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Love and Marriage: a Narrative Exploration

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A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION

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Foreword

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Candlepasses are an age-old tradition in the collegiate Greek system. Women use these rituals to mark a milestone in their relationship with their significant other. The women in the house all stand in a circle, passing around a lit candle and singing a traditional song. The number of times the candle is passed around the circle determines the relationship milestone: once for a lavaliere, a small necklace bearing the fraternity's letters, twice for his fraternity pin, three times for an engagement, and four times around for a pregnancy. The woman who blows out the candle gets to tell the story of how he asked, or impregnated, her. Of course afterwards, there is a chorus of screaming, hugging, and crying from the women in the room.

For two years, I lived in my sorority house and attended many of these candlepasses. I've seen my sorority sisters get lavaliered by long-distance beaus and engaged to their high school sweethearts more times than I can count. Not a year has gone by in my time as an Alpha Chi Omega at DePauw University without one of our seniors graduating with a ring on her finger. Granted, my experience differs greatly from other Greeks on my campus. Candlepasses are not nearly as common in other houses as they are in mine. But still, living in a house of 62 women, relationships are gossiped about almost constantly.

Shortly following another candlepass and engagement for one of our seniors last spring, I felt as though my friends and I were constantly talking about engagements and marriage. So I decided to test my theory. I kept an index card on my desk and marked a tally for every day one of my friends brought up marriage or engagements casually in conversations, just to see how much we really talked about it.

The trend continued for two straight weeks before I gave up and decided we were all obsessed.

This experiment got me thinking more definitely about something I'd been contemplating for some time: the idea of marriage. With all of the relationship talk I've been surrounded by, not to mention the multitude of weddings I've attended over the last few years, I began questioning why marriage was such a hot topic of conversation. What is it about a lifelong monogamous relationship that is so desirable?

The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. There are more than 1,000 legal and tax benefits that come with signing a marriage license that give it definite societal perks. Many weddings take place in a church, which also gives marriage some kind of religious importance. But with the commonality of non-married cohabitation, and the recent legalization of homosexual marriage, the institution is changing as much now as ever. What does marriage even look like today?

I looked to my friends, openly admitting that they plan to marry their current boyfriends. I wondered at my parents, who have been married for more than 25 years, or even their parents, all of who have been married to their same spouse for more than 60 years. How at such a young age could you think, be sure even, that you could tolerate the same person for the rest of your life? What makes that kind of companionship desirable?

I don't mean to sound cynical. A very large part of me is still clinging to the Disney movies of my youth, believing in true love and happy ever after. After watching my parents, grandparents, and the many other successful marriages I've been exposed to it would be hard to write marriage off completely. Something about the set-up has to work, or we wouldn't still be celebrating golden wedding anniversaries today.

I devised this project to try and figure out some of what makes marriage desirable. I wanted to learn about how marriage has come to its current importance today, and discover from

those still experiencing it why these relationships have lasted so long. I have more questions than answers, which is why I've gone straight to the source to discover why marriage works.

Before I begin, I also must admit that much of this project has been spurred on by fears of my own romantic inadequacies. I consider myself a hopeless romantic, and I too hope to get married someday. Coming to college, I expected to find a multitude of men ripe and ready for serious relationships, one of which would inevitably pluck me up and keep me forever.

Alas, that didn't happen.

It's not that I am dying to settle down with a husband, two kids and a white picket fence right now, but when most of your friends are in serious, long-term relationships, you begin to wonder if you're missing out on something important, and whether that something you're missing out on is worth all the commotion. This project is my own personal exploration into the world of love, monogamy, and marriage.

Methods

This project compares the experiences of married couples against each other as well as historical, sociological, and psychological data. My research focuses on sociological and psychological studies into the history of marriage, and how and why monogamous relationships function. My interviews were conducted with married couples of various ages of marriage, asking them questions about their opinions and experiences with love and marriage. The answers to my questions have been compared in the following pages to see how or if marriage has changed over the course of the last few decades, and what the implications of those changes may be.

I began this project by researching the nature of marriage as a societal construct. I read into the history of marriage, looked over a multitude of psychological and sociological studies regarding how people form romantic attachments, and how long-term relationships are affected by love and other factors. I found many interesting articles detailing how couples deal with conflict, and what role love plays both in conflict and relationships in general. Karl Pillemer's *30 Lessons for Loving,* and his marital advice project, served as a foundation upon which I constructed and conducted my work. This research has given me greater understanding into why these marital attachments form, and also helped determine my own interview questions.

I first contacted my participants by phone or email during November and December of 2015 to ask and confirm that they would be willing to speak with me. I wanted to interview married couples that have seen and experienced the best and worst of marriage, and continued with their commitments through it all. Reactions to the project were generally positive; only one couple declined. These couples come from my extended social circle. They are all at different periods of marital life, ranging from less than one year to more than sixty, childrearing and childless. All of the final 15 people are from in tact, heterosexual, Caucasian marriages based in the Midwest of the Unites States.

My interviews were conducted between December 2015 and January 2016. Rather than interviewing couples as a pair, I spoke with participants individually. This removed the risk of any manipulation of answers between spouses, thus allowing for more differentiation in the answers I received. While these conversations sometimes deviated from the intended topic and question, these conversational tangents sometimes lent an even greater perspective into the participants' marriages. The names of all of my participants and any family members they mention have been changed to protect their anonymity and right to privacy.

The question list was developed to focus both on the relationships my participants are a part of, as well as their opinions of and experiences with the institution in general. Because there is some variation in the ages and types of marriage, there was some variation in how the questions were asked, yet the desired information stayed constant throughout all the interviews:

- How did you meet your partner? How long until you started dating? When did you get married?
- When did you come to the conclusion that you should get married? Was there a feeling of "rightness" in choosing your partner?
- Can you remember what your expectation for marriage was *before* you got married? How did the reality of married life compare to these expectations?
- What about marriage have you found the most fulfilling?
- What do you consider valuable traits to have in a partner? (Yours or in general)
- When conflict arises, how do you and your partner constructively deal with it?
- How important is spirituality/religion in marriage? Has it been influential in your life together? How so?
- Is there still a spark in your marriage? How have you maintained that spark?
- What did you learn about marriage from watching your parent's relationships?
- How do you think the legalization of homosexual marriage has/will influence the idea of marriage in America?
- Can you define love?
- What do you believe is the biggest issue facing married couples today?
- What advice would you give to young people thinking about getting married?

Because these individuals come from different areas of my life, it is important to acknowledge and be aware of my own potential biases within this project. In addition, the claims or statements I make in the following pages are not meant to make overarching, definitive statements about the nature of marriage in America. My sample is very limited, not even close to representing the diversity of American marriage today. This project is as much a personal exploration as it is a research study.

What's Coming?

When I first began talks of this project with my faculty committee, they all pointed out and agreed that no matter the results of these interviews, there is something interesting to find with this project. If a couple that has been married for over 50 years has the same view on conflict resolution as does a couple that is engaged to be married today, that shows great continuity across generations. On the other hand, if their answers are completely opposite from one another, it shows how much has changed in the last 50 years.

I've researched various aspects of marriage: the history of the institution, the validity of romantic love in a long-term relationship, and whether love can support a long term relationship, among many other topics. I've learned a lot about what love, marriage, and relationships look like on a scientific and historical level. I've interviewed 15 different people to learn about their perspective on and experiences with marriage. I've organized the material in this book by the questions I asked these individuals, so that I may directly compare their answers.

I'm asking these questions because I'm interested in the answers. I'm not expecting to find one solid golden rule of marital advice and reasoning that fully restores my faith in the institution. I'm looking for perspective, and I know that regardless of the answers I receive, my own perspective will expand.

