fact that I'm in a relationship, and that means I'm going to have to lose a lot of power. Men were terrified of me. I loved that. Now I realize I'm going to have to give all that up."²⁸

Like the sexual orthodoxy on college campuses, the new story of marriage brings "freedom with a male bias."²⁹ The story promotes alternatives to marriage such as cohabitation and casual sexual relationships, and such alternatives are far more likely than marriage to lead to violence against women and, importantly, against children. No-fault divorce has been far more economically damaging to women and children than to men.³⁰ Moreover, the new story forgets one of the fundamental purposes of marriage. Across time and across cultures, marriage has provided the institutional means for attaching men to women and children and for requiring the donation of the male self (and his income) to his related others. Marriage thus provides the basis for enculturating males, for locating men within a context of obligated relationships. The new marriage story does quite the opposite. It loosens the ties to family; releases men from the role of husband and father; and removes the binding obligations and duties imposed through marriage. Finally, if emotional intimacy, relatedness, and nurturing are values traditionally emblemized and embraced by women, it cannot be said that the new marriage story -- with its emphasis on individual freedom and choice -- brings us closer toward a feminist ideal of marriage.

Finally, today's textbook marriage story misleads us as to the sources of happiness. Its message is that happiness resides in the pursuit of individual interests and desires, as defined by the therapeutically aware self. Yet, in the era of expressive individualism, as Daniel Yankelovich notes with considerable restraint, "relationships between men and women have grown distressingly complex -- and often unstable. People's powerful needs for affiliation have been frustrated, and

²⁸ "Sleeping With the Enemy," *Esquire*, 117 (April 1992), p. 77.

²⁹ This is Michael Moffatt's characterization of the prevailing sexual ethos among undergraduates at Rutgers University in the 1980s. Michael Moffatt, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 230.

³⁰ Lenore Weitzman, *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences for Women and Children in America* (NY: The Free Press, 1985) is regarded as the seminal work on this subject. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee provide a richly textured portrait of the social and emotional costs of divorce to men, women, and children in *Second Chances: Men, Women & Children A Decade After Divorce* (NY: Ticknor & Fields, 1989). Other important studies include Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington: Urban Institute Press, 1986) and Frank Furstenberg and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens To Children When Parents Part* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

some forms of pleasure seeking have proven disappointing and unsatisfying."³¹ More consequentially, the idea that marriage exists primarily as a vehicle for the achievement of personal happiness and not for broader social purposes (regulation of sex; childrearing; or contributing to the well-being of the extended family, the community, or the society) not only increases the probability that unsatisfactory marriages will end in divorce. It also may increase the probability that any marriage will become unsatisfactory. Norval D. Glenn makes this important point in commenting on the decline in the ideal of marital permanence:

The person who enters a marriage with the notion that he or she may remain in it only for a few years will not be inclined to commit fully or make the kinds of investments (in time, money, effort, and foregone opportunities) that will be lost if the marriage should end. And even persons who still strongly adhere to the ideal of marital permanence may be afraid to commit strongly to their marriages if they perceive a general weakening of the ideal in the society.³²

If Glenn is correct, his theory has chilling implications. For it means that today's dominant cultural story of marriage culminates in a personally unhappy, socially tragic ending.

III

"Take my wife -- please."

Henny Youngman

"Some people claim that marriage interferes with romance. There's no doubt about it. Anytime you have a romance, your wife is bound to interfere."

Groucho Marx

"Husbands are all alike, but they have different faces, so you can tell them apart."

Anonymous

Up to this point, I've confined my criticism to what the experts tell us about marriage in the

³¹ Daniel Yankelovich, "The Affluence Effect," paper presented to the Brookings Institution Seminar Series on Values and Public Policy, August 20, 1991, p. 18.

³² Norval Glenn, "The Family Values of Americans," Institute for American Values Working Paper No. WP7, June 3, 1991, p. 7.

sociological and textbook literature. Now, I want to pose a broader question: how does expert thought, rooted in social scientific modes of inquiry, shape the general understandings of marriage in our society?

To ask this question is to acknowledge a simple truth: we look to science for much of what we may reliably know about ourselves and the world. This faith in science is justly deserved. We live in an environment vastly altered and mostly improved by the physical and biological sciences. The enormous success and authority of science in improving man's physical well-being now extends to the social world as well; we look to scientific modes of inquiry to correct and improve our most basic human institutions. Consequently, we increasingly consider social scientific thought as a highly authoritative body of knowledge on such institutions as marriage and the family.

