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**I Don't Don't: How Changing Notions of Marriage &  
Family Life Have Transformed Modern America**

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There is a storm brewing in our country today. Not merely a downpour. Much bigger than a squall. It is a tempest of epic proportion. A gale which has been – and certainly has the potential to continue being – the single-biggest tornado/blizzard meld in modern history.

Casualties have accrued. Homes are splintering. Lives will be changed forever.

And all that can occur before the wedding vows are even exchanged!

Mr. President, Secretary/Treasurer, Fellow Presenter, Members of Athenaeum. I present to you,

“I Don’t Don’t: How Changing Notions of Marriage & Family Life Have Transformed Modern America”

In 1960, 70% of Americans were married, and 67% of people were wed before age 30. By 2008, those totals had dropped to 52% and 26%, respectively. In 1978, only 28% of Americans believed marriage was becoming obsolete. By 2010, a whopping 40% of the population believed so.

However, a recent TIME magazine article, entitled, *Marriage: What’s It Good For?* {Which, I must admit, is where a good majority of my references were drawn}, highlights the finding of a Pew Research Center poll, which hypothesizes, “This doesn’t mean... that we’re pessimistic about the future of the American family.” In fact, “we have more faith in the family than we do in the nation’s education system or its economy” {Parenthetically – I’m not sure that says much about any of the aforementioned. But, I digress. The article continued:}. “We’re just more flexible about how family gets defined” (November 29, 2010; pg. 50).

Defining family... An interesting – and contentious – concept and process.

Merriam-Webster defines family as, “a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head.” The U.S. Census Bureau defines the same as, “a group of two people or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together” (*Current Population Survey*, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division – Fertility & Family Statistics Branch, May 10, 2010).

States, however, have been grappling with such classifications, and have led the charge, if you will, in redefining these traditional – Or, as some say, archaic – designations. Just three days ago, in fact, Illinois became the 16<sup>th</sup> state to allow civil unions, which gives spousal rights to same-sex marriages. Similar measures are being discussed (some even at a Constitutional level) for polygamists, life-partners, and even inter-speciests. Yes! Human-Animal relationships.

With such all-encompassing designations, though, come just as many opinions on the importance of marriage and family life. And in the melting-pot we call the United States, perhaps no better examples can be found than with people of different lineages. Take these proverbs, for example:

“A man without a wife is like a vase without flowers.” ~ African

“Never marry for money. Ye'll borrow it cheaper.” ~ Scottish

“Wedlock is a padlock.” ~ English

“The most dangerous food is wedding cake.” ~ American

So, are we becoming jaded to human's oldest partnership? Was Groucho Marx foreshadowing when he commented, “Marriage is a wonderful institution. But who wants to live in an institution?”

In the national Pew survey, the Research Center sought to find the answer to three questions:

- 1) What did people want and expect out of marriage and family life?
- 2) Why did people enter into committed relationships?
- 3) What did people gain from such relationships?

The results were astounding.

It was found “that marriage, whatever its social, spiritual or symbolic appeal, is in purely practical terms just not as necessary as it used to be. Neither men nor women need to be married to have sex or companionship or professional success or respect or children – yet marriage remains revered and desired” (TIME, pg. 49).

Somewhat contradictory, huh? More on that latter part later.

The poll found that over the last 50 years, the median age of people getting married for the first time has increased by an average of one year per decade (2010: Men = 28.2, Women = 26.1). Further, the number of children born out of wedlock increased some eight-fold, to 41%, over that of the 1960's. That equates to a three-fold increase, or 25% of children, living in a single-parent household. As Johns Hopkins University sociologist, Andrew Cherlin, found in his book, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, “About 21% of American children will see at least two live-in partners of their mothers by the time they're 15. And an additional 8% will see three or more” (TIME, pg. 52).

If possible, these statistics are even more forbidding when coupled with a 2000 census report, entitled *America's Families and Living Arrangements*, which found an unmarried woman, living with a man, is four times more likely to be the victim of domestic violence than an actual wife.

Likewise, if the same woman has children, these kids are 40 times more likely to be abused by live-in boyfriends than by their own parents.

Additionally, only 28% of those polled believe there's only one true love for each person. Which may explain why, according to the 2010 Census, 70% of Americans had been married at least once, placing the U.S. at or among the Western world's highest divorce and remarriage rates.

As the M\*A\*S\*H character Frank Burns surmised, "Marriage isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Let me tell you, honestly. Marriage is probably the chief cause of divorce."

Or as Oscar Wilde concluded, even the number of partners doesn't increase your chance for happiness. Wilde professed, "Bigamy is having one husband or wife too many. Monogamy is the same."

Venture-capitalists have even swooped-in to cash-in on American's capricious nature. The wedding industry now generates over \$40 billion a year, and has expanded its realm well-beyond wedding planners and cake decorators. Dating websites, such as *eHarmony* and *match.com*, are quickly becoming some of the most popular venues to meet potential mates. Reality shows, like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, garner as high of ratings as any in television... even though few result in cemented, long-standing relationship. And while pre-nups and post-nups have been around for some time now, a relatively new novelty is divorce insurance.

One would acquiesce, then, that a possible way to navigate these treacherous wedding waters, without actually having to dip your toe in, of course, is to simply live together. Cohabitate. Share the bills... just not the same last name.

Not so fast! Says Seth Eisenberg, president and CEO of the *Paris Foundation*, one of the biggest relationship-education operations in the country; "Marriage is like glue. You can build something with it. Living together is like Velcro" (TIME, pg. 56).

