



Article

The End of Courtship

POVERTY STUDIES



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In the current wars over the state of American culture, few battlegrounds have seen more action than that of “family values”—sex, marriage, and child-rearing. Passions run high about sexual harassment, condom distribution in schools, pornography, abortion, gay marriage, and other efforts to alter the definition of “a family.” Many people are distressed over the record-high rates of divorce, illegitimacy, teenage pregnancy, marital infidelity, and premarital promiscuity. On some issues, there is even an emerging consensus that something is drastically wrong: Though they may differ on what is to be done, people on both the left and the right have come to regard the break-up of marriage as a leading cause of the neglect, indeed, of the psychic and moral maiming, of America’s children. But while various people are talking about tracking down “dead-beat dads” or reestablishing orphanages or doing something to slow the rate of divorce—all remedies for marital failure—very little attention is being paid to what makes for marital success. Still less are we attending to the ways and mores of entering into marriage, that is, to wooing or courtship.

There is, of course, good reason for this neglect. The very terms—“wooing,” “courting,” “suitors”—are

archaic; and if the words barely exist, it is because the phenomena have all but disappeared. Today, there are no socially prescribed forms of conduct that help guide young men and women in the direction of matrimony. This is true not just for the lower or under classes. Even—indeed especially—the elite, those who in previous generations would have defined the conventions in these matters, lack a cultural script whose denouement is marriage. To be sure, there are still exceptions, to be found, say, in closed religious communities or among new immigrants from parts of the world that still practice arranged marriage. But for most of America’s middle- and upper-class youth—the privileged college-educated and graduated—there are no known explicit, or even tacit, social paths directed at marriage. People still get married—though later, less frequently, more hesitantly, and, by and large, less successfully. People still get married in churches and synagogues—though often with ceremonies of their own creation. But, for the great majority, the way to the altar is uncharted territory: It’s every couple on its own bottom, without a compass, often without a goal. Those who reach the altar seem to have stumbled upon it by accident.

Then and Now

Things were not always like this; in fact, one suspects things were never like this, not here, not anywhere. We live, in this respect as in so many others, in utterly novel and unpre-cedented times. Until what seems like only yesterday, young people were groomed for marriage, and the paths leading to it were culturally well set out, at least in rough outline. In polite society, at the beginning of this century, our grandfathers came a-calling and a-wooing at the homes of our grandmothers, under conditions set by the woman, operating from strength on her own turf. A generation later, courting couples began to go out on “dates,” in public and increasingly on the man’s terms, given that he had the income to pay for dinner and dancing. To be sure, some people “played the field,” and, in the pre-war years, dating on college campuses became a matter more of proving popularity than of proving suitability for marriage. But, especially after the war, “going-steady” was a regular feature of high-school and college life; the age of marriage dropped considerably, and high-school or college sweethearts often married right after, or even before, graduation. Finding a mate, no less than getting an education that would enable him to support her, was at least a tacit goal of many a male undergraduate; many a young woman, so the joke had it, went to college mainly for her MRS. degree, a charge whose truth was proof against libel for legions of college coeds well into the 1960s.[1]

In other respects as well, the young remained culturally attached to the claims of “real life.” Though times were good, fresh memory kept alive the poverty of the recent Great Depression and the deaths and dislocations of the war; necessity and the urgencies of life were not out of sight, even for fortunate youth. Opportunity was knocking, the world and adulthood were beckoning, and most of us stepped forward into married life, readily, eagerly, and, truth to tell, without much pondering. We were simply doing—some sooner, some later—what our parents had done, indeed, what all our forebears had done.

Not so today. Now the vast majority goes to college, but very few—women or men—go with the hope, or

even the wish, of finding a marriage partner. Many do not expect to find there even a path to a career; they often require several years of post-graduate "time off" to figure out what they are going to do with themselves. Sexually active—in truth, hyperactive—they flop about from one relationship to another; to the bewildered eye of this admittedly much-too-old but still romantic observer, they manage to appear all at once casual and carefree and grim and humorless about getting along with the opposite sex. The young men, nervous predators, act as if any woman is equally good: They are given not to falling in love with one, but to scoring in bed with many. And in this sporting attitude they are now matched by some female trophy hunters.

But most young women strike me as sad, lonely, and confused; hoping for something more, they are not enjoying their hard-won sexual liberation as much as liberation theory says they should.[2] Never mind wooing, today's collegians do not even make dates or other forward-looking commitments to see one another; in this, as in so many other ways, they reveal their blindness to the meaning of the passing of time. Those very few who couple off seriously and get married upon graduation as we, their parents, once did are looked upon as freaks.

After college, the scene is even more remarkable and bizarre: singles bars, personal "partner wanted" ads (almost never mentioning marriage as a goal), men practicing serial monogamy (or what someone has aptly renamed "rotating polygamy"), women chronically disappointed in the failure of men "to commit." For the first time in human history, mature women by the tens of thousands live the entire decade of their twenties—their most fertile years—neither in the homes of their fathers nor in the homes of their husbands; unprotected, lonely, and out of sync with their inborn nature. Some women positively welcome this state of affairs, but most do not; resenting the personal price they pay for their worldly independence, they nevertheless try to put a good face on things and take refuge in work or feminist ideology. As age 30 comes and goes, they begin to allow themselves to hear their biological clock ticking, and, if husbands continue to be lacking, single motherhood by the hand of science is now an option. Meanwhile, the bachelor herd continues its youthful prowling, with real life in suspended animation, living out what Kay Hymowitz, a contributing editor of *City Journal*, has called a "postmodern postadolescence."