This phenomenon is relatively new. For most of human history, marriage belonged to a domain of human experience remote from scientific forms of knowledge. Rather, marriage was rooted in a moral tradition dominated by religious, familial, and folkloric ways of understanding. This body of knowledge differs from scientific knowledge, not in its sophistication or its profundity, but in its relatively unreflective, unsystematized, unselfconscious modes of expression and transmission. It is codified knowledge, but its codes are mainly nonliterary, nonspecialized, and unmediated. (Religious teachings, of course, represent a partial exception to this general observation.)

Beginning in this century, social scientists began to stake a claim to marriage as an important new field for scientific inquiry. Their main purpose was to rescue marriage from the mystifications and superstitions of the moral tradition and to place it securely within the rational realm of science. Historically, this moment marked the emergence of a class of marriage experts, well-schooled in scientific methodology and techniques, affiliated with academic rather than religious institutions, and committed to reforming and improving marriage through enlightened social engineering. A science of marriage, rooted in an analytic, objective, quantitative set of ideas and principles, promised to bring about improvements in spousal relationships, in marital happiness, and in the overall functioning of the institution.

To an impressive degree, the new social scientists were successful in their epistemological claimstaking. Today's marriage experts are drawn from the ranks of sociology, psychology, and the therapeutic professions; their opinions are treated as authoritative by media and policy elites. Even religious opinion increasingly draws upon social scientific teachings and insights. Talk of "roles and relationships," "singlehood," and "gender identities" not only fill the pages of *The New York Times*; they are also the stuff of Sunday sermons and inspirational bestsellers.

As a result, our thinking on marriage is increasingly shaped by credentialed experts. And, increasingly, we think about marriage in the way that experts do. In short, what now prevails is the objective, factual, rational, and analytic. While I do not wish to disparage the virtues of scientific thinking nor to ignore the many practical contributions it can make to our understanding of marriage, I do wish to point out the ways in which contemporary social scientific epistemology limits, inhibits and even harms our moral and public discourse.

Leon Kass reminds us that scientific modes of inquiry are antiphilosophical in spirit, "at best, neutral to the large human and metaphysical questions that dominated ancient philosophy, and which human beings still ask and will always ask -- questions about meaning, being, ultimate causes, the eternity or noneternity of the world, justice and injustice, the good, the true and the beautiful." Within the scientific tradition, Kass observes, "opinions about good and bad, justice and injustice, virtue and vice have no cognitive status and are not subject to rational inquiry -- they are, as we are fond of saying, values, and therefore, merely subjective."³³

Second, social scientific ways of thinking often ignore or rule as inadmissible nonscientific ways of thinking. A vivid example of this tendency can be found in Mirra Komorovsky's classic study, *Blue Collar Marriage*. Komorovsky notes that working class husbands and wives are not able to talk about their marriage with the psychological precision and sophistication of college-educated couples. Their notions about relationships are unreflective and "primitive." They cannot name or discuss their emotions. They do not understand the therapeutic value of talk. "We often had the feeling that the questions we raised had never been the subject of previous reflection. We were often told exactly that: 'Gee, I don't know. I have never thought about that.'"³⁴

Komorovsky intends nothing more than to call attention to a problem in research methodology. But her observation suggests the way in which one particular mode of (elite) expression has come to define how we think about marriage. It is hard to believe that Komorovsky's blue collar couples were truly "inarticulate"; in all likelihood, they joked and complained about their spouses, prayed for forgiveness after a marital spat, gossiped about other people's husbands and wives at family gatherings, and depended on a body of inherited teachings, sayings, and stories for their ideas about marriage. They were inarticulate only in the specialized vocabulary that increasingly defines the dominant discourse.

Without making too much of this single example, let me make a second observation. Komorovsky tells us something important when she focuses on the educational background of her respondents. The college experience has been crucial in securing the authority of the social scientific world view. After all, you do not learn scientific methodology or language at your grandmother's knee; it must be formally transmitted by trained professionals in institutions of higher learning. Since college professors, college students, and the college-educated are the main producers and consumers of scientific knowledge, it is no coincidence that expert opinion on marriage has gained the cultural upper hand during the dramatic expansion of higher education over the past twenty-five years.

When the discourse on marriage is governed by social scientific, rather than moral, opinion, the overriding tendency is to avoid philosophical questions and to focus on instrumental matters. If

³³ Leon R. Kass, M.D., *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (NY: The Free Press, 1985), p. 5.