Author and songwriter, Claire Cloninger figures, in her book, *When the Glass Slipper Doesn't Fit and the Silver Spoon is in Someone Else's Mouth*, "that the degree of difficulty in combining two lives ranks somewhere between rerouting a hurricane and finding a parking place in downtown Manhattan."

We would be remiss if we didn't also look at the impact a divorce has on the other potential parties of a family: children. Since 1971, at least 1 million kids a year come out of divorced families. In modern-day terms, that equates to over 25% of the American population between the ages of 18 and 44. As Judith Wallerstein discerned, in her book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, which followed the lives of children for up to 25 years after their parents split, "We've been wrong in thinking the main impact of divorce occurs at the breakup. The major impact on children takes place when they reach their 20's. That's when the ghosts rise from the basement."

So... what does all this mean? Is divorce, as one author put it, "the past tense of marriage"? Are engagement rings, wedding rings, and sufferings "the three rings of family life"?

I think not. As a matter of fact, I propose it is – and always has been – inherently intertwined in humans to seek companionship and maintain the desire to procreate. One need not look any further than the world's first couple for proof and an example.

*Genesis 2:18 & 24* profess, “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him... Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” *Mark 10:9* later continues, in reference to this bond, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” This spiritual counseling seems to hold statistical, secular water, as well. A fairly recent Boston-based *Alternatives to Marriage Project* found 46% of those people who didn't affiliate with any religious group, divorced within 10 years.

But, one need not be a Christian to believe or understand the sustainability of human life. Simple biology can explain that. Or, as 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century author, Tertullian, deduced, “When will there be an end of marrying? I suppose, when there is an end of living!”

Now... let's revisit those Pew survey results.

According to those polled, “the richer and more educated you are, the more likely you are to marry, or to be married.” Likewise, “if you're married, you're more likely to be well off” (TIME, pg. 49). One can see the dichotomy – and snowball effect – of this situation: With the cost of education out-pacing that of inflation, it is becoming more and more problematic for people to afford higher tutelage. And if an individual's chances of matrimony increase with their schooling, then the fewer people climbing the proverbial educational ladder, means fewer people getting married, and fewer people proliferating family life (at least, as it's conventionally been known). This chasm is further-revealed in the fact that 64% of college graduates are married, compared to only 48% of those with no higher education. Consequently, higher learning is noticeable with marriage.

So, too, are higher earnings. Since 1960, the median household income for singles, as compared to married couples (even after adjusting for household size), has grown from a 12% difference, to that of 41%.

Even more interesting are the numbers which reflect a vast majority of people (over 75%) that say the best means of raising children is by married couples (not to include gay and lesbian couples, which 43% of citizens believe is bad for society (compared to only 12% that feel this brand of rearing – no pun intended – is good)).

However, perhaps no better assemblage for the merits traditional marriage and family life has been made, than with Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher's book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*. From a happiness perspective, Waite and Gallagher most-notably point out – believe it or not – married couple's sex-life, as compared to those of singles and cohabitants. Married couples had sex some 10-15% more than their counterparts {Decipher your own figures here}, and also recorded a 10-12% higher emotional and physical satisfaction rate.

As for health, married people (men especially) are markedly less likely to experience mental health issues, and, subsequently, contemplate or commit suicide. Wedded couples also live longer. In fact, single men and women have mortality rates that are a staggering 250% and 50%, respectively, higher than married men and women. Some studies have even shown that having a spouse – whether because of nagging or nurturing – can reduce one’s risk of cancer, expedite recovery time from a major surgery, and lead to better checkups.

In regard to finances, Waite and Gallagher discovered married couples can live as cheaply as one and a half persons, by, if nothing else, sharing insurance benefits and major necessities (cars, etc.). Further, married men were more successful at work, received higher performance reviews, and, in turn, were promoted more often. The same holds true for married women, which earn an average of 4-10% more (depending on race and number of children) than their single peers.

Just as I alluded earlier, though, the main sticking-point with this whole debate, is that there are as many sides to the argument as there are participants. It would be irresponsible – even ignorant – of me to not admit there are countless surveys and studies reflecting – at least to some extent – contrary findings to these of the Pew poll. And, yes, there are always exceptions to every rule. Understandable reasons for divorce. Success stories from broken homes and dire consequences. {Perhaps I should also add I hope this paper didn’t come across as some type of referendum on marriage or attack on singles, separated or divorced couples, those that have remarried, or people of other orientations. I merely intended to share the results of - what I thought, at least – was an interesting study.}

I would be lying, though, if I said I wasn’t worried about our nation’s bearings. Our moral compass, if you will. A mantra that seems to have stuck with many, and was reported to have originated with fellow-Kentuckian and NFL star, Paul Hornung, is, “Never get married in the morning, because you never know who you’ll meet that night.” Of course, Hornung was also rumored to have a serious venereal disease.

In conclusion, I must admit I don’t think this is an issue that will reach any level of unwavering consensus anytime soon. In fact, it seems to heading in a more ambiguous direction. As the Pew survey speculated, “It seems that the 21<sup>st</sup> century marriage, with its emphasis on a match of equals, has brought about inequality.” In addition, “A marriage gap and a socioeconomic gap have been growing side by side for the past half-century, and each may be feeding off the other. But because it’s unclear whether the burdens of poverty are making people’s relationships less permanent or people’s impermanent relationships are worsening their poverty, the solution is not obvious.”

Thus, let us follow the advice of one wiser than us all: Socrates, who said, “By all means marry; if you get a good wife, you’ll be happy; if you get a bad one, you’ll become a philosopher.”