Those women and men who get lucky enter into what the personal ads call LTRs—long-term relationships—sometimes cohabiting, sometimes not, usually to discover how short an LTR can be. When, after a series of such affairs, marriage happens to them, they enter upon it guardedly and suspiciously, with prenuptial agreements, no common surname, and separate bank accounts. Courtship, anyone? Don't be ridiculous.

Recent Obstacles to Courtship

Anyone who seriously contemplates the present scene is—or should be—filled with profound sadness, all the more so if he or she knows the profound satisfactions of a successful marriage. Our hearts go out not only to the children of failed marriages, but to the children of failed marriages, to those who have been abandoned by their parents' divorce, and to those

only to the children of failed- or non-marriages—to those betrayed by their parents—divorce and to those deliberately brought into the world as bastards—but also to the lonely, disappointed, cynical, misguided, or despondent people who are missing out on one of life's greatest adventures and, through it, on many of life's deepest experiences, insights, and joys. We watch our sons and daughters, our friends' children, and our students bumble along from one unsatisfactory relationship to the next, wishing we could help. Few things lead us to curse "o tempora, o mores" more than recognizing our impotence to do anything either about our own young people's dilemmas or about these melancholy times.

Some conservatives frankly wish to turn back the clock and think a remoralization of society in matters erotic is a real possibility. I, on the other hand, am deeply pessimistic, most of the time despairing of any improvement. Inherited cultural forms can be undermined by public policy and social decision, but once fractured, they are hard to repair by rational and self-conscious design. Besides, the causes of the present state of affairs are multiple, powerful, and, I fear, largely irreversible. Anyone who thinks courtship can make a comeback must at least try to understand what he is up against.

Some of the obstacles in the way of getting married are of very recent origin; indeed, they have occurred during the adult lifetime of those of us over 50. For this reason, one suspects, they may seem to some people to be reversible, a spasm connected with the "abnormal" sixties. But, when they are rightly understood, one can see that they spring from the very heart of liberal democratic society and of modernity altogether.

Here is a (partial) list of the recent changes that hamper courtship and marriage: the sexual revolution, made possible especially by effective female contraception; the ideology of feminism and the changing educational and occupational status of women; the destigmatization of bastardy, divorce, infidelity, and abortion; the general erosion of shame and awe regarding sexual matters, exemplified most vividly in the ubiquitous and voyeuristic presentation of sexual activity in movies and on television; widespread morally neutral sex education in schools; the explosive increase in the numbers of young people whose parents have been divorced (and in those born out of wedlock, who have never known their father); great increases in geographic mobility, with a resulting loosening of ties to place and extended family of origin; and, harder to describe precisely, a popular culture that celebrates youth and independence not as a transient stage en route to adulthood but as "the time of our lives," imitable at all ages, and an ethos that lacks transcendent aspirations and asks of us no devotion to family, God, or country, encouraging us simply to soak up the pleasures of the present.

The change most immediately devastating for wooing is probably the sexual revolution. For why would a man court a woman for marriage when she may be sexually enjoyed, and regularly, without it? Contrary to what the youth of the sixties believed, they were not the first to feel the power of sexual desire. Many, perhaps even most, men in earlier times avidly sought sexual pleasure prior to and outside of marriage. But they usually distinguished, as did the culture generally, between women one fooled around with and

women one married, between a woman of easy virtue and a woman of virtue simply. Only respectable women were respected; one no more wanted a loose woman for one's partner than for one's mother.

The supreme virtue of the virtuous woman was modesty, a form of sexual self-control, manifested not only in chastity but in decorous dress and manner, speech and deed, and in reticence in the display of her well-banked affections. A virtue, as it were, made for courtship, it served simultaneously as a source of attraction and a spur to manly ardor, a guard against a woman's own desires, as well as a defense against unworthy suitors. A fine woman understood that giving her body (in earlier times, even her kiss) meant giving her heart, which was too precious to be bestowed on anyone who would not prove himself worthy, at the very least by pledging himself in marriage to be her defender and lover forever.

Once female modesty became a first casualty of the sexual revolution, even women eager for marriage lost their greatest power to hold and to discipline their prospective mates. For it is a woman's refusal of sexual importunings, coupled with hints or promises of later gratification, that is generally a necessary condition of transforming a man's lust into love. Women also lost the capacity to discover their own genuine longings and best interests. For only by holding herself in reserve does a woman gain the distance and self-command needed to discern what and whom she truly wants and to insist that the ardent suitor measure up. While there has always been sex without love, easy and early sexual satisfaction makes love and real intimacy less, not more, likely—for both men and women. Everyone's prospects for marriage were—are—sacrificed on the altar of pleasure now.