³⁴ Mirra Komorovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage* (NY: Random House, 1967), p. 17.

only couples had better communication skills; if only husbands and wives understood the techniques of conflict resolution; if only boys and girls could be trained to get along with each other; then marriages would succeed. Communication skills, training models, conflict resolution, and therapeutic interventions represent the paradigmatic scientific toolkit for fixing up marriage, and this toolkit is firmly in the hands of the experts.

Along with a faith in technique, expert thinking emphasizes the efficacy of talk. Indeed, to many experts, effective communication within marriage can represent the highest possible good; if men and women can learn how to name and express their feelings, how to clarify their own needs, how to fight fairly, then their marriages will thrive. Not coincidentally, these talk solutions reflect the values of expert culture where nothing is more highly prized than words, opinions, and skillful argumentation. Indeed, when asked how to strengthen marriage, experts almost reflexively recommend more and better talk: expanded therapeutic and counseling services to couples, better training for family life teachers, and more marriage education in the schools.

Clearly, there is nothing wrong with efforts to promote good communication in a marriage. Indeed, good communication is one of the key indicators of family strength, according to several scales of social scientific measurement. Moreover, improved communication skills may be valuable in enhancing marital quality and satisfaction. However, it cannot be true that these skills, by themselves, can make the crucial difference in keeping marriages together. If that were true, why is it that many marriages succeed almost solely on the basis of mute determination to stay married? Why is it that so many marriages among the most articulate, therapeutically self-aware, highly educated couples fail? Why is it that this age of unprecedented rates of divorce is also the age of the unprecedented triumph of psychological and therapeutic modes of expression and self-understanding? Surely, if more psycho-talk could save marriages, our divorce rate would have been falling throughout this century.

Simply put, the expert tradition of thought is rendered silent on the most fundamental questions: What does it mean to be a good husband or a good wife? Is it possible to be a good man but a bad husband? How does marriage instruct us in the larger meaning and purpose of life? In the place of normative judgments, the expert tradition offers faith in technical competencies: the mastery of cognitive skills and techniques. However, values such as marital permanence, fidelity, obligation, sacrifice and commitment cannot be reduced to matters of technical competence, nor are they particularly susceptible to rational analysis and debate. Rather, they are grounded in a body of nonscientific moral opinion and practice.

In contrast to the technical formalism and ostensible neutrality of expert thought, moral opinion depends on other means of regulating and controlling attitudes and behaviors. Earlier I noted the way that language regulates marriage and controls behaviors that threaten marriage. Now I would like briefly to consider the function of humor and proverbial wisdom in governing our ideas and conduct in marriage.

Humor partakes of the moral consensus because it depends on a set of shared meanings, a clear view of the order of things. This is why humor tends to be topical and why old *New Yorker*

cartoons seem so unfunny. In other words, humor serves an important regulating function, reinforcing the existing order -- keeping people in their established place -- and, at the same time, offering consolation for the pains and inconveniences of staying in that established place. Marriage-as-ball-and-chain jokes, to cite one familiar example, function in this way.

At the same time, humor criticizes and subverts that which is most deeply embedded in the culture. There is a cruel brand of humor that assaults the weak and vulnerable (iron lung jokes and the like) but, in general, humor takes aim at the powerful and strong. Thus, humor seeks to correct and reform as well as to regulate and control.

Accordingly, when humor loses its sway over an important domain of human experience, it should be cause for concern. For what it suggests is a larger loss of meaning, a disturbance in the moral ecology governing that experience. In some ways, humor is like the canary in the mines; when it dies, there is strong reason to believe that the overall environment is endangered.

When it comes to marriage, that may be precisely what is happening. No one finds marriage very funny anymore. Largely gone are the old jokes about frigid wives, wimpy husbands, interfering mothers-in-law. Gone too is the close-to-the-bone humor about the pain, disappointment, and sufferings imposed by the marital bond. "Relationships" rather than marriage now provide the material for stand-up comedy, cartoons, and humorous sketches.

As an individual arrangement, defined by private meanings and detached from larger social purposes and moral traditions, marriage simply no longer invites humor. As a social institution, it is too weak to laugh at. There was a time when we could laugh at emotionally inarticulate husbands or conniving wives or predatory mothers-in-law because we shared a sense of their place in the institutional scheme of things. But if marriage is simply a constellation of private meanings, we cannot engage it through humor, any more than I would make fun of the entree you select from a menu or the kind of car you choose to drive. Similarly, I might smile to myself when I read the following wedding vows: "We affirm our limitlessness. We are flamboyant fools. Together we shall mature but never age. To grow old is a contradiction. To grow is the dictum."³⁵ But I could never laugh out loud because these vows apparently hold deep meaning for the couple who invents and utters them.

