

Restoring a Marriage Norm



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LAWRENCE M. MEAD, PH.D.

Foreword

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Over the last several decades, I've probably written more about family fragmentation than any other topic. On occasion, I've been charged with spending too many words describing the problem—which I've long called the overwhelming social disaster of our time—and too few suggesting how to fix it. And on occasion, the criticism has hit home, which is one reason why I commissioned Prof. Larry Mead to write what turned out to be (unsurprisingly given his frequent path-breaking) an uncommonly brave and important essay.

As almost all of us do, Dr. Mead notes that marriage is in decline in the United States, to the dangerous detriment of all. Nevertheless, he contends, we hardly do anything about it. "The great fact about expert discussions of marriage is their defeatism." How to explain this inhibition and how to change gears? "Restoring a Marriage Norm," as he puts it, is a "reconnaissance into that forbidden territory."

The central cause, Dr. Mead argues, for the weakening of marriage is its erosion as a norm. "Marriage is still honored in theory, but this value is no longer morally binding. For marriage to recover it must again become a norm that people feel they have to

observe." And making that happen, he contends, is politically more possible than we think.

But accomplished how? Dr. Mead offers specific ideas, but more than any legal or programmatic change, his major contribution lies in the strength of his measured insistence. As when he writes: "A revival of marriage should seek a middle between today's *laissez-faire* attitude and a blanket condemnation of all who offend the norm." Or when he writes that a restoration of a marriage norm "requires that the public take a step back on tolerance and become more impatient for better behavior in family life, as it has already done concerning work, crime, and schools." Or when he concludes by talking about how the prodigal son is forgiven as he admits his faults, but that in dealing with marriage today, "society's main problem is that it can no longer say it has anything to forgive. That, above all, needs to change."

Lawrence M. Mead is Professor of Politics and Public Policy at New York University. I first became familiar with his work about 30 years ago when I read his pivotal book, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, released in 1986. A half-dozen years later, in 1992, he wrote another essential book, *The New Politics of Poverty: The Nonworking Poor in America*. In between, in 1990, he graciously participated in Center of the American Experiment's inaugural event, a day-long conference titled "The New War on Poverty: Advancing *Forward* This Time." And since that spring day in St. Paul, he has contributed to

several Center symposia and was one of 40 significant players across the country I interviewed for *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*, released in 2014.

As I fully knew would be the case as I walked to his Greenwich Village office that afternoon, what he had to say not only was insightful and necessary, it also bespoke fortitude. Prompted by that exchange as well as research he has pursued since, I asked Larry to expand on a key issue he's been investigating: Why it is imperative that we relearn how to voice concerns and objections louder than a whimper in response to the dwindling of marriage in many quarters of our nation. He has done exactly that, once more incisively.

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Introduction

Marriage is in decline in America, to the detriment of individuals and society alike, and yet we do essentially nothing about it. In this paper, I contest the common view that little *should* be done.

Among the many causes of the problem, the most important is the erosion of marriage as a norm. Marriage is still honored in theory, but this value is no longer morally binding. For marriage to recover it must again become a norm that people feel they have to observe.

The great fact about expert discussions of marriage is their defeatism. Most scholars of the subject describe the decline of marriage, but they are resigned about it. Few if any suggest any solutions.¹ This reticence is surprising in light of the damage that the fall of marriage has done to America. How do we explain this inhibition, and how could we turn it around? This paper is a reconnaissance into that forbidden territory. I briefly describe the marriage norm and the decline of marriage, including its costs and possible causes, but I concentrate mainly on the moral assumptions that leave us helpless to respond.² I argue that marriage should once again be a norm that we seriously expect people to observe, and to achieve that is politically more feasible than we may think.

The Marriage Norm

Marriage as a value principally entails two ideas.

The first is that adults should form sexually intimate ties only in the context of relationships that are expected to be lifelong. This implies that the partners should not relate intimately for very long without committing themselves to fidelity in some formal way. They should not cohabit yet remain unmarried indefinitely, nor should they have affairs outside marriage. Nor should they divorce except in unusual circumstances. The second idea, implied by the first, is that children should normally be born to parents who are married and should grow up in a family with two parents.