Sexual Technology and Technique

The sexual revolution that liberated (especially) female sexual desire from the confines of marriage, and even from love and intimacy, would almost certainly not have occurred had there not been available cheap and effective female birth control—the pill—which for the first time severed female sexual activity from its generative consequences. Thanks to technology, a woman could declare herself free from the teleological meaning of her sexuality—as free as a man appears to be from his. Her menstrual cycle, since puberty a regular reminder of her natural maternal destiny, is now anovulatory and directed instead by her will and her medications, serving goals only of pleasure and convenience, enjoyable without apparent risk to personal health and safety. Woman on the pill is thus not only freed from the practical risk of pregnancy; she has, wittingly or not, begun to redefine the meaning of her own womanliness. Her sexuality unlinked to procreation, its exercise no longer needs to be concerned with the character of her partner and whether he is suitable to be the father and co-rearer of her yet-to-be-born children. Female sexuality becomes, like male, unlinked to the future. The new woman's anthem: Girls just want to have fun. Ironically, but absolutely predictably, the chemicals devised to assist in family planning keep many a potential family from forming, at least with a proper matrimonial beginning.

Sex education in our elementary and secondary schools is an independent yet related obstacle to courtship and marriage. Taking for granted, and thereby ratifying, precocious sexual activity among teenagers (and even pre-teens), most programs of sex education in public schools have a twofold aim: the prevention of teenage pregnancy and the prevention of venereal disease, especially AIDS. While some programs also encourage abstinence or non-coital sex, most are concerned with teaching techniques for "safe sex"; offspring (and disease) are thus treated as (equally) avoidable side effects of sexuality, whose true purpose is only individual pleasure. (This I myself did not learn until our younger daughter so enlightened me, after she learned it from her seventh-grade biology teacher.) The entire approach of sex education is technocratic and, at best, morally neutral; in many cases, it explicitly opposes traditional morals while moralistically insisting on the equal acceptability of any and all forms of sexual expression provided only that they are not coerced. No effort is made to teach the importance of marriage as the proper home for sexual intimacy.

But perhaps still worse than such amorality—and amorality on this subject is itself morally culpable—is the failure of sex education to attempt to inform and elevate the erotic imagination of the young. On the contrary, the very attention to physiology and technique is deadly to the imagination. True sex education is an education of the heart; it concerns itself with beautiful and worthy beloveds, with elevating transports of the soul. The energy of sexual desire, if properly sublimated, is transformable into genuine and lofty longings—not only for love and romance but for all the other higher human yearnings. The sonnets and plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Keats and Shelley, and the novels of Jane Austen can incline a heart to woo, and even show one whom and how. What kind of wooers can one hope to cultivate from reading the sex manuals—or from watching the unsublimated and unsublime sexual athleticism of the popular culture?

Decent sex education at home is also compromised, given that most parents of today's adolescents were themselves happy sexual revolutionaries. Dad may now be terribly concerned that his daughter not become promiscuous in high school or college, but he probably remains glad for the sexual favors bestowed on him by numerous coeds when he was on campus. If he speaks at all, he will likely settle for admonitions to play it safe and lessons about condoms and the pill. And mom, a feminist and career woman, is concerned only that her daughter have sex on her own terms, not her boyfriend's. If chastity begins at home, it has lost its teachers and exemplars.

Crippled by Divorce

The ubiquitous experience of divorce is also deadly for courtship and marriage. Some people try to argue, wishfully against the empirical evidence, that children of divorce will marry better than their parents because they know how important it is to choose well. But the deck is stacked against them. Not only are many of them frightened of marriage, in whose likely permanence they simply do not believe.

but they are often maimed for love and intimacy. They have had no successful models to imitate; worse, their capacity for trust and love has been severely crippled by the betrayal of the primal trust all children naturally repose in their parents, to provide that durable, reliable, and absolutely trustworthy haven of permanent and unconditional love in an otherwise often unloving and undependable world. Countless students at the University of Chicago have told me and my wife that the divorce of their parents has been the most devastating and life-shaping event of their lives.[3] They are conscious of the fact that they enter into relationships guardedly and tentatively; for good reason, they believe that they must always be looking out for number one. Accordingly, they feel little sense of devotion to another and, their own needs unmet, they are not generally eager for or partial to children. They are not good bets for promise keeping, and they haven't enough margin for generous service. And many of the fatherless men are themselves unmanned for fatherhood, except in the purely biological sense. Even where they dream of meeting a true love, these children of divorce have a hard time finding, winning, and committing themselves to the right one.

It is surely the fear of making a mistake in marriage, and the desire to avoid a later divorce, that leads some people to undertake cohabitation, sometimes understood by the couple to be a "trial marriage"—although they are often one or both of them self-deceived (or other-deceiving). It is far easier, so the argument goes, to get to know one another by cohabiting than by the artificial systems of courting or dating of yesteryear. But such arrangements, even when they eventuate in matrimony, are, precisely because they are a trial, not a trial of marriage. Marriage is not something one tries on for size, and then decides whether to keep; it is rather something one decides with a promise, and then bends every effort to keep.

Lacking the formalized and public ritual, and especially the vows or promises of permanence (or "commitment") that subtly but surely shape all aspects of genuine marital life, cohabitation is an arrangement of convenience, with each partner taken on approval and returnable at will. Many are, in fact, just playing house—sex and meals shared with the rent. When long-cohabiting couples do later marry, whether to legitimate prospective offspring, satisfy parental wishes, or just because "it now seems right," post-marital life is generally regarded and experienced as a continuation of the same, not as a true change of estate. The formal rite of passage that is the wedding ceremony is, however welcome and joyous, also something of a mockery: Everyone, not only the youngest child present, wonders, in embarrassed silence, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Given that they have more or less drifted into marriage, it should come as no great surprise that couples who have lived together before marriage have a higher, not lower, rate of divorce than those who have not. Too much familiarity? Disenchantment? Or is it rather the lack of wooing—that is, that marriage was not seen from the start as the sought-for relationship, as the goal that beckoned and guided the process of getting-to-know-you?