It is equally true that humor can console only when radical improvement is unlikely, if not impossible. When marriage was widely understood as an institution both permanent and imperfect, there was plenty of opportunity for making fun of marriage and plenty of need for the consolations of humor. But when perfectionist notions of marriage take hold and when marriage dwindles to an easily terminable lifestyle option, we no longer seek the comforts of a joke about dumb husbands or a wisecrack about spendthrift wives.

Humor represents only one element in the moral ecology of marriage. Proverbial wisdom is another. Like humor, it too views marriage as a deeply flawed institution that nevertheless

³⁵ Khoren Arisian, *The New Wedding: Creating Your Own Marriage Ceremony* (NY: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 46.

imposes powerful claims and restrictions on the individual. Similarly, proverbial wisdom embraces the notion of flawed human nature. As one scholar has pointed out, proverbs typically offer a "canny acceptance that people should not be expected to act much better than they are."³⁶

Consider the following illustrations:

"Needles and pins, needles and pins,
When a man marries his trouble begins."

J.O. Halliwell-Phillips, *Nursery Rhymes and
Nursery Tales of England*, 1845

"Marriage is a romance in which the hero dies in the first chapter."

Anonymous

"Wedlock is a padlock."

John Ray, *English Proverbs*

³⁶ Thomas Fitzgerald, "Proverbs in an Age of Expertise: Literature, Politics, and the Vernacular," April 1992, p. 8. I discovered this unpublished essay as I was developing my argument on proverbial wisdom. Fitzgerald's illuminating analysis of the proverb as a neglected and declining source of common opinion contributed to my understanding of the topic and strengthened my confidence in this line of argument.

"The torment of one, the felicity of two, the strife and enmity of three."
Washington Irving

"One good Husband is worth two good Wives; for the scarcer things are the more they're valued."
Benjamin Franklin

"The best husbands aren't caught, they're made."
Anonymous

"Marriage is an institution for the blind."
Anonymous

"A bad husband cannot be a good man."
Anonymous

"Marriage, they say, halves one's right and doubles one's duties."
Anonymous

Despite its shrewd insights, however, proverbial wisdom is dismissed today, especially among elites, as a body of moral opinion, a source of valuable knowledge, and an inheritance deserving of reflection and thought. Expert opinion views proverbial truth as a charming artifact, the naive understanding of a simpler time. There is irony here, since proverbial wisdom treats many of the same concerns as expert opinion -- the proper age at marriage; sound principles of mate selection; roles and responsibilities within marriage; the likely success of second and third marriages -- and, in many instances, comes up with similar conclusions. (In other instances -- such as its advice on the proper way a husband should discipline his wife, proverbial wisdom should properly be ignored.)

By looking at the moral tradition and ecology of marriage, I do not mean to suggest that folk wisdom is always wiser than expert opinion. I simply wish to make the point that there are heavens and earths not dreamt of in the expert philosophy. Marriage, after all, constitutes more than a disciplinary field. It establishes the very boundaries and geography of our everyday life; it provides the context for our most enduring and important relationships; it defines the nature and content of our affections, obligations, and sorrows; it guides and instructs us in the meaning and purpose of life; it undergirds the social order itself. In important respects, therefore, marriage represents a terrain poorly suited to colonization by experts, a territory that should be dotted with "Go Slow" signs. Yet, once introduced, expert knowledge has aggressive, proliferative habits. Like *kudzu*, it can overwhelm the landscape and choke out more delicate, indigenous species of moral thought and action.

What is to be done? How can we improve our discourse on marriage and strengthen a body of opinion and practice in support of marriage as an institution? My recommendations fall into two categories. First, I offer some ideas on what the experts might do. Second, I offer some reflections on how our thinking about marriage might encompass the tradition of moral thought and opinion and thereby contribute to a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of marriage.

Daniel Yankelovich notes that expert opinion plays a central role in raising the public's consciousness about a particular concern or issue. Experts help shape public thinking about the importance of a problem, its likely social consequences, and possible ways to address the problem by serving as a source of credible information and empirical evidence. When it comes to the social benefits of marriage and the social impact of marriage break-up, expert opinion surely can contribute to greater public awareness and understanding. To do this, however, experts must do more or less the opposite of what they have been doing for at least three decades. Instead of attacking marriage as a sick and failed institution, they must instead treat marriage as an important subject for serious scholarly attention and debate. This alone would have the positive effect of signaling the social significance of marriage, not to mention generating knowledge that might contribute to a greater understanding of marriage.