The stress on fidelity in marriage reflects more than tradition. The emotional stakes in marriage are high, for both parents and children. Sexual intimacy inevitably generates close emotional ties in which each spouse expects support from the other, beyond what is expected from more limited relationships, such as with friends or coworkers. Children, similarly, form closer bonds with parents than with anyone else in their young lives. If these ties are in fact supportive and lasting, then the family can become the best thing that most people ever experience in life. It can empower children to build their own strong families and achieve success in other ways.

But if the parents divorce or never marry, or children cannot count upon them, the emotional costs to all involved are also great—often worse than any other defeat in life. That is ultimately why marriage

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cannot be left entirely to private choice. The impacts on the health and happiness of the society are too serious. (This does assume that society has some influence over the quality of family life, as I address below.)

Society seeks to uphold a marriage norm today only in limited ways. All states and the District of Columbia offer some form of no-fault divorce, which allows most marriages to dissolve at the will of either party with few questions asked. However, states still insist that parents who have left families—usually the fathers—contribute financially to the support of

their children. Those financial ties live on as relics of marriages that failed or never formed.

Note that a marriage norm does not imply that all sexual activity must be confined to marriage. Young people do need to gain some experience of romantic relationships before they are ready to marry. That may include some physical involvement, but short of intercourse. It is *sustained sexual intimacy*, including intercourse, and above all *childbearing* that should occur within marriage. To support a marriage norm also does not imply any position on related issues such as the legitimacy of birth control, abortion, or gay marriage. For my purposes, the marriage norm applies equally to gay and straight couples. Both should observe fidelity and raise children—if any—within marriage. Nor do I embrace the more specific or demanding norms of some religious traditions. Reflecting today’s pluralism, a revived marriage norm should be limited to the two basic principles—fidelity to spouses and childbearing within marriage.

Marriage Decline

The decline of marriage is easily described. In 1960, 72 percent of adults aged 18 and over were married, but in 2014, only 50 percent were. In the same years, the share that were divorced or separated grew from 5 to 14 percent, while the share who had never been married rose from 15 to 30 percent.³ While some couples live together without marrying, in America those relationships are usually transient, not essentially equivalent to marriage as they are in some European countries.⁴ Thus, marriage is no longer the default condition of adult Americans as it once was. As a consequence, the share of children who have lost a parent due to parental divorce or separation rose from around 15 percent in the 1960s to almost 40 percent by the 1990s.⁵

The growth of childbearing outside of marriage is equally dramatic. In 1970, only 11 percent of births in the United States occurred to unmarried women, a figure that rose steadily to reach 40 percent in 2015. Among black and Hispanic Americans, the numbers are even higher. For blacks, 38 percent of births occurred outside marriage in 1970, soaring to 70 percent in 2015. Among Hispanics, the unwed birth rate has more than doubled in less than four decades, from 24 percent in 1980 to 53 percent in 2015. Thus, marriage has mostly disappeared from America’s minority communities.

Some single mothers acquire partners after giving birth, but the share of children who grow up fatherless is still rising. In 1960, less than 10 percent of children under 18 lived with an unmarried mother; by 2012, 24 percent did. For Hispanics, the 2012 figure was 28 percent, and for blacks, 50 percent.⁶ Today, advocates and community groups who work in poor areas simply assume that the “family” mostly means just a mother and her children. Most fathers are absent or unknown.

As the rise in unmarried childbearing implies, the recent decline of marriage has not meant less procreation, as it once would have. In Victorian times, men avoided romantic bonds unless they could afford to marry and support a family. Today, even couples who never had a serious relationship often have a child. Clearly the family still exists, even if marriage has fallen. What marriage decline really means today is loss of the *commitment* to maintain traditional family ties.

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These adverse patterns have most affected Americans with lower incomes. Among the affluent and college-educated, marriage did fall somewhat in the 1960s and 1970s, but has since firmed up. But marriage continued to fall among less-educated and lower-income Americans.⁷ The marriage problem now is really twofold. Among the more affluent, it mainly means either cohabitation (usually ending in a break-up) or divorce. Among the less affluent, it means not only these problems on a wide scale but also high rates of childbearing outside marriage, where the parents have some initial tie but break up soon after the birth. Due to these differences, as Jonathan Rauch says, “Marriage is displacing both income and race as the great class divide of the new century.”⁸



Costs of Decline

At first, some feminists cheered the decline in marriage, for they viewed matrimony as often oppressive to women. The rising acceptance of divorce gave wives a chance to escape unhappy unions. But among the less educated, satisfaction in marriage has declined right along with the marriage rate.⁹ The fact that so many adults today have been through divorce has tended to estrange the sexes. Men and women are more wary of each other on the job. And they are often even more wary in private life, a reversal from the days when family life was seen as a refuge from the workplace.¹⁰ The decline of marriage, and therefore of private life, has become a leading cause of adult unhappiness in America today.