That the cause of courtship has been severely damaged by feminist ideology and attitudes goes almost without saying. Even leaving aside the radical attacks on traditional sex roles, on the worth of motherhood or the vanishing art of homemaking, and sometimes even on the whole male race, the reconception of all relations between the sexes as relations based on power is simply deadly for love. Anyone who has ever loved or been loved knows the difference between love and the will to power, no matter what the cynics say. But the cynical new theories, and the resulting push toward androgyny, surely inhibit the growth of love.

On the one side, there is a rise in female assertiveness and efforts at empowerment, with a consequent need to deny all womanly dependence and the kind of vulnerability that calls for the protection of strong and loving men, protection such men were once—and would still be—willing to provide. On the other side, we see the enfeeblement of men, who, contrary to the dominant ideology, are not likely to become better lovers, husbands, or fathers if they too become feminists or fellow-travelers. On the contrary, many men now cynically exploit women's demands for equal power by letting them look after themselves—pay their own way, hold their own doors, fight their own battles, travel after dark by themselves. These ever so sensitive males will defend not a woman's honor but her right to learn the manly art of self-defense. In the present climate, those increasingly rare men who are still inclined to be gentlemen must dissemble their generosity as submissiveness.[4]

Even in the absence of the love-poisoning doctrines of radical feminism, the otherwise welcome changes in women's education and employment have also been problematic for courtship. True, better educated women can, other things being equal, be more interesting and engaging partners for better educated men; and the possibility of genuine friendship between husband and wife—one that could survive the end of the child-rearing years—is, at least in principle, much more likely now that women have equal access to higher education. But everything depends on the spirit and the purpose of such education, and whether it makes and keeps a high place for private life.

Most young people in our better colleges today do not esteem the choice for marriage as equal to the choice for career, not for themselves, not for anyone. Students reading *The Tempest*, for example, are almost universally appalled that Miranda would fall in love at first sight with Ferdinand, thus sealing her fate and precluding "making something of herself"—say, by going to graduate school. Even her prospects as future Queen of Naples lack all appeal, presumably because it depends on her husband and on marriage. At least officially, no young woman will admit to dreaming of meeting her prince; better a position, a salary, and a room of her own.

The problem is not woman's desire for meaningful work. It is rather the ordering of one's loves. Many women have managed to combine work and family; the difficulty is finally not work but careers, or, rather, careerism. Careerism, now an equal opportunity affliction, is surely no friend to love or marriage: and the

careerist character of higher education is greater than ever. Women are under special pressures to prove they can be as dedicated to their work as men. Likewise, in the work place, they must do man's work like a man, and for man's pay and perquisites. Consequently, they are compelled to regard private life, and especially marriage, homemaking, and family, as lesser goods, to be pursued only by those lesser women who can aspire no higher than "baking cookies." Besides, many women in such circumstances have nothing left to give, "no time to get involved." And marriage, should it come for careerist women, is often compromised from the start, what with the difficulty of finding two worthy jobs in the same city, or commuter marriage, or the need to negotiate or get hired help for every domestic and familial task.

Besides these greater conflicts of time and energy, the economic independence of women, however welcome on other grounds, is itself not an asset for marital stability, as both the woman and the man can more readily contemplate leaving a marriage. Indeed, a woman's earning power can become her own worst enemy when the children are born. Many professional women who would like to stay home with their new babies nonetheless work full-time. Tragically, some cling to their economic independence because they worry that their husbands will leave them for another woman before the children are grown. What are these women looking for in prospective husbands? Do their own career preoccupations obscure their own prospective maternal wishes and needs? Indeed, what understanding of marriage informed their decision to marry in the first place?

Not Ready for Adulthood

This question in fact represents a more subtle, but most profound, impediment to wooing and marriage: deep uncertainty about what marriage is and means, and what purpose it serves. In previous generations, people chose to marry, but they were not compelled also to choose what marriage meant. Is it a sacrament, a covenant, or a contract based on calculation of mutual advantage? Is it properly founded on eros, friendship, or economic advantage? Is marriage a vehicle for personal fulfillment and private happiness, a vocation of mutual service, or a task to love the one whom it has been given me to love? Are marital vows still to be regarded as binding promises that both are duty-bound to keep or, rather, as quaint expressions of current hopes and predictions that, should they be mistaken, can easily be nullified? Having in so many cases already given their bodies to one another—not to speak of the previous others—how does one understand the link between marriage and conjugal fidelity? And what, finally, of that first purpose of marriage, procreation, for whose sake societies everywhere have instituted and safeguarded this institution? For, truth to tell, were it not for the important obligations to care for and rear the next generation, no society would finally much care about who couples with whom, or for how long.

This brings me to what is probably the deepest and most intractable obstacle to courtship and marriage: a set of cultural attitudes and sensibilities that obscure and even deny the fundamental difference

between youth and adulthood. Marriage, especially when seen as the institution designed to provide for the next generation, is most definitely the business of adults, by which I mean, people who are serious about life, people who aspire to go outward and forward to embrace and to assume responsibility for the future. To be sure, most college graduates do go out, find jobs, and become self-supporting (though, astonishingly, a great many do return to live at home). But, though out of the nest, they don't have a course to fly. They do not experience their lives as a trajectory, with an inner meaning partly given by the life cycle itself. The carefreeness and independence of youth they do not see as a stage on the way to maturity, in which they then take responsibility for the world and especially, as parents, for the new lives that will replace them. The necessities of aging and mortality are out of sight; few feel the call to serve a higher goal or some transcendent purpose.