Marriage: A (Very Brief) History

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Beginning my exploration into what makes marriage so valued in America today, I wanted to start at the beginning. Not by critically analyzing the division of labor between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but by looking at how marriage became a part of America's societal construct. Author and sociologist Stephanie Coontz wrote the foundational text that analyzes and explores this topic. *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* chronicles the extensive history of marriage, and how it has changed from an economic agreement to a declaration of love. It took her more than 300 pages to outline the finer points of marital history, but I want to show at least an overview of the multitude of changes that have led to our society's current idea of what marriage is supposed to be.

By today's standards, the 1950s are often classified as the golden age of marriage in America. In the time after World War II, household harmony was meant to settle society down from the turmoil of the war. Women did housework in heels and men brought home the metaphoric bacon. However this period was far from normal in the course of marital history. It took 450 years of changing attitudes and social practice to get to that point, and in the last 50 years marriage has changed again (Coontz, 247). The big change boils down to one thing really: love, and its increased importance in the institution of marriage. Only in the last 200 years has love become something of importance when entering a marriage rather than a desirable outcome that may or may not come as the relationship progresses (17, 23).

The earliest marriages were established as economic and political agreements between families as a way to share and produce resources. Families would marry their children to each other so they could combine property or wealth. Marriage also regulated sex, so that husbands and wives would produce heirs to further unite bloodlines. This form of marriage bound not just

husband and wife, but involved "parents, in-laws, rival nobles, secondary wives, concubines, siblings, uncles, and children by former wives or mistresses" (89). In the beginning, marriage was a family affair.

The rise of Christianity began changing this highly politicized institution into something with more religious weight. The Catholic papacy rose to power just as the Roman Empire began to dissolve in the fourth and fifth centuries, leaving the country in need of governance. The Catholic Church began taking on some governmental functions that would leave a lasting impact on "the politics of marriage, divorce, and family life in the new kingdoms of Western Europe" (87, 89). With the collapse of the Roman Empire, new royalty and prominent bloodlines needed to be established.

The Catholic Church sought allies within these changing families, and began regulating the complex marriages between them as a way to gain power. The Papacy created and imposed its beliefs on what marriage should be, reforming societal ideals on adultery, polygamy, incest and divorce. England's King Henry VIII is famous for creating the Church of England in order to contradict the Catholic Church and obtain a divorce from his wife Catherine to marry Anne Boleyn (133). Other sects of Christianity sprouted up across Europe, each defining marriage in its own way. The Protestants insisted that marriage was a societal building block, and love began switching from something solely reserved for God to an emotion also applicable to a husband or wife (134). Religion started giving marriage a kind of morality the church still prescribes to today.

Although the political and economic system of marriage remained in place through the 18th century, marriage for love can be traced back as early as the 13th century (123). According to Coontz, "by the end of the 1700s, personal choice of partners had replaced marriage as a social

ideal and individuals were encouraged to marry for love" (145). People began to believe that marriage and its obligations should be "based on love and reason, not a husband's arbitrary will" (149). But others still worried that basing such a fundamental societal institution on something as flimsy as love would produce "rampant individualism," and that the pursuit of happiness would undermine social order (149).

This rise in individualism also produced a gradual change in labor and gender roles during the 19th century. The housework generally performed by women was once considered an equal part of the marital workload, but as women slowly became considered the fairer sex, homemaking became a labor of love instead of equal marital labor (155). Women became dependent on marriage as a means to gain access to the masculine rights their gender would not allow them to obtain. While their labor roles were changing, women took it upon themselves to change their gender roles as well. They began to believe they were the moral superiors to men, referring to men as the grosser sex. By 1900, divorce rates increased by 70 percent in the United States as conflict within the definition of marriage emerged (181).

The new introduction of individualism and the freedom of choice created a rise in premarital sex and out of wedlock childbirth (156). If you could choose your partner instead of being assigned one, you could also choose when and whether or not to have sex with them too. However, as society entered the 20th century, "postfeminist" women, whose mothers had fought for women's rights in the late 1800s, backed away from feminist ideals to embrace the gender norms that the enlightenment period had bred. This brand of post-feminism emphasized and encouraged female chastity (159). According to Coontz, American women in the early 1900s were repelled by the idea of sex, and sexual desires became primarily equated with the masculine sex (190).

However, these ideas began to change again within the sex revolution of the 1920s. Women began embracing the sexual passions and desires they had denied themselves, more than half of them having sex before marriage (200). As people were being given more sexual freedom, deciding for themselves how love played into marriage, they gained the choice to partake in other formerly marital activities outside of the institution. Premarital sex rose again in the early 1900s, as did marriage rates. This combined with an increase in divorce rates left society wondering whether this newfound sexual freedom was beneficial or not (207, 211).

The first half of the 1900s also brought some new strain to marriage in the United States. Coontz notes that during the depression of the 1930s, marital issues switched from sexual to survival (218). Divorce rates fell simply because couples who wanted to separate could not have afforded separate households. Then with the onset of World War II in the early 1940s, marriage rates spiked as men went off to war, leaving the women behind to take over the workforce in their absence. Women gained jobs and skills, earning men's wages while their husbands were away at war. The labor force changed from male to female dominated as wives to began to bring home bacon formerly reserved for their husbands.

The so-called golden age of marriage persisted from 1947 through the early 1960s. All of the progress made for sexuality and women's rights in the previous century slowed to a halt when men returned from World War II. Between the end of the Great Depression and the termination of World War II, most everyone was relieved to be in a period of happy domesticity (230). "This was the first chance many people had to try to live out the romanticized dream of a private family, happily ensconced in its own nest" (231). Divorce rates dropped by 50 percent (235). Consumerism skyrocketed with the invention of new household appliances, and mass media soothed the American people into a state of complacency and contentment within the

traditional homemaker-breadwinner marital state. Social scientists at the time were in agreement "that the 1950s family represented the wave of the future" (243).

But the civil and social unrest of the 1960s offset the established equilibrium of the golden age very quickly. Much of this change came with the revamping of the white women's rights movement. Instead of staying home to be homemakers, women began to enter the workforce again, and the economy adjusted to and relied on their contributions. Jobs gave women a sense of importance, and the double-income household became crucial to familial survival (260).

Women also worked to gain more reproductive rights. The 1960s brought on a contraceptive revolution. Birth control pills enabled women to separate sex from childbirth and created a new sexual freedom they had not yet been able to fully enjoy. Women could opt out of parenthood, and as the birthrate declined the connection between childrearing and marriage began to dissolve. Women had control over their bodies and income, and the security and partnership offered by marriage when raising a child began to lose some of its meaning.

The 1980s started another increase in the divorce rate (263). Women held great strength in the American workforce, and the male-breadwinning family no longer dominated the perception of the American family. No-fault divorce laws have reduced the bargaining power of those wishing to try and tough marriage out. The most recent change to the marital institution within the United States came on June 26, 2015 when the United States Supreme Court voted to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states, ending a long battle for equal marriage rights. Whether or not this will hold any great change for how we define marriage has not yet been determined, but the fact that the battle was so laborious and long lasting shows that there is something about the label of being "married" worth fighting for.

The changes to marriage over the centuries have been extensive, and what marriage looks like today is a far cry from any marital construct we have seen before. All of this contributes to what author and sociologist Andrew Cherlin has deemed the deinstitutionalization of marriage in America. He defines this deinstitutionalization as "the weakening of social norms that defines people's behaviors in a social institution such as marriage" (Cherlin, 848). Cherlin emphasizes the many changes and alternatives that have altered what marriage looks like. The gendered roles of breadwinner and homemaker have faded as more women enter the workforce. Out-of-wedlock childbirth is common, eliminating the need for marriage as its definite setting. Cohabitation is also becoming more popular and accepted as a marital alternative (849). Cherlin recognizes the surge of individualism that began in the 1800s, but also cites its continued, but changing, importance.

> [Marriage] has evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige … It used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone. It is something to be achieved through one's own efforts rather than something to which one routinely accedes. (Cherlin, 855)

Marriage is a now form of "social-bragging." Participants hold their relationship above another's to distinguish its quality and endurance. Its institutional importance has been replaced with this idea of a "super-relationship" (855-856). It is another societal mold we fit into, but with today's individualism, the original political and economic binds that held husband and wife have faded into history.