The costs for children are also clear. Scholars find that, on average, children raised in single-parent homes do worse in later life by many measures than those who grow up with two parents. They are less likely to get through school and hold jobs, and more likely to end up in prison or drug-addicted, or to become unmarried parents themselves. (These facts hold true even allowing for many other adverse factors, such as lower-income levels, that are associated with single-parent families.¹¹)

Single parenthood typically leads to homes where the mothers and later partners have only transient ties, and the resulting turmoil denies children the stability, attention, and support they need to deal with school and other challenges. Children often have to take charge of siblings and assume other family responsibilities because parents are preoccupied with their own struggles. From that experience, youth often emerge unable to trust their parents and, by extension, other authority figures, such as teachers and employers. They lack the confident ties to competent adults, either in or out of the home, that they need to prosper.¹² The recent vogue for emotional and social learning (ESL) in schools is an effort, belatedly, to build such ties.¹³ Effectively, the school must take over the parents' task of socializing the child.

Causes of Decline

Liberal scholars typically attribute the decline of marriage to falling economic opportunity for less educated men. Especially, they blame loss to Asia of much factory employment, which often paid well for unskilled work. This they believe undercut many

husbands as breadwinners, causing them to give up on work and causing the mothers of their children to reject them.¹⁴ By some accounts, high economic inequality in itself depresses marriage, just as it did in Victorian times.¹⁵

Yet this theory exaggerates the importance of the factories and how good jobs ever were for low-skilled men, even before globalization. Work levels for low-income men have been falling for decades in any kind of economy, and in good times and bad. And at least low-paid jobs are still available to low-skilled men, as immigration shows. Mostly, these men have simply stopped doing the jobs that are accessible to them. The fall in their earnings is too small to explain the much larger fall in marriage.¹⁶ Any connection between economic change and marriage trends is unclear.

Another problem with this theory is that men have not rejected romantic relationships and parenthood—only the commitment to fidelity. Less educated men are still fathering children, thus incurring many of the burdens of marriage, such as child support. They are simply doing so without the commitments to their spouses and children that formerly made marriage constructive. How can this be considered a sensible response to any economic trend? Compared to more stable marriage, the current disarray is, on average, worse for everyone involved, parents as well as children.

A second economic idea is that government has discouraged marriage by providing social benefits to the poor and near-poor. Some of these benefits are targeted to single mothers, who then stand to lose that support if they marry. Similarly, a husband's earnings could raise a single mother's household income above the eligibility level for other government benefits, especially the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Do those disincentives deter lower-income women from marrying? It may seem so, but advocates of this theory have never shown that such incentives actually have any substantial effect on whether people marry.¹⁷ Marriage rates are governed by social forces more powerful than economics.

A more plausible approach to explaining the decline of marriage is cultural change. The advent of the birth control pill and legal abortion in the 1970s allowed couples to separate sex from parenthood more than before. That promoted a more casual attitude toward sex outside of marriage, and weakened the marriage

norm. Women could no longer demand marriage from men as the price of intimacy. And because the pill and other birth control methods are not entirely reliable, in many cases the result was unwed pregnancy.¹⁸

Meanwhile, women also became more demanding about the men they were willing to marry. In general, women now expect a more egalitarian partnership than the sort of marriage that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century, when most wives deferred to husbands and confined their role to child rearing. Most observers, including men, now accept that marriage cannot be restored unless it becomes more evenhanded than in the past. But this does assume that spouses can manage differences more constructively than they used to (see further below).

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Above all, cultural change means that marriage has lost authority as a norm. Most Americans continue to believe in marriage. They say they hope to marry and remain married. But they no longer feel they have to. They may see divorcing, cohabiting, or having children outside of marriage as regrettable—even poor single mothers say this¹⁹—yet the norm of marriage does not actually govern their actions.