The view of life as play has often characterized the young. But, remarkably, today this is not something regrettable, to be outgrown as soon as possible; for their narcissistic absorption in themselves and in immediate pleasures and present experiences, the young are not condemned but are even envied by many of their elders. Parents and children wear the same cool clothes, speak the same lingo, listen to the same music. Youth, not adulthood, is the cultural ideal, at least as celebrated in the popular culture. Yes, everyone feels themselves to be always growing, as a result of this failed relationship or that change of job. But very few aspire to be fully grown-up, and the culture does not demand it of them, not least because many prominent grown-ups would gladly change places with today's 20-somethings. Why should a young man be eager to take his father's place, if he sees his father running away from it with all deliberate speed? How many so-called grown-ups today agree with C. S. Lewis: "I envy youth its stomach, not its heart"?

Deeper Cultural Causes

So this is our situation. But just because it is novel and of recent origin does not mean that it is reversible or even that it was avoidable. Indeed, virtually all of the social changes we have so recently experienced are the bittersweet fruits of the success of our modern democratic, liberal, enlightened society—celebrating equality, freedom, and universal secularized education, and featuring prosperity, mobility, and astonishing progress in science and technology. Even brief reflection shows how the dominant features of the American way of life are finally inhospitable to the stability of marriage and family life and to the mores that lead people self-consciously to marry.

Tocqueville already observed the unsettling implications of American individualism, each person seeking only in himself for the reasons for things. The celebration of equality gradually undermines the authority of religion, tradition, and custom, and, within families, of husbands over wives and fathers over sons. A nation dedicated to safeguarding individual rights to liberty and the privately defined pursuit of happiness is, willy-nilly, preparing the way for the "liberation" of women; in the absence of powerful non-liberal cultural forces, such as traditional biblical religion, that defend sex-linked social roles, androgyny in

education and employment is the most likely outcome. Further, our liberal approach to important moral issues in terms of the rights of individuals—e.g., contraception as part of a right to privacy, or abortion as belonging to a woman's right over her own body, or procreation as governed by a right to reproduce—flies in the face of the necessarily social character of sexuality and marriage. The courtship and marriage of people who see themselves as self-sufficient rights-bearing individuals will be decisively different from the courtship and marriage of people who understand themselves as, say, unavoidably incomplete and dependent children of the Lord who have been enjoined to be fruitful and multiply.

While poverty is not generally good for courtship and marriage, so neither is luxury. The lifestyles of the rich and famous have long been rich also in philandering, divorce, and the neglect of children. Necessity becomes hidden from view by the possibilities for self-indulgence; the need for service and self-sacrifice, so necessary for marriage understood as procreative, is rarely learned in the lap of plenty. Thanks to unprecedented prosperity, huge numbers of American youth have grown up in the lap of luxury, and it shows. It's an old story: Parents who slave to give their children everything they themselves were denied rarely produce people who will be similarly disposed toward their own children. Spoiled children make bad spouses and worse parents; when they eventually look for a mate, they frequently look for someone who will continue to cater to their needs and whims. Necessity, not luxury, is for most people the mother of virtue and maturity.

The progress of science and technology, especially since World War II, has played a major role in creating this enfeebling culture of luxury. But scientific advances have more directly helped to undermine the customs of courtship. Technological advances in food production and distribution and a plethora of appliances—refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, dryers, etc.—largely eliminate the burdens of housekeeping; not surprisingly, however, homemaking itself disappears with the burdens, for the unburdened housewife now finds outside fish to fry. More significantly, medical advances have virtually eliminated infant mortality and deadly childhood diseases, contributing indirectly to the reduction in family size. The combination of longer life-expectancy and effective contraception means that, for the first time in human history, the child-bearing and child-rearing years occupy only a small fraction (one-fifth to one-fourth) of a woman's life; it is therefore less reasonable that she be solely prepared for, and satisfied by, the vocation of motherhood. Lastly, medical advances quite independent of contraception have prepared the drive toward our recently permitted sexual liberation: For the triumph of the sexual is a clearly predictable outcome of the successful pursuit, through medicine, of the young and enduringly healthy human body.

In fact, in his *New Atlantis*, Francis Bacon foresaw that the most likely social outcome of medical success would be a greatly intensified eroticism and promiscuous sexuality, in which healthy and perfected bodies seek enjoyment here and now without regard to the need for marriage, procreation, and child-rearing. Accordingly, to counter these dangers, Bacon has his proposed utopian society establish the most elaborate rituals to govern marriage; and it gives its highest honor (after those conferred on the man

most elaborate rituals to govern marriage, and it gives its highest honor (after those conferred on the men of science) to the man who has sired over 30 living descendants (of course, within conventional marital boundaries). In the absence of such countervailing customs, as Bacon clearly understood, the successful pursuit of longer life and better health leads—as we have seen in recent decades—to a culture of protracted youthfulness, hedonism, and sexual license.