So why is any of this relevant to my study of marriage? How does this brief overview of the last roughly 2000 years of the history of western marriage play into my talking to married couples today? This history shows the breadth and depth of what marriage has looked like over

the years. It shows that social politics and economics are at the foundation of this interpersonal connection, and that religion, which once played little to no factor in one's decision to marry, has become an important moral contribution. It also shows that love and individual desire has not always been the largest factor in marriage, and that now, in fact especially now, there are modes of cohabitation outside of marriage that are functioning and socially acceptable.

Marriage has changed so much even in the last 50 years. By talking to people from different generations who are all apart of the institution, I expect that I will find some varying answers as to what they think is important in a marriage, and I hope that by knowing the history and seeing the changes that society has overcome since some of these marriages began, I can anticipate and analyze these differences more fully.

Introductions

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The central portion of this project is the group of participants I spoke with. Before I tell their stories, I want to introduce them. They have been divided into three groups based on age and marital longevity, and these groups will be referenced throughout this paper. As previously stated, all names in this project have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of my participants.

Young Love

Couples married for five years or less

Lewis Neilson & Anna Stevens dated for more than two years and are now engaged. They are both seniors in college, and will be graduating in May. Lewis and Anna represent the prequel to the marital institution.

Brian & Laura Moore are newlyweds who just got married last October. They met their freshman year of college, but held off getting married for six years, after the birth of their daughter, Lindsay. They represent both the newlywed and young parent populations.

Leon & Brooke Holmes were married in December of 2012. They are strong Christians and talented artists who live in Wichita, Kansas where Leon is on assignment in the Air Force.

The Silver Age

Couples married between five and fifty years

Rick & Michelle Williams are empty nesters whose three boys have all grown up and moved out. Rick and Michelle own a very successful printing business together in Indianapolis. They met after graduating from Butler University, and have been married for 35 years.

Don & Clare Davidson are still very much in love after 44 years of marriage. They are high school sweethearts who got engaged after Don returned from serving in Vietnam, and before Clare graduated from DePauw University. They never had children.

The Golden Years

Couples married for more than fifty years

Mark & Lucy Adams started dating while Mark was on assignment in the Navy in Pensacola, Florida and she was living in Indianapolis. They have been married for 61 years, had two sons, and still reside in Indianapolis today.

Pete & Evelyn Tanner, married 64 years, have two sons and a daughter. Pete worked as a Methodist minister while his wife Evelyn was a nurse. They spend their time travelling between their cabin in the woods of southern Indiana, and their second home in Indianapolis.

Charlie Burke's wife Leah died in August of 2014 from complications related to Alzheimer's. They met in high school, and had been married for more than sixty years when Leah passed. Charlie is 89 years old now and lives on his own with his dog, Danny.

Chapter 1

Meeting and Choosing The One

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It was July 4, 1951 and Evelyn and her friend Judy were stuck at the July Fourth carnival in Linton, Indiana. They had missed their ride back to the Indianapolis where they were working in the statehouse over the summer, and needed to get back that evening.

Evelyn looked around the hot, sticky evening, filled with Ferris wheels and cotton candy stands, trying to figure out what to do. That's when she saw Bill, a friend she had met in Sunday school, flanked on either side by two stocky guys. Evelyn was a master flirt, and walked up to him.

"Bill," Evelyn asked. "Is there any chance you're going to Indianapolis tonight?"

Bill said that he was headed that way along with his buddies, but before they could get there they needed to drop off another friend of his with his girlfriend. Evelyn and Judy went with the boys. It was almost two in the morning before they finally got in the car to head towards the city. Evelyn and Judy sat in the backseat, and Bill's friend Pete hopped in between the two girls. Evelyn didn't know Pete, but he had nice arms, and as they drove though the night Pete fell asleep on Evelyn's shoulder.

It was an almost two hour drive north to Indianapolis. Bill dropped the girls off at their apartment and Evelyn said goodbye to Pete. A few days later Pete looked Evelyn up in the phone book, and called her up to ask her out.

Ten months later, Pete and Evelyn got married. That will be 64 years ago this May.

A lifelong relationship as it is just beginning has an unassuming simplicity. There's some moment of introduction, a combination of chance and initiative that brings each couple together.

In his book *30 Lessons for Loving,* Karl Pillemer discusses relationships, and the importance of following both your head and your heart when choosing a partner. At one point, he considers the idea of "rightness." Of the hundreds of couples he talked to for his study, many of them referenced this feeling of rightness about their spouse; a moment that they knew their person was the one.

> "In the search for a partner, nearly all the experts[1] described a powerful 'sense of rightness, an intuitive and almost indescribable conviction that you have made the right choice. Call it what you will—a spark, an intuition, a gut feeling—but they agree that you shouldn't commit to a relationship without it. That's what following your heart means." (Pillemer, 9)

The question I posit here is how does a marriage start. How do people meet their husband or wife and decide that they're "The One"? The beginning of a marriage encompasses not just an inciting incident, but also a decision to spend a life with that person, so I asked my participants how they made their decisions.

Take for example, Charlie and Leah Burke. Charlie first met his wife of 68 years in January of 1944. He was standing outside of his homeroom government classroom waiting for the next class to start when he saw her walk inside the room. Charlie asked the teacher what her name was, and she told him: Leah Martens.

After a while he asked her out. He waited outside her house on their first date because her mother wasn't home yet. They dated for a couple of months, going to football and basketball games, before Charlie got drafted into the army and sent away on deployment. He kept in touch

[1] The experts are the elders Karl Pillemer spoke to during his interviews.

with Leah all those months, writing letters to her across the country. When Charlie came home on leave in May of 1946, he and Leah decided to get engaged.

While Charlie and Leah met by chance, other introductions were more purposeful. Mutual friends often had a hand in helping things along. For instance, Lucy Adams dated Mark's brother before dating him, and met Mark through a friend who was dating Mark's other brother. Other participants met their future spouses through introductions made by current significant others. Michelle Williams went to Butler University at the same time as her husband, but didn't meet him until being introduced by her boyfriend, an old high school friend of Rick's.

The military played a role in the early courtships of many of the couples I spoke with. Five of the eight men I spoke with were enlisted in the armed forces at one point during courtship or marriage. They spanned four wars, World War II, The Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the war in Afghanistan, and three branches of the service, Air Force, Army, and Navy. While this inevitably disrupted the courtship of who would become their future wives, this didn't stall them forever. They wrote letters to each other to stay in touch, and travelled cross-country to get to see their sweethearts.

It wasn't just the golden and silver ages that experienced this separation. Brooke and Leon Holmes are two that I would classify as old souls, as their story matched what I found more consistent in the older couples I conversed with. The two met while doing an art project at church. Brooke was in high school at the time, and she and Leon had been dating just a few months when Leon went off to basic training for the Air Force. They got engaged while he was on assignment in Washington state. The military kept this millennial couple apart, just as it had their older counterparts.

Getting married in lieu of military enlistment was common with men and women from the golden age. During the early years of World War II, "marriage fever" swept across the United States (Coontz, 220). The potential for separation encouraged young lovers to marry each other before it was too late to marry at all, and provided financial incentives as well. Current military practice dictates "Military members who have dependents receive housing allowances that are about 25 percent greater than those who do not have dependents at the same pay grade" (Hogan, 421). Incentives like this could lead military members to marry earlier to gain access to additional financial benefits.

In a 2010 study partially funded by the United States Department of Defense, researchers compared marital incidences between active-duty military members and civilians (420). Past studies conducted during the Vietnam War showed that military men "were much more likely to marry and to divorce than young male civilians" (423). Another study conduced between 1995 and 1999 of males aged 18 to 30 and fully employed showed that for each age after 18, military men were again more married than civilians (423). The same results came from this study performed in 2010, with financial and benefit packages offered by the military inducing single members to marry early (434).