By and large, experts agree that a reassessment of marriage was inevitable and desirable, yet most also suggest that the decline of marriage has gone too far. Extreme arguments against any marriage norm do not serve the interests of most women and children. It is also clear that early childhood intervention programs cannot fully compensate for the losses children suffer from single parenthood. So, the decline of marriage cannot be made good by the wider society. Rather, society must somehow find its way back to stronger norms for family life.

The Norm of Tolerance

The main obstacle to doing that is the competing norm of tolerance. Many—even most—Americans

have come to see marriage as a strictly private matter that society should stay out of. When it comes to romantic relationships, an angel with a flaming sword seems to block any return to telling people how to behave. On examination, however, the case usually made for tolerance is weak. What may seem to be only a private matter has too many implications for others—as well as the spouses themselves—to forbid setting some standards.

The classic argument for tolerance is made by John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty*, first published in 1859. Mill states “That the only purpose for which power may be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.” In other words, society should leave individuals free to believe what they will about moral or political issues. But Mill would contemplate restraints on belief or behavior if they were necessary to protect an important social interest.

Mill goes on to say that “this doctrine [of tolerance] is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties,” not “children” or “young persons . . . who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others” or who must be “protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.”²⁰ In short, before individuals can be left free to choose their own lives, they should be mature enough to avoid ways of life that are self-defeating. So even the individual’s own interest may warrant social efforts to promote good behavior. These social and individual interests provide ample grounds for reviving a marriage norm, at least of the basic kind I propose.

The Social Interest

As noted above, most expert observers now think that, at current levels, marital breakup and unwed pregnancy are bad for American society. But equally, the less tolerant norms of earlier eras may have made it too difficult for unhappy and abused spouses, particularly women, to avoid or leave a marriage. Better than either extreme is a compromise where divorce and single parenthood are strongly discouraged but not forbidden in all circumstances. Judgment is needed in individual cases, but routine infringement of marriage norms must end. Everyone’s interests must be weighed and freedom cannot be the only value served. A minimal

marriage norm of the kind I propose is consistent with Mill's ideal of tolerance. Very likely Mill himself would have approved it, if not the more rigid rules of Victorian society.²¹

Single parenthood makes demands on others that a stronger marriage norm would avoid. A single mother often cannot cope with her family on her own, especially if she is working. She must depend on friends and relatives to tend and help raise her children. Some observers have thought that single mothers and grandmothers could form a sufficient family among themselves, even without husbands.²² But ad hoc cooperation among extended family members is no substitute for committed married couples.

Any one single parent has only a small effect, but the more of them there are, the more the neighborhood becomes starved for adults, especially fathers, who are able to supervise children. Children who lack fathers at home go looking for them outside. Any married fathers who do live at home find other children in the neighborhood, not their own, seeking relationships with them. Inevitably, the burdens are far from mutual. Single mothers must expect more help from two-parent families than they are able to give. In effect, they (and the absent fathers of their children) free-ride on the marriages of others.

The social interest in stronger marriage also extends beyond the adults and children who are most immediately involved. Philosophers say that the family is the building block of society. In other words, adults who can get along in family life are also able to collaborate with people outside the family. If marriage declines, the capacity to collaborate also falls, and soon only government can achieve any collective good. Private life is essential to the support of public life, and private virtue generates the civic virtue essential to civil society.²³

In a society rich in social capital, reciprocity and mutual trust are unquestioned. Members can volunteer for common tasks without argument, because they expect others to be reliable, keep promises, and help others out when asked, just as they do themselves.²⁴ Social capital is usually scarce in low-income areas because adults who fail to cooperate in the family also have little capacity to help others. The decline of the family and of social capital are thus closely linked.

In addition to relying on other adult relatives and

neighbors, single mothers lean heavily on social programs run by government or nonprofit bodies, such as churches. These provide services, activities, and attention for fatherless children who lack sufficient attention or other resources at home. Effectively, these programs rely on the social capital of adults from outside the family. Again, by failing to sustain their own relationships, single mothers and fathers end up free riding on the relationships of others. These considerations make clear that stronger marriage is a public good in which everyone has an interest.