Technology aside, even the ideas of modern science have hurt the traditional understanding of sex. Modern science's rejection of a teleological view of nature has damaged most of all the teleological view of our sexuality. Sure, children come from the sex act; but the sex act no longer naturally derives its meaning or purpose from this procreative possibility. After all, a man spends perhaps all of 30 seconds of his sexual life procreating; sex is thus about something else. The separation of sex from procreation achieved in this half-century by contraception was worked out intellectually much earlier; and the implications for marriage were drawn in theory well before they were realized in practice. Immanuel Kant, modernity's most demanding and most austere moralist, nonetheless gave marriage a heady push down the slippery slope: Seeing that some marriages were childless, and seeing that sex had no necessary link to procreation, Kant redefined marriage as "a life-long contract for the mutual exercise of the genitalia." If this be marriage, the reason for its permanence, exclusivity, and fidelity vanishes.

With science, the leading wing of modern rationalism, has come the progressive demystification of the world. Falling in love, should it still occur, is for the modern temper to be explained not by demonic possession (Eros) born of the soul-smiting sight of the beautiful (Aphrodite) but by a rise in the concentration of some still-to-be-identified polypeptide hormone in the hypothalamus. The power of religious sensibilities and understandings fades too. Even if it is true that the great majority of Americans still profess a belief in God, He is for few of us a God before whom one trembles in fear of judgment. With adultery almost as American as apple pie, few people appreciate the awe-ful shame of *The Scarlet Letter*. The sexual abominations of Leviticus—incest, homosexuality, and bestiality—are going the way of all flesh, the second with religious blessings, no less. Ancient religious teachings regarding marriage have lost their authority even for people who regard themselves as serious Jews or Christians: Who really believes that husbands should govern their wives as Christ governs the church, or that a husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church and should give himself up to death for her (Ephesians 5:24-25)?

The Natural Obstacle

Not all the obstacles to courtship and marriage are cultural. At bottom, there is also the deeply ingrained, natural waywardness and unruliness of the human male. Sociobiologists were not the first to discover that males have a penchant for promiscuity and polygyny—this was well known to biblical religion. Men are also naturally more restless and ambitious than women; lacking woman's powerful and immediate link to life's generative answer to mortality, men flee from the fear of death into heroic deed, great quests, or sheer distraction after distraction. One can make a good case that biblical religion is, not least, an

attempt to domesticate male sexuality and male erotic longings, and to put them in the service of transmitting a righteous and holy way of life through countless generations.

For as long as American society kept strong its uneasy union between modern liberal political principles and Judeo-Christian moral and social beliefs, marriage and the family could be sustained and could even prosper. But the gender-neutral individualism of our political teaching has, it seems, at last won the day, and the result has been male "liberation"—from domestication, from civility, from responsible self-command. Contemporary liberals and conservatives alike are trying to figure out how to get men "to commit" to marriage, or to keep their marital vows, or to stay home with the children, but their own androgynous view of humankind prevents them from seeing how hard it has always been to make a monogamous husband and devoted father out of the human male.

Ogden Nash had it right: "Hogamus higamus, men are polygamous; higamus hogamus, women monogamous." To make naturally polygamous men accept the conventional institution of monogamous marriage has been the work of centuries of Western civilization, with social sanctions, backed by religious teachings and authority, as major instruments of the transformation, and with female modesty as the crucial civilizing device. As these mores and sanctions disappear, courtship gives way to seduction and possession, and men become again the sexually, familiarly, and civically irresponsible creatures they are naturally always in danger of being. At the top of the social ladder, executives walk out on their families and take up with trophy wives. At the bottom of the scale, low-status males, utterly uncivilized by marriage, return to the fighting gangs, taking young women as prizes for their prowess. Rebarbarization is just around the corner. Courtship, anyone?

Why It Matters

Given the enormous new social impediments to courtship and marriage, and given also that they are firmly and deeply rooted in the cultural soil of modernity, not to say human nature itself, one might simply decide to declare the cause lost. In fact, many people would be only too glad to do so. For they condemn the old ways as repressive, inegalitarian, sexist, patriarchal, boring, artificial, and unnecessary. Some urge us to go with the flow; others hopefully believe that new modes and orders will emerge, well-suited to our new conditions of liberation and equality. Just as new cultural meanings are today being "constructed" for sexuality and gender, so too new cultural definitions can be invented for "marriage," "paternity and maternity," and "family." Nothing truly important, so the argument goes, will be lost.

New arrangements can perhaps be fashioned. As Raskolnikov put it—and he should know—"Man gets used to everything, the beast!" But it is simply wrong that nothing important will be lost; indeed, many things of great importance have already been lost, and, as I have indicated, at tremendous cost in personal happiness, child welfare, and civic peace. This should come as no surprise. For the new

arrangements that constitute the cultural void created by the demise of courtship and dating rest on serious and destructive errors regarding the human condition: errors about the meaning of human sexuality, errors about the nature of marriage, errors about what constitutes a fully human life.

Sexual desire, in human beings as in animals, points to an end that is partly hidden from, and finally at odds with, the self-serving individual: Sexuality as such means perishability and serves replacement. The salmon swimming upstream to spawn and die tell the universal story: Sex is bound up with death, to which it holds a partial answer in procreation. This truth the salmon and the other animals practice blindly; only the human being can understand what it means. According to the story of the Garden of Eden, our humanization is in fact coincident with the recognition of our sexual nakedness and all that it implies: shame at our needy incompleteness, unruly self-division, and finitude; awe before the eternal; hope in the self-transcending possibilities of children and a relationship to the divine.[5] For a human being to treat sex as a desire like hunger—not to mention as sport—is then to live a deception.