These studies prove that military members are more likely to marry younger than civilians. My results were similar; those in the military married earlier than those uninvolved in military service. The financial benefits are good enough that it's worth the early engagement. But while the youth of these early marriages may not have worked for the couples in the studies compiled by Hogan and Seifert, as they also found a correlation for high divorce rates from these early marriages in later years, the participants I spoke with have all made it work, remaining married to their same veteran partner their entire lives.

There was a lot of variation between how these couples met, and who introduced them to each other, but there wasn't a lot of correlation between how long people dated before they got engaged or married. Numbers ranged from ten months up to six years before getting engaged. While the military played a role in many of these courtships, it wasn't a necessary component. It's difficult to categorize these meetings because they are all so unique, and produce unique couples and relationships.

Of course, not all relationships lead to marriage. Some relationships inevitably don't work out. But the couples in this study all did, and I wondered what made them decide to do so? The feeling of rightness posited by Pillemer seemed plausible to me, but what grounds did it hold with my participants? I asked these couples about the supposed feeling of rightness, whether they felt that feeling and when. However, when I started these interviews, the question was too vague. Participants didn't know quite what I meant, so I had to specify further. Was there one specific moment when they knew they would get married, or was it more of a gradual evolution of thought?

Some, like Clare Davidson just assumed that marriage would eventually happen to her, and she also somehow knew it would be with Don.

> "Part of it was the culture and times that we were growing up in, and because my mom was so fond of him. She knew from the get-go that we were going to get married. She would say things to me like, 'Oh you're not nice enough to that boy. That Davidson boy is really sweet.' As it turned out my mom died my sophomore year at DePauw, and so part of it may have been I knew she would be supporting that we stayed together."

But not everyone had as clean cut an answer as Clare did. The results to the question in general were mixed. The great majority answered that their feeling of rightness was a gradual

change in feelings towards their partner. There was no light bulb moment that solidified that the person they were with was the one they were going to marry.

Mark Adams was one of the most succinct subjects I talked to. At 84 years old, he didn't have much to say other than answering the questions I asked. When I asked him about deciding to marry his wife Lucy, his answer was simple.

> "I was very comfortable with it after we met. She dated my younger brother for a while and then we meet and she liked me better I guess. She's four years younger than me. I was very comfortable with it. I liked her folks."

There were many, particularly men, that said they always kind of felt that it was going to happen with their now spouse. There was something different about this person in comparison to others they had known or dated that made them think that things were going to work out as they did.

However, in a few answers I received, participants had a more gut reaction. When I asked Lewis Neilson when he realized he was going to marry his now fiancée Anna, he was able to reference the exact moment with ease.

> "I went to Rome over spring break last year. People in Rome are just beautiful, in general. 70-year-old women look gorgeous. But I was sitting on the bus and I was talking to this really attractive girl and I just couldn't stop thinking of Anna the entire time. And that's kind of when I was like, 'Oh shit, I actually do feel that way.' And I thought I did before, but that was kind of an epiphany for me."

Lewis wasn't the only one who could remember a specific moment when he knew. Brian Moore had a similar experience with his wife, Laura, whom he met while she was dating someone else.

"I actually remember having the thought when she was still with her ex-boyfriend. 'Why can't I meet single girls like this more often because this is the type of girl I would like to marry.' I knew I was ready that December, I think I'm very strong in my convictions. But we thought it would be better to wait until after college."

While these two young men experienced the gut reaction I believe Pillemer was referring to when he described rightness, they were the only two. There may have been an always-present feeling of comfort with their partner, but for everyone else I spoke with their ideas on the potential for marriage developed slowly over time. Only after spending significant amounts of time together did they begin to recognize the potential for a future with that person.

While this conclusion may not be as romantic as love at fist sight, it is reassuring. Relationships take time to mature and develop, and it took these couples time to be able to recognize that lifelong factor in each other. Couples can meet in all kinds of ways, be it an introduction by a current boyfriend or falling asleep on a car ride to Indianapolis, but it has to start with an introduction, which eventually turns into like, then love and maybe, if they're lucky, a walk down the aisle.

Chapter 2

Knowing What To Look For and Finding Fulfillment

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In July of 2015, Leon and Brooke Holmes traveled to Anaheim, California to attend the Star Wars Celebration. This cross-country road trip from Kansas to California was a way to celebrate Leon's return from deployment in Afghanistan, and further exploit their mutual love for the Star Wars franchise.

As Leon & Brooke walked around the massive convention, they came across vendors selling custom art. Drawings of characters and other elements of the series meant as memorabilia for fans like themselves.

Leon was talking about how incredible the art and artists were when his wife pulled him to the side and said with tears in her eyes, "You can do that. You can make art like that."

Since that day, Leon has begun making his own custom art, travelling to conventions in the Midwest to sell his prints. He has social media accounts and has been commissioned to create several custom works. Leon is pursuing his passion, thanks in part to his wife's support.

> "She believed in me, and that inspired me to really push my boundaries and strive for that. Without her doing that I don't think I would have created almost any of the stuff I have so far. She saw something in me that I didn't see in myself."

Brooke and Leon have been married for three years now. Brooke was barely 19 years old when they got married and moved to Kansas, and they faced a lot of resistance from family and friends who told them to wait until they were older. But Brooke knew what she wanted.

> "He's my best friend. I have never had someone that knows me inside and out, and he does. He knows me forwards, backwards, upside down, and that's amazing. It feels

amazing to have that person that you don't even have to tell them what you're feeling. They already know."

People have lots of ideas about what to look for in a partner. They say girls look for men like their fathers; men look for their mothers; marry your best friend; opposites attract. When I asked my participants, "What do you find most fulfilling about marriage?" I wanted to know what about their partner or their relationship made them feel that maintaining that relationship for a lifetime was worth it. I also asked what traits would be valuable to look for in a partner that could be beneficial to a marital relationship. For Laura Moore, trust is the absolute most important thing.

"For a while, Brian was 100 percent handling our finances because I was finishing up school. We actually moved in together about a year before we got married, and I was so busy trying to start my new job. He'd been moved out for a while. He'd been handling his own finances for a while. That definitely is something I just handed over to him, and I knew I could trust him with that."

Trust and communication were two traits were brought up throughout my conversations, particularly by the younger couples. These relationship elements aren't something a partner can outright possess, but rather something that develops through the course of a relationship. Learning how to communicate was something the young lovers were still learning how to navigate. However, those from the golden age had been together for so long that the communication came naturally. For these participants, that idea of companionship, of being able to have one person to do everything with was what stood out the most.

While it may not have been the first element they thought of, love and affection were both brought up as important factors in a marriage by many of my participants. A part of this is

simple, raw physical attraction. Pete Tanner, who has been married for 63 years, phrased it as, "an inner longing, urging, or craving to be with the person." But even outside of that idea of physical attraction is a deeper emotional feeling.

I was lucky enough to see this kind of love and affection in Don and Clare Davidson. Throughout lunch and their interviews following, they called each other pet names like Honey and Sweetie. Don opened doors for Clare and I, and when I got up to leave their home he insisted on putting my coat over my shoulders. Clare explained to me that this kind of affection has been present during every day of their marriage.

> "He's a very affectionate, demonstrative, out there kind of guy, and I have never had a day when I didn't know I was loved and a part of this relationship. And again that doesn't mean everything is perfect or you don't disagree, but he is a very stable like a rock kind of guy, and that's been very good for me."

Another important element that to creating a healthy, long lasting relationship that Don Davidson and many other participants brought up is the importance of partners having similar backgrounds.

> "If your spouse comes from a family that is similar to your family, then you have kind of similar upbringing and similar values. I think that it is very important to have similar values, and I think the reason for that is basic core values are very hard to change, and if you have similar values, you at least have some simpatico from the beginning."