The Individual Interest

A stronger marriage norm is also in the interest of individuals and couples. Forming families in the haphazard way that has become common today cannot favor the lives of most ordinary people. Today's near-total *laissez-faire* approach to marriage is far too vulnerable to individual impulse. Some think individuals will observe a marriage norm without social pressure because they will see that doing so is sensible for them. But there are many good behaviors that individual interest is insufficient to promote. Just as people should not marry or procreate unwisely, so they should not drop out of school, break the law, succumb to drug addiction, and so on. Society does not hesitate to tell youth how to behave in all these areas, and to sanction them in various ways if they do not. Only about marriage does it currently fail to set standards.

Norms are essential to resist temptation. One may know what lifestyle leads to success, yet actually living that way requires more self-discipline than many people have. The urge to seize immediate pleasures, even at long-run cost, is too strong. That is particularly true with romantic relationships. The desire to venture in can outweigh the more distant dangers. These include not only having unplanned children and contracting illness but the emotional costs of relationships that prove too demanding to sustain. To minimize these dangers, society used to encourage courting couples not to get too involved with one another—then to do so only with a clear commitment to fidelity. It was either-or. Today's messy middle, where couples often drift into marriage and children without foresight and without clear commitments, is far less defensible.

Americans face especially strong temptations when choosing whether to get or stay married. The

experience of falling in love creates the illusion of a perfect harmony with one's spouse that will last forever. Popular culture sells that vision endlessly. Thus, many people rush into matrimony convinced they will be happy, their lives transformed. They end up disappointed, and some have affairs later. Today's youth are especially prone to think that the sole aim of marriage is their own fulfillment.²⁵ They fail to reckon with the self-denial that is also required.

Typically, romance is only the first stage of marriage. The initial rapture usually fades and then the partners must work out many practical differences if they are to stay together. Romance may return, but only if one first learns to "get along." Failure to do that is the main reason marriages fail, or never form at all. In enduring marriages, the partners often emerge with quite a different relationship than they had at first. The need to get couples through this difficult transition is why society must actively promote marriage as a norm.²⁶

The Politics of Marriage

So the case to restore a marriage norm is strong—but is it politic? Could the nation ever again set at least some standards for family life? The usual view is that doing this is hopeless. Polls do show that the general public still honors marriage while, at the same time, viewing it as a matter of personal choice, not something government should promote

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or enforce.²⁷ Furthermore, since rates of breakup among partners and unwed childbearing run highest among minorities, observers have feared that pro-marriage messages would appear racist. In the interests of integration, apparently, society must tacitly accept marriage decline.

To be sure, some Americans belong to faith communities that successfully defend a marriage

norm already. The maintenance of these traditions is thus vital to the work of marriage revival. Yet only a minority of people belong to communities where direction about marriage is so clear, and even religious believers hesitate to strengthen such norms for the entire society. So the general case for revival must be made in non-religious terms as I do here.

Fortunately, Americans are less relaxed about maintaining social mores than the case of marriage may suggest. On some other, closely related issues, they have been quite demanding. The same voters who decline to make welfare recipients marry are nonetheless determined to make them work, if employable. That conviction, when seconded by political leaders, largely drove the radical welfare reform of the 1990s, which instituted much tougher work tests in family welfare than formerly.²⁸ That led to dramatically higher work levels and lower poverty for single mothers than ever before.

Similarly, the sharp growth in crime in the 1960s and 1970s generated such a vogue to get tough on offenders that by the 2000s, the nation had over 2 million people behind bars. That probably helped to reduce crime since the 1990s, although how much is unclear.²⁹ As a third example, the longstanding problems of education in poor areas have generated a movement to reform schools and raise standards, and there is some progress on this front. On all these issues, the norm of tolerance and racial sensitivities have not deterred change. Many blacks seek to boost the employment of welfare recipients, reduce crime, and improve schools right alongside whites.³⁰

The gains in some ways have extended even to marriage. While the overall marriage trends are negative, as cited above, birth rates among teenagers have declined substantially since 1991 and recently reached historic lows.³¹ While the causes are not clear, they probably include the strong message about the need for work and self-reliance that emanated from welfare reform.³²

Note that all these enforcing movements were at first dismissed or opposed by elites. Many experts denied that government could or should *require* poor people to work, obey the law, or do better in school. Instead they preferred voluntary policies where government simply invested in the disadvantaged without setting norms, although those measures in fact achieved little. Elected

leaders at first hesitated to set standards, especially for minorities, for fear of appearing judgmental. But the public was undeterred, and eventually its will prevailed. Due to all these pressures, the tenor of American society is more orderly and conservative today than it was 30 or 40 years ago.³³

