

How to Make Marriage Matter

IT IS EASIER IN THESE UNITED STATES TO WALK AWAY from a marriage than from a commitment to purchase a used car," says Professor Thomas Morgan of the George Washington University School of Law. "Most contracts cannot be unilaterally abrogated; marriages in contemporary America can be terminated by practically anyone at any time, and without cause." Assume that as a society we treat marriage too lightly. A few decades back, we decided that marital bonds tied too tightly. In those days many had to travel to Mexico to obtain a divorce, or acquire residency in Nevada. Others had to make believe that one of the parties had engaged in a nefarious affair. We responded with no-fault divorce. A generation later, many feel that our society oversteered the other way, rendering marriages almost disposable.

A new course correction could be forced by the heavy hand of the law. However, most Americans are properly leery of excessive reliance on government. Our society requires a change in the habits of the heart, in the ways we think about marriage and how we value it.

"Supervows" would send a powerful message. Such vows are premarital contracts in which those about to be betrothed declare that they are committing more to their marriage than the law requires. They may choose from a menu of items what they wish to incorporate in their voluntary agreement. For instance, if either spouse requests marital counseling, the other promises to participate. If one asks for a divorce, he or she promises to wait at least six months to see if differences can be worked out. Once the couple freely arrives at an agreement, the supervows become legal commitments between the spouses.

Not very romantic, demur critics. Fair enough. Shoring up marriages may well require less infatuation and more responsibility. Church and synagogue programs that encourage engaged couples to discuss with each other, before they tie the

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knot, who will attend to the children, who will control the bank account and other such pivotal questions are fulfilling a similar societal need. Even better are school programs that teach conflict resolution. Studies have shown that stable and contented couples fight about as often as those in marriages that are failing. However, the happy couples have learned to fight better—to be issue- rather than person-oriented, for instance.

Before the salvation of marriage can progress, society requires an encompassing consensus that there is a problem. Currently, evolving such a consensus is being waylaid by an ideological word game. As long as the term family is used to cover both the "real" family and its antithesis—the single-parent version—the question of whether a society can do without families is hopelessly obfuscated. Moreover, a challenging thesis is hidden: the thesis that it does not matter which social arrangements adults devise to bring up children. It is implied (rather than demonstrated) by calling single-parent households "families" that one parent can do the job of two, that grannies and aunts can replace Mom and Pop, and so on. All will serve equally well. Hence all may be accorded the august title "family," and whether the couple is married matters not.

Here science chimes in, its voice rising. Over the past years, a growing body of evidence shows that children who grow up under the tutelage of people other than their natural parents are more likely to fail in school, have social difficulties and get arrested. To a large extent, their failings reflect the fact that single parents are economically disadvantaged as compared with two-parent families. However, this difference is also affected by the dismemberment of the family. It costs more to run two households than one.

Slowly, more and more people are realizing what anthropologists have long observed: that throughout the enormous variety of human experience, over all continents and throughout all history, no society ever thrived without family. True, there were all kinds of arrangements, from extended families to clans that helped do the parenting. In India, it is said, a child was always in somebody's arms. In Africa, we are told, it takes a whole village to raise a child. But these wondrous social fabrics gave additional support rather than replaced the nuclear family. Our society increasingly has neither.

Once we firmly agree that there is a problem, to change course society requires a vision: Where are we headed? Social conservatives nostalgically envision a return to the days when moms did the nurturing and pops brought home the bacon. However, there is no moral justification for treating women as having lesser rights than men, denying them the right to work outside the home and largely exempting men from parental responsibilities. The communitarian movement—which seeks to shore up the moral, social and political foundations of society—is closer to the mark. Communitarians, for whom I often speak, envision a family in which fathers and mothers share the tribulations and jobs of parenting and of securing a livelihood.

A recommitment to family requires new practices. Social sciences show that values do not fly on their own wings; they must be embodied in our rituals. Supervows may serve as one such sociological device. If it becomes chic to state "We have a supervow!"—with the implicit question "And how about you?" hanging in the air—we will be on the way to valuing marriage and thus family more highly, without relying on punitive laws. Supervows alone will not carry the day, but they will help mend the American family. ■