The idea here is that there have to be commonalities for a relationship to last. My participants mentioned a multitude of similarities that are important to them as individuals. Rick Williams insisted on having an intelligent partner like his wife Michelle that he can have good conversation with. Many from the golden age discussed the importance of having similar

religious ideals.[2] Similar financial values were also brought up as important, as dealing with money can be a big stressor for a relationship.[3] Michelle Williams also mentioned that it is important to be able to laugh together, "maybe even when you're really crying."

However, creating that relationship can't come just from similar backgrounds either. Relationships also take maintenance and hard work, something even the newlyweds are familiar with. I met Laura Moore at her apartment on a snowy evening at the end of what had been a very long day. While we sat down to chat, her husband Brian went to fill up her car and get her a soda from the gas station. Things like this mean a lot to Laura.

> "I can appreciate another person so much, and that makes the love and the intimacy and even the sexual component of our relationship go that much deeper. It's not that I depend on him, but it's when he does those things because he knows that I've had a bad day. Like today I was really busy. I had a half hour between the time I got home to the time I needed to leave for my meeting, and he had dinner ready on the table. So we got to sit down and have thirty minutes of peace with my family."

These "little pieces of love" as Brooke Holmes calls them can be important in the early days of marriage, just as the Moores have demonstrated. This type of affection is known as compassionate love, "a form of altruistic, caring love that emphasizes concern for the other's wellbeing" (Reis, 652). Love, affection, mutual caregiving and compassion are all expectations of many newlyweds as they first enter into marriage (653). Mutual understanding, acceptance, respect, admiration, and openness are all characteristics of compassionate love that describes the way individual compassionate acts are performed and perceived by a partner (654).

In a 2013 study titled "The expression of compassionate love in everyday compassionate

[2] See Chapter 5, page 48.
[3] See Chapter 7, page 58.

acts," researchers at the University of Rochester had 175 heterosexual newlyweds fill out diaries everyday for two weeks recording "whether or not they had enacted a given behavior on that day and the other asking whether or not their partners had enacted a given behavior on that day" (655). Over the ten different surveyed acts of compassion, including physical affection and doing something to have fun together, newlyweds reported participated in at least one of these acts on about 60 percent of days. Husbands reported enacting these behaviors more frequently than their wives, which researchers believe may be linked to their wives seeing their behaviors in a positive light. This result may also be because wives find it difficult to recognize these acts from their husbands (669).

These outcomes "show how compassionate behavior predicts shifts in satisfaction from day to day," but also that "each partner's report of perceived partner compassionate behavior was to a large extent influenced by the other partner's report of enacted compassion" (670). Compassionate acts like Brian making dinner for Laura can be beneficial to everyday marital interaction. Husbands and wives may perceive these actions differently, but they do recognize their presence and importance, both as they perform the acts and as they receive them. This study only analyzed the interactions between newlywed couples like the Moores, but as the study also suggests, it would be interesting to look at these effects in marriages of all lengths. Perhaps these compassionate acts can help make a marriage more fulfilling at all ages.

Acts help Laura see her husband's compassion for her, but her husband Brian differs in this respect. In terms of fulfillment, he doesn't even feel that the married label matters. He's happy with their relationship regardless of the label.

> "It's kind of weird. I don't feel like it's any different now that I'm married as opposed to in September when we were engaged … I would be happy if we were just together and

not married. To me, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to change my behavior based on being married or not. It's about the person."

As Brian points out, fulfillment comes not just from the relationship itself, but also the individual that shares it. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made in order to continue that life, and sometimes those sacrifices are what make a relationship valuable, like when Evelyn Tanner dropped out of nursing school to marry Pete. As their marriage progressed, education became and remained a priority to them and their family, something Evelyn remains very proud of.

"I was able to go on to college and finish my education, and I was able to encourage my children to be educated. I was able to contribute financially, physically to their success as well as mine as well as his, because he had not gone very far in college when we were married … When he got finished our goal then was to finish my education, and he was able to help me with that with things like child care and a little bit of cooking."

Hearing these couples talk about why they found their spouse fulfilling was one of the most fulfilling parts of the interview process for me. Not all of them had immediate answers or reactions to the question. Some had to sit back, think about it, and have me repeat the question. But they all opened up eventually, and had a kind of nostalgia in their eyes as they considered the importance of their marriage in their lives. They'd glance at a spot just over my shoulder as they talked on about why they've enjoyed their life with that one other person.

Each of these participants had slightly different ideas on what makes a marriage fulfilling, and what traits to look for in a partner. Similar backgrounds seem a near universal qualifier amongst these participants for creating a successful union, but compassionate love does seem to be an important component as well. Spouses want to care about their partner, and vice versa. While there are hints that the young lovers are still adjusting to the communicative and

lifestyle aspects of married life, they trust each other just as the golden and silver ages do. Not everyone looks for the same traits in a spouse, but it seems that these couples can generally agree on some of the more general points. It's important to have things in common with them, and that other person should bring life a greater kind of fulfillment, just as it has for the Holmes'.

Chapter 3

Meeting Marital Expectations

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Brian and Laura Moore like to joke that they did everything backwards. They met and started dating during their freshman year of college. The following year, they had their daughter Lindsay. Brian and Laura both stayed in school following the birth of their daughter, finishing their degrees before finally getting married this past October, six years and one child after they first met.

This may not have been what Brian and Laura expected when they met, but it is how their relationship unfolded. Other aspects of their marriage challenged the gender roles Brian's parents established in their marriage. Brian handles most of the family's finances, while his mother did that growing up. Brian also does the laundry like his mother did, while Laura does the cooking like Brian's father did. Little things like that are perhaps not what Brian expected when he married Laura, but they are the reality of his married life.

When they had their daughter, they were encouraged to get married, but Brian is glad they didn't.

> "We had [Lindsay] so young there was a little pressure to get married right away. And even though the end result was still the same, I'm kind of glad we did wait because it felt like it was our decision, not someone else's made for us."

One of the biggest influences on how children understand love and marriage comes from watching their parent's relationships. How our parents raise us interact with each other can have a large influence on how we perceive relationships should function. In an article titled "Family Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and Culture," researchers explore the important differences

between the attachments formed between marital spouses and their children. The attachment theory of psychology shows the importance of the parental dynamic and interaction while a child is shaping their idea of relationships. In America, the spousal dyad of husband and wife is the core center of the family. "Attachment theory is focused on dynamics involving protection, care, and felt security", and is generally "more concerned with children and development" (Rothbaum, 329). The quality of that marital relationship is essential to "[o]verall family functioning" (Rothbaum, 330). Researchers also noticed that in cases where parents were in unhappy marriages, they would turn to their children to stabilize the marriage, as parents could reconnect over the shared rearing of the child, leaving the child's relationship with their parent to suffer.

Not all of the marriages in my study had children, and there was a mix of both good and bad parenting that my subjects learned from. However they all did have parents. When I asked these couples what they expected marriage to be like, if they had any expectation at all it generally came from their parent's marriage. It makes sense that long-term exposure to one particular marriage would form a lot of expectations as to what the institution would be like for them. But as many couples that said they learned a lot of good things from their parents, there were also some that wanted their marriage to be different from their parents.

For example, Laura Moore described that her parents were not very physically affectionate with each other growing up. They got married and had kids at a young age. One set of grandparents both came from divorces and a hard-working, blue-collar lifestyle that created many fights between them. Laura's other set of grandparents lived far away and had children at great, varying age gaps. However, all three of her example marriages all stayed together, no divorce. That taught Laura a respect for the institution that she has brought to her marriage with Brian.

"The one thing I did learn from all three relationships was respect. Respect for your partner, and respect for the institution of marriage. When the going gets tough you stick it out. There were a lot of tough times through all three of those relationships, and they definitely could have called it quits and … at least in our modern times, no one would have said, 'Oh you were silly for doing that.' They were true tough times. I feel like because all three relationships pushed through it, it only made it stronger. I think that's something me and Brian share. Marriage is a forever thing."

This sentiment was reflected in many conversations I had. To those who came from homes where their parents did not divorce, they considered that a major contributing factor in shaping their outlook on marriage. Michelle Williams saw her parents as partners, and knew that marriage was meant to be a lifelong commitment.