Note also that in all cases changes in public policy were less important than a global change in public expectations. In welfare reform, the work demands made on the recipients of aid were less important than the wider demand for and acceptance of employment by poor mothers, both on and off the rolls. Similar dynamics played out in fighting crime and in reforming schools. Government did enforce good behavior, but more

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importantly the whole climate changed so that behaving well became expected and normal. Many people “at risk” of offending no longer thought to do “bad” things that previously were accepted. Not government but public opinion is the ultimate governor of America, Tocqueville said, and so it has been in all these cases.

The potential for a more forceful promotion of marriage arises from the class division already mentioned. The marriage norm need not be reinvented entirely. It is alive and well among Americans with higher incomes and college educations. Perhaps all they need to do, as Charles Murray says, is to “preach what they practice”—to tell the rest of America to shape up.³⁴ There already is a marriage movement, made up of individuals and organizations dedicated to restoring marriage, although without much inclination, as yet, to be directive.³⁵

In the end, restoring a marriage norm requires that the public take a step back on tolerance and become more impatient for better behavior in

family life, as it has already done concerning work, crime, and schools. Americans have probably hesitated to demand marriage because most of us are less confident about maintaining ties to our spouses today than we are about working, obeying the law, or getting through school. To function outside the home is easier than inside. But there is also impatience with the many demands that single parenthood places on the society. So change is possible.

What to Do?

As in the earlier cases, the effort to restore marriage must ride two horses. Some concrete steps should be taken to promote and—to a limited degree—enforce the norm of marriage. But the test of these actions is less what they achieve directly than the stimulus they give to the larger change in public expectations that must finally turn the tide.

Aside from the politics of restoring marriage, can anything actually be done? One extreme view is that the task is simply impossible. Private life may seem to lie beyond any public action. Fate determines who is happy in love, like who is gifted or healthy, and fortunes in this area cannot be equalized, goes the belief.³⁶ Another extreme view is that government need not do anything about marriage because social order tends to regenerate after a period of decline, as the recent hopeful trends may suggest.³⁷ Against both these views, a reasonable position is that public policies are one cause of marriage decline, and to change those policies can help restore the norm—especially by triggering the global change in public expectations that seems needed.

A marriage norm might be reestablished by action at three levels—through more effective public advocacy, legal changes to make people take marriage more seriously, and direct discouragement of unwed pregnancy where society has leverage, through the schools and child support.

Promoting Marriage

For starters, public agencies with an interest in stronger marriage should launch public media campaigns to promote a new marriage norm. These campaigns should tout the “success sequence,” according to which young people should finish school, get a job, and get married, and then have children, in that order.³⁸ Among young Americans

who observe these steps, 80 percent attain at least the middle class, and only 3 percent become poor.³⁹ As one example, the New York City welfare department under Mayor Michael Bloomberg posted notices on mass transit warning teens that procreating outside marriage is bad for children's futures. Liberal commentators criticized this effort as stigmatizing single mothers, but the ads did force discussion of the problem, thus ending the usual pained silence on the subject. Public officials, both appointed and elected, should go on promoting marriage and expressing disapproval of unwed parenthood and divorce, undeterred by pushback, and so should religious leaders and other public figures.⁴⁰

For opinion leaders today, passive acceptance of marriage's decline has become the easy way out. Most notables still support marriage in principle, but they feel they no longer need to say or do anything about it. Their excuse is the norm of tolerance and the supposed unpopularity of having any marriage norms. But as we have seen, the decline of marriage has become too costly to tolerate, and effective opposition to it is possible. A silent majority already exists in favor of marriage. For it to find voice, leaders must simply say what *they* believe.

Public advocates cannot merely encourage people to marry, however. They must discuss marriage realistically. Surviving the decline of romance is the main emotional hurdle most marriages face, yet open discussion of the subject is scarce. Although all religious traditions honor marriage, religious scriptures say remarkably little about how to get along with one's spouse. The Bible, for instance, honors marriage but says little directly about how to maintain it. At most, the spouses are told to obey each other. But what if they disagree? Perhaps the subject has simply been too sensitive to discuss. Society can no longer afford this silence.