Thus how shallow an understanding of sexuality is embodied in our current clamoring for “safe sex.” Sex is by its nature unsafe. All interpersonal relations are necessarily risky and serious ones especially so. And to give oneself to another, body and soul, is hardly playing it safe. Sexuality is at its core profoundly “unsafe,” and it is only thanks to contraception that we are encouraged to forget its inherent “dangers.” These go beyond the hazards of venereal disease, which are always a reminder and a symbol of the high stakes involved, and beyond the risks of pregnancy and the pains and dangers of childbirth to the mother. To repeat, sexuality itself means mortality—equally for both man and woman. Whether we know it or not, when we are sexually active we are voting with our genitalia for our own demise. “Safe sex” is the self-delusion of shallow souls.[6]

It is for this reason that procreation remains at the core of a proper understanding of marriage. Mutual pleasure and mutual service between husband and wife are, of course, part of the story. So too are mutual admiration and esteem, especially where the partners are deserving. A friendship of shared pursuits and pastimes enhances any marriage, all the more so when the joint activities exercise deeper human capacities. But it is precisely the common project of procreation that holds together what sexual differentiation sometimes threatens to drive apart. Through children, a good common to both husband and wife, male and female achieve some genuine unification (beyond the mere sexual “union” that fails to do so): The two become one through sharing generous (not needy) love for this third being as good. Flesh of their flesh, the child is the parents’ own commingled being externalized, and given a separate and persisting existence; unification is enhanced also by their commingled work of rearing. Providing an opening to the future beyond the grave, carrying not only our seed but also our names, our ways, and our hopes that they will surpass us in goodness and happiness, children are a testament to the possibility of transcendence. Gender duality and sexual desire, which first draws our love upward and outside of ourselves, finally provide for the partial overcoming of the confinement and limitation of perishable

embodiment altogether. It is as the supreme institution devoted to this renewal of human possibility that marriage finds its deepest meaning and highest function.

There is no substitute for the contribution that the shared work of raising children makes to the singular friendship and love of husband and wife. Precisely because of its central procreative mission, and, even more, because children are yours for a lifetime, this is a friendship that cannot be had with any other person. Uniquely, it is a friendship that does not fly from, but rather embraces wholeheartedly, the finitude of its members, affirming without resentment the truth of our human condition. Not by mistake did God create a woman—rather than a dialectic partner—to cure Adam’s aloneness; not by accident does the same biblical Hebrew verb mean both to know sexually and to know the truth—including the generative truth about the meaning of being man and woman.[7]

Marriage and procreation are, therefore, at the heart of a serious and flourishing human life, if not for everyone at least for the vast majority. Most of us know from our own experience that life becomes truly serious when we become responsible for the lives of others for whose being in the world we have said, “We do.” It is fatherhood and motherhood that teach most of us what it took to bring us into our own adulthood. And it is the desire to give not only life but a good way of life to our children that opens us toward a serious concern for the true, the good, and even the holy. Parental love of children leads once wayward sheep back into the fold of church and synagogue. In the best case, it can even be the beginning of the sanctification of life—yes, even in modern times.

The earlier forms of courtship, leading men and women to the altar, understood these deeper truths about human sexuality, marriage, and the higher possibilities for human life. Courtship provided rituals of growing up, for making clear the meaning of one’s own human sexual nature, and for entering into the ceremonial and customary world of ritual and sanctification. Courtship disciplined sexual desire and romantic attraction, provided opportunities for mutual learning about one another’s character, fostered salutary illusions that inspired admiration and devotion, and, by locating wooer and wooed in their familial settings, taught the inter-generational meaning of erotic activity. It pointed the way to the answers to life’s biggest questions: Where are you going? Who is going with you? How—in what manner—are you both going to go?

The practices of today’s men and women do not accomplish these purposes, and they and their marriages, when they get around to them, are weaker as a result. There may be no going back to the earlier forms of courtship, but no one should be rejoicing over this fact. Anyone serious about “designing” new cultural forms to replace those now defunct must bear the burden of finding some alternative means of serving all these necessary goals.

A Revolution Needed?

Is the situation hopeless? One would like to be able to offer more encouraging news than the great popularity—and not only among those 50 or older—of the recent Jane Austen movies, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, and *Emma*, and (on public television) the splendid BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*. But, though at best a small ray of hope, the renewed interest in Jane Austen reflects, I believe, a dissatisfaction with the unromantic and amarital present and a wish, on the part of many 20- and 30-somethings, that they too might find their equivalent of Elizabeth Bennet or Mr. Darcy (even without his Pemberly). The return of successful professional matchmaking services—I do not mean the innumerable “self-matching” services that fill pages of “personal” ads in our newspapers and magazines—is a further bit of good news. So too is the revival of explicit courtship practices among certain religious groups; young men are told by young women that they need their father’s permission to come courting, and marriage alone is clearly the name of the game. Various groups, including David Blankenhorn’s Institute for American Values, have put marriage—and not only divorce—in the national spotlight. And—if I may grasp at straws—one can even take a small bit of comfort from those who steadfastly refuse to marry, insofar as they do so because they recognize that marriage is too serious, too demanding, too audacious an adventure for their immature, irresponsible, and cowardly selves.