"It takes two people willing to commit to one another, and work hard to make something happen. I mean my mom and dad never had a lot of money. Never had fancy houses or clothes or cars, but they probably had one of the best marriages and a great family situation. I believe it was because they truly believed they were partners … they really did give me the expectation that it wasn't a fleeting frivolous thing. If you were going to say I do than you better mean it."

Many couples described this importance their parents taught them regarding the longevity of marriage. Divorce is a topic that has become more prevalent in the marital mindset in the last hundred years. Marriages like Michelle Williams' parents showed their children that marriage was meant to last forever, and their children emulated, respected, and have tried to repeat that.

But not everyone came from happily married homes. Leon Holmes was one that looked to his parent's marriage as something he wanted to improve upon. They've been divorced since he was four, and he learned what not to do from them.

> "I think in my life I learn a lot more from watching people fail at things and learning what not to do in order to then take that knowledge and apply things so that I don't fail … I think they gave me a lot of examples of what not to do, yelling and fighting and stuff."

These difficult marriages do not go unnoticed by children. In many of these interviews, participants talked about the expectation of family and parenthood, whether or not that expectation was fulfilled. Children watch their parents' marriages and expect things in their own romantic relationships to behave in a similar fashion.

Sociologists refer to this influence as intergenerational processes. "In a young adult's romantic relationship, the parents' marital conflict is predictive of the level of conflict in their own relationships" (Soloski, 775). According to researchers, it's not so much whether parents get divorced that can predict a person's later romantic conflicts, but rather how much general conflict exists in the parental relationship. Because love is socially constructed, children observe social interactions to determine their own behaviors in love and conflict. In addition, higher levels of love witnessed in a parental relationship can in turn lead to higher expectations for love in the child's expectations for marital love (Soloski, 787). This influence can in turn be passed down through generations. Children watch their parents, who then watched their own parents, and so on. The expectations for love and conflict in marriage, at least in individual families, have been constructed throughout the generations, and continue on with the children of those relationships today.

Childrearing is yet another expectation of what married life will be like. For many couples of the silver and golden ages, having a family was one of the expectations they mentioned as having before they got married. This was the case for both women and in some cases men. Child rearing is one of the age-old constructs associated with marriage, and the expectation for the older couples was some form of child rearing. Clare Davidson expected to have children and when she and her husband Don didn't, that changed her expectations.

> "I think a lot of this, the expectation part, was because of the time and the culture. I remember thinking I graduated from nursing school in May, got married in August, started working in September as a nurse, and in my mind I thought I'll work about three years and then we'll start our family, and life will be. Most people thought that when they got married. They thought they would have a family … I think as a young married I just assumed that's what I would do as well."

But not all marital expectations were family centric either; others were more of an internal survey of how to enter into the institution, and how to share a life with his or her spouse Clare's husband Don came almost straight off an overseas deployment to Vietnam when he married Clare, and he needed to get used to having to share his life with another person, an adjustment that did not come easily to him.

> "I was supposed to be the boss of everything, in my own mind. I wasn't being the boss of everything. I was not feeling that I should have to compromise very much, and I was compromising. But at almost the end of a year, one of the things that my wife does on a yearly basis is she goes and spends two weeks with her family in Minnesota, and the time came for her to leave to go on that trip. And I was all, 'Hey, that's great. I can go out and do whatever I want.' And you know something? I found out I needed her. I needed to

have her companionship. And I realized I wasn't going to be just fine by myself ever again. I needed my wife."

Things are somewhat similar for Brooke Holmes and her husband Leon. Even after three years, they still recognize that they need each other, which is something Brooke did not expect coming into her marriage.

"I guess I expected to get tired of him more, but I don't. Everyday we come home from work and say, 'Oh I missed you.' Or when we're getting ready to go to work, we lay there and say 'I don't want you to go to work. Let's just stay here all day and quit our jobs.'"

What all of this boils down to is that the relationships between parents and children can be incredibly influential to not only the children's perception of what marriage is, but also the parent's relationship. From the couples that I spoke with, long-lasting marriages generally produce children that want to continue in that tradition. As parents turn to their children for support in poorly formed marriages, children look to the parent for guidance on how to form a successful marriage. If they don't find it, they'll look elsewhere for an example.

Of the participants that I talked to, many had no idea what to expect going into marriage. They knew that they loved each other and wanted to be together, but aside from that the ins and outs of married life were still unclear to many. Brian and Laura Moore haven't had a marriage exactly like that of their parents, but that's not a bad thing. The Davidson's didn't have kids. Leon's marital example doesn't come from his parents. Most of my participants said that marriage generally lived up to their expectations of what they believed the institution to be, and that they looked to their parents as a reference for how to stay together, or what they should change for their own life.

Chapter 4

Igniting the Spark

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There is still a palpable spark in Don and Clare Davidson's marriage. They both confirmed it for me. But they also both confirmed that it takes some work to keep that spark alive, and as simple and silly as it may sound, a bar of white Dial soap does it for them.

For the last 44 years of their marriage, Don has preferred that they use white Dial soap in the shower. Clare has no preference, but is willing to go along with what her husband wants. Don and Clare have turned this bar of soap into a contest. As weeks progress and showers are taken, the bar of soap in the shower gets skinnier and skinnier. The contest is to see who can outsmart their spouse and replace the bar of soap before the other person can get to it. They wonder at how many more showers the bar of soap can last. If someone replaces the soap and their partner gets into the shower to find a fresh bar, they get a thoughtful surprise, and sometimes give a playful criticism for getting the new bar of soap out too soon. It's one of Clare's favorite parts of their life together.

> "It really is about being kind and not taking that person for granted. I do think that's an easy thing to happen in marriages. You sort of lose each other. We talk every day, every evening when we're having a cocktail about, 'OK, how was your day? What happened today? Who did you see today?' You have to stay connected, but it has to be purposeful … You've got to keep that spark going whether it's with Dial soap or whatever it may be."

The interactions between Don and Clare Davidson exude that careful consideration for a spouse that Clare mentions. Don feels the same way about Clare, and when I asked him about the spark between him and his wife, the man stumbled over his words as he tried to explain it to me.

> "I have pursued my wife for almost 50 years. Literally, I have pursued her, and if you ask her she will tell you I am still pursuing her. She is just a delight to me. I'm pursuing her, and I still will pursue her until the day I die. The spark is … I can't get enough of that woman! The common thing at night when I come to bed, she's already in bed … I can't not be with her. She's just great. I can't tell you how much I love her because I love her more than anything."

"The spark" is another one of those big ideas in a marriage that I want to understand. It's not easy to define, as my participants showed me when I spoke with them, but they still all knew what I was talking about when I asked about the spark. There was some idea in their head they could reference to show the connection between they and their spouse.

While every couple knew what I was getting at when I asked them about the spark, the idea of what the spark shifted as I moved from interviewing young lovers to those form the golden and silver generations. While the younger couples looked for a sharp, exciting, sometimes physical feeling, the older couples discussed more of a level of comfort with their significant other that made life a little more worthwhile.

I'll start with the younger couples, and really the youngest of all the couples. Lewis Neilson has felt a spark with Anna since the moment they met, and still feels it as they move towards getting married.

> "I would definitely say there's a spark. I would say there was one from pretty much the first time we met. And it's definitely fluctuated some but I don't think it's been overly

bad. I think the biggest thing for us is just staying open with each other and trying not to get too stressed out and push each other away. But every time we're together, or I even see her, I just immediately get happy, and I think that's helpful."

So for Lewis, there's a sense of joy in the spark in his relationship with Anna. It's something internal he can feel within himself towards her. Leon and Brooke Holmes feel a connection for each other that is very deep and spiritual. They have often discussed that they feel they are soul mates, which is what Leon thinks of the spark as.