Public and expert discussions of marriage are often too sacrificial. The message usually is that marriage serves the interests of children, and parents should marry and stay married for this reason. That is true but not the whole truth. Rather, marriage is first of all for the parents. In the Garden of Eden, God creates men and women for each other's benefit, before children ever appear. Adults typically have more problems getting along with their spouses than with their children. So to achieve stronger families, overcoming marital conflict is the lion in the path.

Fortunately, the marriage movement has developed more realistic views. Counselors try to teach couples in conflict how to work out differences. In religious congregations, ministers build on the Bible's few comments on marriage to develop fuller guidance about how to succeed in marriage. Counseling programs in the secular world also have appeared, and research suggests that they can improve the odds that marriages will endure, at least among the middle class.⁴¹

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Counselors, both religious and secular, encourage couples to be more open about their own feelings yet also hear their partners, to make statements about themselves rather than the other, and above all, to make clear that concern for the other abides, even if amid disagreements. These doctrines amount virtually to a new gospel, a way to realize the great promise of marriage, which is to make love a reality even in our present, imperfect lives. All those involved in restoring marriage should affirm these realities more candidly than they do.

One place to start is with the instruction that teenagers now commonly receive in school about sex. These courses are far more candid about how to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases than schools ever were generations ago, and that is good. But instructors typically say very little about the emotional side of getting along with one's partner. What do young people need to know about the joys and dangers of this enticing new world? How do they acquire the romantic experience they need for a successful marriage later—without getting hurt in the process? Right now, youth may get some advice from parents or peers, but it is hit or miss. Society prepares them much better and more openly for the other major challenge of adult life—employment and careers.



Through these means, marriage can become less of a mystery. It should provoke more hope but less illusion and less fear. It is wonderful, but it is also work. It should become an expected task of adult life that people learn how to handle at a young age. Then they can manage it when they get married themselves.

Legal Changes

Some legal changes can make it more likely that people will marry wisely and remain married, benefiting both themselves and children. Currently, there are few legal restraints on either marriage or divorce. States give out marriage licenses with virtually no requirements, and either spouse may divorce the other at will. Most observers think that no-fault divorce has contributed to marriage decline.

Rather, to either marry or divorce should become more demanding. To get a marriage license, would-be partners should have to undergo marital counseling in hopes of heading off ill-considered matches. The chief aim is to be sure the partners have faced key issues that might trouble their marriage later on, such as how to handle children, money, careers, the in-laws, and so on. Churches now often offer such counseling to their members. Counselors provided by them or (for those without religious affiliations) a public agency should have to certify that the couple was ready to marry before a marriage could go forward. Standards would not be extreme, but neither would approval be routine.

I would also restrict the grounds for divorce or separation and, similarly, require counseling to be sure the spouses were really irreconcilable. Again, a counselor would have to approve before a divorce or separation could proceed. This process would formalize the role that family court judges often play now when they press spouses to come to terms with each other rather than give up on marriage. As with counseling before marriage, standards would not be extreme, but neither would divorce or separation routinely be approved.

Both the making and the breaking of the marriage bond should be taken more seriously than they are now. Of course, some couples would continue to cohabit and have children outside marriage, but they would continue to lack the legal standing and recognition of those conforming to the marriage norm. There would thus be pressure

on unwed couples to meet the conditions and become married themselves.

Deterring Unwed Childbearing

The above proposals are aimed chiefly at the middle class, where the main need is to minimize divorce. What about marriage decline in lower-income communities, where marriages often do not form at all yet unwed pregnancy is rife?

The George W. Bush administration tried to develop counseling programs designed to promote or maintain marriage among lower-income couples. But none of these programs achieved the positive effects found for a middle-class clientele.⁴² The chief weakness was that few couples who volunteered for the programs attended regularly. The programs never got a grip on their lives.⁴³ That suggests that marriage will not recover through voluntary efforts alone. Some enforcement is also necessary. But society has less leverage to change behavior in the realm of relationships than it has in the areas, like welfare or crime, that have seen recent progress.

A better hope is to focus on reducing unwed pregnancy. Poor mothers find low-income men too unreliable to marry, yet they still have children with them.⁴⁴ Most of these children are unplanned, in many cases unwanted, so there still is value in helping the mothers avoid births they do not choose. Long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARC), such as implants or inter-uterine devices (IUD), have proven to be more effective than condoms or the pill. So government should make these methods available to all women without charge.