Frail reeds, indeed—probably not enough to save even a couple of courting water bugs. Real reform in the direction of sanity would require a restoration of cultural gravity about sex, marriage, and the life cycle. The restigmatization of illegitimacy and promiscuity would help. A reversal of recent anti-natalist prejudices, implicit in the practice of abortion, and a correction of current anti-generative sex education, would also help, as would the revalorization of marriage as a personal, as well as a cultural, ideal. Parents of pubescent children could contribute to a truly humanizing sex education by elevating their erotic imagination, through exposure to an older and more edifying literature. Parents of college-bound young people, especially those with strong religious and family values, could direct their children to religiously affiliated colleges that attract like-minded people.

Even in deracinated and cosmopolitan universities like my own, faculty could legitimate the importance of courtship and marriage by offering courses on the subject, aimed at making the students more thoughtful about their own life-shaping choices. Even better, they could teach without ideological or methodological preoccupations the world’s great literature, elevating the longings and refining the sensibilities of their students and furnishing their souls with numerous examples of lives seriously led and loves faithfully followed. Religious institutions could provide earlier and better instruction for adolescents on the meaning of sex and marriage, as well as suitable opportunities for co-religionists to mix and, God willing, match. Absent newly discovered congregational and communal support, individual parents will generally be helpless before the onslaught of the popular culture.

Under present democratic conditions, with families not what they used to be, anything that contributes

to promoting a lasting friendship between husband and wife should be cultivated. A budding couple today needs even better skills at reading character, and greater opportunities for showing it, than was necessary in a world that had lots of family members looking on. Paradoxically, encouragement of earlier marriage, and earlier child-bearing, might in many cases be helpful—the young couple as it were growing up together before either partner could become jaded or distrustful from too much pre-marital experience, not only of “relationships” but of life. Training for careers by women could be postponed until after the early motherhood years—perhaps even supported publicly by something like a GI Bill of Rights for mothers who had stayed home until their children reached school age.

But it would appear to require a revolution to restore the conditions most necessary for successful courtship: a desire in America’s youth for mature adulthood (which means for marriage and parenthood), an appreciation of the unique character of the marital bond, understood as linked to generation, and a restoration of sexual self-restraint generally and of female modesty in particular.

Frankly, I do not see how this last, most crucial, prerequisite can be recovered, nor do I see how one can do sensibly without it. As Tocqueville rightly noted, it is women who are the teachers of mores; it is largely through the purity of her morals, self-regulated, that woman wields her influence, both before and after marriage. Men, as Rousseau put it, will always do what is pleasing to women, but only if women suitably control and channel their own considerable sexual power. Is there perhaps some nascent young feminist out there who would like to make her name great and who will seize the golden opportunity for advancing the truest interest of women (and men and children) by raising (again) the radical banner, “Not until you marry me”? And, while I’m dreaming, why not also, “Not without my parents’ blessings”?

Notes

1. A fine history of these transformations has been written by Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
2. Readers removed from the college scene should revisit Allan Bloom’s profound analysis of relationships in his *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Bloom was concerned with the effect of the new arrangements on the possibility for liberal education, not for marriage, my current concern.
3. In years past, students identified with Hamlet because of his desire to make a difference in the world. Today, they identify with him because of his “broken home”—the death of his father and the too-hasty remarriage of his mother. Thus, to them it is no wonder that he, like they, has trouble in his “relationships.”
4. Truth to tell, the reigning ideology often rules only people’s tongues, not their hearts. Many a young woman secretly hopes to meet and catch a gentleman, though the forms that might help her do so are

either politically incorrect or simply unknown to her. In my wife's course on Henry James' *The Bostonians*, the class's most strident feminist, who had all term denounced patriarchy and male hegemonism, honestly confessed in the last class that she wished she could meet a Basil Ransom who would carry her off. But the way to her heart is blocked by her prickly opinions and by those of the dominant ethos.

5. See my "Man and Woman: An Old Story," *First Things*, November, 1991.

6. This is not to say that the sole meaning of sexuality is procreative; understood as love-making, sexual union is also a means of expressing mutual love and the desire for a union of souls. Making love need lose none of its tenderness after the child-bearing years are past. Yet the procreative possibility embedded in eros cannot be expunged without distorting its meaning.

7. I recognize that there are happily monogamous marriages that remain childless, some by choice, others by bad luck, and that some people will feel the pull of and yield to a higher calling, be it art, philosophy, or the celibate priesthood, seeking or serving some other transcendent voice. But the former often feel cheated by their childlessness, frequently going to extraordinary lengths to conceive or adopt a child. A childless and grandchildless old age is a sadness and a deprivation, even where it is a price willingly paid by couples who deliberately do not procreate. And for those who elect not to marry, they at least face the meaning of the choice forgone. They do not reject, but rather affirm, the trajectory of a human life, whose boundaries are given by necessity, and our animal nature, whose higher yearnings and aspirations are made possible in large part because we recognize our neediness and insufficiency. But, until very recently, the aging self-proclaimed bachelor was the butt of many jokes, mildly censured for his self-indulgent and carefree, not to say profligate, ways and for his unwillingness to pay back for the gift of life and nurture by giving life and nurturing in return. No matter how successful he was in business or profession, he could not avoid some taint of immaturity.

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