"It's just a connection of your souls. Sometimes I turn around and I look at her and she smiles at me in a certain way and my heart skips a beat, and I don't know what that is necessarily. It's something that I think transcends words and human understanding. It's connection on a spiritual level. I've always kind of had that with her. It catches you at weird times."

The spark can also be physical. Laura Moore had to rediscover the sexual spark with Brian when they moved back in together.

"When I hear spark I always think of it in a sexual sense. For a while there not living together for the six years, and then living in our parents homes, we didn't really have a sexual relationship for almost three and a half, four years. It put a big strain on our relationship. I feel like with that we kind of lost that intimacy we had with each other prior … It's kind of rekindling now, and turning into a warm fire."

For these young lovers, the spark and chemistry of their relationship is a very real, physical feeling. It is young, thriving and burning with passion. This feeling began to shift as I talked to couples that had more marital experience. In fact, Michelle Williams even discredited the need for a constant physical spark in a relationship.

"I would define spark as being happy to see someone walk through the door, and I am. I don't like it when he's not home and I am. I feel very sad for people that feel that they need that little electric shock when somebody touches them. I remember the first time you held hands with somebody, that energy flowing through, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe this is happening to me.' I feel very sad that people feel that they need that, because I don't think that's what a spark is at all. It's not a bad thing, but it's not something that is going to continue."

There's some research to support this idea. In a study titled "Is love a flimsy foundation? Soulmate versus institutional models of marriage," sociologists W. Bradford Wilcox and Jeffrey Dew looked at whether having a physical, emotional love as a foundation for a marriage stood up against looking at marriage more as an institution. Social scientists found that "for both sociological and biological reasons, emotional intimacy and sexual attraction are likely to ebb and flow in most marriages," meaning basing a marriage on sexual intimacy alone is unlikely to yield success. In contrast, "the institutional model of marriage is more likely to deliver marital stability than is the soulmate model of marriage" (Bradford Wilcox, 688). Of course, researchers also point out that "couples are most likely to enjoy a long-term marriage that comes close to approximating the *soulmate* model when they build their marriage on a firm *institutional* foundation" (Bradford Wilcox, 688).

So there may be some scientific validity to Michelle's thoughts on the spark. While having sexual intimacy is important in the beginning, solely sexual intimacy with a partner is not likely to last. A relationship needs to be founded as a partnership in the institution in order to be successful.

As this research suggests, and as I spoke with the older couples about their relationships, their idea of the spark had in some cases kind of fizzled out. The women of the golden marriages, Lucy Adams and Evelyn Tanner, said that after so many years, there wasn't a spark like there was in the beginning. It had shifted into a comfort of knowing that person would be there for you. The idea was particularly clear to Lucy Adams.

> "When you're married this long there isn't that wow factor like there was at the beginning. There is a peace that comes over you to know that there's somebody there always with you that knows you better than anybody else, and that no matter what you're there for each other."

Evelyn Tanner agrees that there wasn't much of a spark with Pete left either. However, when I asked their husbands, Mark Adams and Pete Tanner, about whether or not there was a spark with their wives both of them answered yes emphatically. Pete Tanner says you don't lose it.

> "Oh yes, it's still there. We enjoy being together. We enjoy meal times. She enjoys cooking, and I enjoy eating. So if it's a spark it's there, it hasn't diminished over the years. You don't lose it."

Mark Adams also agreed that there was still some spark left in his marriage with Lucy.

> "I still have the spark. I see the spark between us. We just do things together and love what we're doing. We've done a lot of travelling. We won't be doing that anymore, so that's nice to do that much together."

For every participant I talked to, there was some sense of spark in their marriage, or at least there was at one time. I think the spark is about is finding comfort in another person, and never seeing that comfort fade away. Whether it's a physical, sexual yearning to be together, or

just being happy to see them walk through the door, the spark helps bring fulfillment to marriage, no matter how many years it's been, or how many bars of soap you've gone through.

Chapter 5

Finding Religion & Spiritualty

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Charlie Burke is almost 90 years old. His house sits on a two-acre plot in the cornfields just east of Indianapolis. The yard is well manicured and stretches out on all sides of the house. A yellow smiley face is painted on the sky blue shed at the end of his driveway, and the American flag flying upside down on the flagpole out front. If you ask Charlie, he'll tell you he's flying the distress signal until that Son-of-a-bitch Obama is out of office.

Charlie has lived alone in that house since his wife died. Leah was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease a few years back. Charlie took care of her at home as long as he could, but one morning when he work up, she was unresponsive. Leah stayed in a nursing home until passed away the following August. Charlie was with her, never leaving her side, holding her hand as her breathing finally began to slow. As the morning drew nearer, she began gasping for breath. Charlie told his wife of 68 years, "Don't fight it. Jesus is waiting for you."

Charlie still lives in the house they shared. Every morning he gets up and rides the electric chair he had installed for his wife down to the kitchen. After he has breakfast, he goes into the living room at the back of his house and reads his bible with Danny the dog sitting at his feet. He first reads from his bible, and then he picks up his wife's, telling Danny, "Now I'm going to read from Mommy's bible."

Reading his Bible is how Charlie keeps in tune with his wife. He looks though the passages she marked and the notes she made in the margins. In her death, and in continuing his life without her, he keeps religion and his relationship with God at the forefront of their relationship.

One of the cruxes of my interest in marriage is the intersection between the law and religion within the institution. As I've already pointed out, marriage was not always a religious-based institution. The Catholic Church created many of the religious pillars the western world considers true about marriage today (Coontz). But the marriage license that seals the deal with the state has very little if anything to do with religion at all. That piece of paper joins two people together legally, but not in the eyes of God.

This distinction was important for Leon and Brooke Holmes. They signed their legal marriage license the summer before their winter wedding. Leon is in the Air Force, and gets paid additional benefits because of his married status. Those additional monies basically financed their wedding, which they considered their true marriage. Leon believes that marriage doesn't necessarily have to be between two Christians to be successful, but having a similar set of beliefs is essential.

> "The bible says not to be yoked with a non-believer if you're a believer. I believe in that because I think that builds a lot of your worldview, and how you see things and you go about issues. With me and her it was never a problem. We've had the same view on that for quite a long time, and I think that's really key to our relationship."

The distinction between the legal and religious sides of marriage has been difficult for me to decipher. Some people use Christianity and the bible to define the roles of husband and wife and what love is supposed to look like, but I know that is not the case for everyone. Atheists who have no religious leanings whatsoever can be married just as Christians, Jews, or Muslims can in the eyes of the law.

Religion has been shown to affect and create higher levels of marital satisfaction and happiness. In a 2013 study titled "The Social Construction of Love Through Intergenerational

Process" researchers identified "the association between parental relationship factors, including marital status and interparental conflict, and both the experience of and expectations for love" (Soloski, 773). While the core of their research focused on how love's increased influence on marriage has affected families and marriage as a whole, they also looked at how people's ideas of religion impacted their individual ideas on marriage. They found that religiosity has a strong positive correlation to marital satisfaction. "Specific values and expectations (e.g. Relationship commitment and sexual intimacy) that coincide with religious ascription resemble the components of love in this study" (Soloski, 776). Religious values also positively correlate to relationship success and sexual efficacy.

This study showed that the more influential religion is on a marriage, the greater the satisfaction, commitment, and ultimately love may be. I believe this has something to do with the fact that much of the purpose behind religion seems to be the creation of a set of moral values for the couple to share. Pete Tanner worked as a Methodist preacher for more than 30 years, and he and his wife consider religion and spirituality to be a building block of their marriage.

> "I think it's very important. Christianity gives you a standard to live up to, personally and also between people. There's certain standards that you live up to and you don't deviate from them … spirituality is a strong thing for people to live by and live with and guarantee the other person is a stable person."

Of the eight couples I spoke with six of them had strong religious feelings that impacted their ideas of marriage. Some, however did not. The Davidsons, who have been married for almost 45 years, do not attend church regularly, nor do they consider themselves particularly religious people. Don's spirituality comes through his marriage and relationship with Clare.