Marriage may have declined, Isabel Sawhill has argued, but perhaps society can teach a new norm where mothers at least avoid childbearing until they have a partner they can count on. This may seem to acquiesce too much in the cultural change that has separated sex from marriage. But it is still useful to reduce unwed parenthood directly where we can. That at least helps women avoid unwanted pregnancy and thus have more hope to marry successfully later on. Call it marriage lite.⁴⁵

Society, if willing, can take other steps to deter unwed childbearing, at least among teenagers who still have to attend school. In this sphere, community leaders could take a lesson from recent successful efforts to address gang violence. David Kennedy and his associates have shown that the police and other

public agencies can reduce urban gang violence sharply. In “ceasefire,” the authorities confront the gangs with the moral message that violence is wrong, coupled with credible threats of punishment if killings continue and help to leave a life of crime. Killing then drops sharply.⁴⁶

Similarly, in a given city, elected officials could ally with the leaders of local agencies and religious congregations to confront teen pregnancy in much the same way. They could announce to youth in high school that becoming pregnant would no longer be tolerated. When a pregnancy did occur, both partners involved would be sent to special, single-sex schools where they would prepare to work and support their children; going on to college would be deemphasized, and there would be no sports and other activities outside the classroom. Their lives would not be over, yet society’s disapproval would be clear.⁴⁷

Male youth would also be warned that fathering children without accepting responsibility for them would not be tolerated. They would face speedy enrollment in the child support system, which would require them to help support their children financially until the children turned 18, whether or not the father married the mother. Again, their lives would not be over, but their choices would be circumscribed.

The limitation is that the coalition opposing unwed pregnancy would initially only be local, and it must be sustained over time, or problems will rebound. To expect such a coalition nationally is premature. And to deter single parenthood among teenagers fails to reach the other dimensions of the marriage problem. Unwed pregnancy, after all, has already fallen sharply among teens, while among older women it continues to grow. And none of this directly achieves the committed couples who, alone, can really restore marriage.

Minimizing Stigma

The very idea of promoting, let alone trying to enforce, marriage will appear forbidding to many. It conjures up the same visions of coercion spun by feminist opponents of marriage in previous generations. Many will fear to restore any stigma against cohabitation, unwed childbearing, or divorce when the decline of marriage has become so accepted. But society does need to revive the marriage norm, and some return to stigma is unavoidable to that end. Bad behavior must be

disapproved. Society should take no pleasure in that. Yet some balance must be struck between minimizing this cost and minimizing the costs of marriage decline.

Stigma can be reduced by making it clear that norms have changed. In “ceasefire,” the police tacitly disregard shootings that occurred before they confront the gangs. It is violence after that point that is sanctioned. With marriage, it is unwed childbearing *after* the marriage norm is revived that would be most disapproved, not instances that occurred earlier. Other steps mentioned above would hopefully equip young people to deal better with marital conflict and thus minimize occasions for incurring stigma in the first place. Marriage must become more normal in several senses—more prevalent but also less feared.

The return of a marriage norm need not preclude forgiveness for violators. The norm generates pressure for those who err to do better next time. In many cases, those who have cohabited or had children outside marriage later achieve successful marriages. Those who divorce may learn from the experience and marry more successfully the second time. Parents who do not marry at all can at least cooperate to raise their children. The reliable payment of child support does give some absent parents a way to reenter their families to some extent. The fathers can at least contribute something to their children’s lives, as most seek to do.⁴⁸

A revival of marriage should seek a middle between today’s *laissez-faire* attitude and a blanket condemnation of all who offend the norm. As with all important rules, compliance will be imperfect, but it will still be expected. The point is to restore a norm that tells people what society expects in this important arena. Violators must pay a price, yet their lives can still go on. In the Bible, the prodigal son admits his fault, but he is also forgiven. In dealing with marriage today, society’s main problem is that it can no longer say it has anything to forgive. That, above all, needs to change.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, the contributors to Mitch Pearlstein's valuable compendia, *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), and *What Must We Do to Repair Our Culture of Massive Family Fragmentation* (Golden Valley, MN: Center of the American Experiment, June 2016).
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