Equally important, expert opinion can call attention to the harmful effects of marriage break-up and the overall deinstitutionalization of marriage. In the current climate of opinion, where marriage is viewed as competitive with other attractive lifestyle options, it is important to know how marriage compares with non-marriage in fostering social and individual well-being. Experts can provide this kind of social accounting and evaluation. Experts might also criticize and reform their own canon. Perhaps they should begin by taking a second look at the textbooks on their shelves. More affirmatively, expert opinion can make the arguments for marriage as an essential institution in a well-functioning, well-ordered democratic society.

However, today's marriage crisis reflects more than the shortcomings of the academy or of expertise. More fundamentally, it reflects a crisis in meaning, a break-down in our shared understanding about the larger purposes of marriage. Consequently, there is a need, not just for better research and more evidence, but also for a new understanding of marriage. -- or, to adhere to the language of this paper, a new "new story." I suggest the following as some possible steps toward this improved understanding of marriage.

1. As an essential first step, attend to the proverbial wisdom that sees marriage as a flawed, imperfect institution. Admit error in treating marriage as a project for relentless revision and improvement. At the same time, adopt the notion that while not perfect, strong, lifelong marriages are achievable for most people.

2. Acknowledge the social significance and social benefits of marriage as an institution.

Expert thought, particularly therapeutic thought, promotes the idea that individuals can bend marriage to fit their purposes. The moral tradition offers the opposing idea that marriage bends individuals to its purposes. Implicit in this idea is the notion that marriage must be stronger and less changeable than married individuals themselves. The fit is not always comfortable between the institution of marriage and the married couples who inhabit the institution. Difficulties and unhappiness inevitably arise along the way, the moral tradition tells us, but individual unhappiness itself is not sufficient cause for ending a marriage. Moreover, these difficulties can be endured, the fit sometimes improves, and the evidence for this is that many married couples, including most of our own grandparents and parents, stay married for a lifetime. Of course, this does not mean that we should endorse marriage at the cost of physical abuse or even at the cost of extreme emotional torment and suffering. Nonetheless, as a corrective to the current understandings of marriage, we should promote the now vanishing idea that marriage confers social and personal benefits beyond privatized, therapeutic understandings of happiness. Right now, there are more advocates arguing for the benefits of sugar cane subsidies than there are making the case for the large social benefits of marriage. Indeed, absent this argument, we must resign ourselves to the continued erosion of the marriage institution, with all its immediate and long-term negative consequences.

3. Reinstatement of a moral vocabulary of marriage

It seems clear that if we want to establish marriage as a privileged institution, then our language must endow marriage with special meaning. Certainly, we must resist the fashion to speak of marriage as only one of several intimate lifestyles, or of husbands and wives as "heterosexual partners."

4. Under current conditions, the pursuit of and faith in lifelong marriage should be regarded as deeply countercultural. Religious institutions offer the likeliest base for a countercultural insurgency in support of strong marriages.

We know that religious faith and observance correlate positively with marital success. Moreover, churches have long regarded marriage preparation, marriage counseling, and support to married couples, not to mention religiously-based social movements like the Catholic Cane Conference, as central to their mission. Equally important, churches connect individual married couples to a larger group, thus strengthening the commitment to marriage as an institution. Finally, some churches actively engage in outreach work, particularly among young people who are unchurched. These ministries, though not necessarily focused exclusively on marriage, do provide a religious and moral vision competitive with the dominant secular vision of expressive individualism. This religious vision has the potential for shaping marriage commitments later on and should be supported. There are also nondenominational community organizations that reach out to unmarried youth; an outstanding example is the National Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Development, based in Cleveland. This grass-roots organization is working with unmarried teen-age fathers in the inner city in order to encourage these young men to marry their children's mothers, or, at the very least, to build regular, responsible relationships with their children and their children's mothers.

There are cultural stirrings today which suggest that the moment has come for a rethinking of marriage. Clearly, in the past few years, there has been a turning away from the extreme forms of expressive individualism -- as well as from its most famous exponents, many of whom are in jail -- and a sober consideration of the social and personal costs of an era of self-indulgence. There is a reawakening of that classically American quest for greater spiritual meaning and shared purpose. There is also widespread concern about the fraying of the social fabric and the declining well-being of families and children. Perhaps it is time to concern ourselves with the imperiled state of marriage as well.