"I'm not a churchgoing person. This is not from upbringing. I think that it's partially experiences in the military.[4] But I think … I basically go to the church of my wife. She is the church. That's my feeling. She's my spiritual contact. She is everything that's good in my life, and that's the way I feel about it."

Clare's religious views are similar to Don's. She thinks this may be in part because they don't have children. This makes sense. When I asked this question to other couples, many responded that they wanted their children to be raised with religious beliefs in a religious household. For instance, when Laura and Brian Moore were deciding how to raise their daughter, Laura was adamant that Lindsay would be raised in the Catholic faith. Brian even converted to Catholicism after his daughter was born so that they could share in religion together as a family.

However, not all couples share the exact same faith. Since dating Lewis, Anna Stevens has rethought some of her ideas on Christianity, as she is more more religious than her fiancée. Rick Williams has been a Catholic all his life, while his wife Michelle was raised in a Methodist home. They have gone to separate churches for their entire married lives, which has lasted more than 30 years. What's important to the Williams' is that their partner holds some kind of belief in a higher power even if it may not be exactly the same.

What I also found interesting about these answers was that regardless of their religious affiliations or ideas, every couple had an answer to the question. They had thought about their spirituality in terms of their relationship and their marriage, whether it has held a great influence or not. While they may not fully agree on its influence, these subjects recognize religion's influence on the institution as a whole.

[4] Don Davidson was deployed for the army during the Vietnam War.

This question was aimed at exploring that intersection of legality and religiosity within marriage, but that's not exactly what I got. The legal rigors of marriage really have very little to do with the moral code religion imposes on a marriage, or at least that's what I can gather from the couples I spoke with. The two sides are very separate. According to these participants, religion is not a necessity for a marriage to function and be successful. No one needs to go to church every Sunday and piously obey the bible, though it can and has been beneficial for many. Those that have their differences in terms of religion have managed to reconcile them and still have a functioning, successful relationship. But couples like the Davidsons prove that it does not have to be so. Religion brings a moral center to the relationship that it can revolve around.

Charlie Burke uses his bible to be with his wife. She's been gone almost two years and he still goes to see her on the 17th of each month, the anniversary of her death. For him, God is real, and that spiritual connection keeps him connected to the woman he spent 68 years married to.

Chapter 6

Exploring Marital Diversity

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On June 26, 2015, the United States Supreme Court legalized homosexual marriage with a favorable 5-4 vote. The highest court in the country determined that under fourteenth amendment rights, "states must issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and recognize same-sex unions that have been legally performed in other states" (Huffington Post). Thirty-seven states already recognized homosexual marriage, but the new ruling determined that all states must hold the marriage licenses of homosexual marriages just as they would for any heterosexual couple.

This was a historic and long fought victory for many gay rights activists. Massachusetts was the first state to legalize homosexual marriage back in 2004, and the issue has been ascending the national justice scale since. This ruling irrevocably changes the definition of marriage in America. But now that homosexual marriage has been legalized, what do the opponents, and proponents, believe?

While I did not interview any homosexual married couples for this study, discussing homosexual marriage is essential to this time and this project. While homosexuality has been around for many years, the legalized idea is still new to America. I thought that the greatest difference in ideas would show between the older and younger generations. The homosexual marriage debate continued through the formative adolescent years of my generation, whereas older generations were encouraged not to talk about the issue. I wanted to ask my couples their opinions on what the legalization of homosexual marriage meant to the institution of American marriage.

Lucy Adams is 81 years old, and she has more immediate experience with homosexuality than most people from her generation because her sister was gay. For a long time Lucy didn't understand why homosexuals wanted to get married, but has since recognized the benefits a marriage license affords its signers.

> "It doesn't bother me. I've grown up with it. I can be very broad-minded about things like that … I've had one person tell me that I was exposed to a lot of things that a very early age that most people didn't know about, therefore I did not talk about it. Nether did Mark. And the people that Gwen brought home were fine. We treated them just like normal people."

Lucy's attitude of acceptance is similar to others of her generation that I interviewed. But it seems like nothing more than just that, a hesitant acceptance. Those I spoke to are not overwhelmingly supportive of the change, but they recognize that it will not change their own marriages. They recognize the legality, and know that "traditional" heterosexual marriages will still go on. But there is hesitancy in fully accepting these marriages as legitimate. Even by saying that she treated them like normal people and that she didn't talk about it, Lucy implies that there is, or at the very least was, something abnormal about homosexuality.

Michelle Williams of the silver age has been married for 35 years, but was the strongest opponent of those I spoke with. When I first asked the question, she sat in contemplation for a moment trying to find the words for the idea she later expressed.

> "I think homosexuality is wrong. I am not convinced that someone is born to be that way. If they choose that lifestyle I think it's a very difficult choice to make, and I think it will further denigrate the institution of marriage rather than make it better … I feel that it's more of a sexual gratification level than a lifelong commitment level. It seems to me

that's probably one of those horrible stereotypes. It may not be true for everyone, but I believe it's true for a lot. If you start a relationship with somebody based solely on sexual gratification you're going to be very disappointed."

Michelle's husband Rick likened the battle for homosexual marriage to interracial marriage.

"What does the state have anything to do with marriage? I mean really, why would the state legislate or say who could be married and who couldn't? That's because they didn't want blacks marrying whites. That's where it's come from."

He's not wrong. Initial opposition to interracial marriages came from religious as well as biological understandings. Those who thought interracial marriages should be illegal cited "biblical support for their position and espoused racist beliefs that blacks are biologically inferior to whites" (Haider-Markel, 233). In a 2005 study titled "Attributions and the Regulations of Marriage: Considering the Parallels Between Race and Homosexuality," researchers Donald P. Haider-Markel and Mark R. Joslyn explored people's opinions on the biological differences that oppose not only interracial marriage, but also homosexual marriage. If sexuality can be controlled, it can be changed, and individuals who identify as homosexuals are therefore held accountable for it. Just as opponents of interracial marriage may believe the difference in intelligence between blacks and whites is not conducive to marriage and reproduction, the argument over whether homosexuals are born gay or choose to be that way correlates with whether or not individuals believe homosexuality should be legal or not.

The Haider-Markel study looks to race, gender, and other socioeconomic categories to compare opinions on these issues. It shows a correlation between high religiosity and opposition to both same-sex and interracial marriage, which supports my own findings. Many of those I

talked to who thought homosexuality was wrong used religion as the main opposition against homosexual marriage. They said things like "God created man and woman to be together" and that "the problem should be addressed by scripture." The connection between the biological attributes of blacks and homosexuals relating to marital rights has also increased, and "as was the case for blacks, the biologically based attribution is strongly correlated with opinion on gay marriage" (Haider-Markel, 238).

I'm not saying that the fight for homosexual marriage is akin to the fight for interracial marriage, but what this study does support is that divergence from traditional marriage, that being between people of one race and different sexes, makes some people uneasy. But it's not a vast majority; as of 2005, 55 percent of those surveyed opposed the legalization of homosexual marriage (Haider-Markel). The biology that people once used to contradict interracial marriages is now being retooled to oppose homosexual marriage.

My participants were all white people from the Midwest. I didn't ask them their opinions on interracial marriages, but when asked about homosexuality, very few answers I received were out rightly opposed to the idea. Those of the golden age were generally accepting at least of the legality of homosexual marriage, even if they showed a bit of hesitancy about the idea itself. The young lovers, however, were overwhelmingly in support of gay marriage. Of those married 5 years or less, no one opposed the recent legalization. They cited that their belief in love was the deciding factor. Like those of the golden age, they recognized that homosexual marriages would not affect their own, but generally believed that expanding the definition of marriage in America will only strengthen the institution.

Anna Stevens, who is engaged and still a college student, had this to say on the topic:

> "I think it kind of opens a lot of people's minds or at least broadens their understanding of love and relationships and what that looks like. Because I mean really anyone can love anyone else. Emotionally that can happen … I don't think there is one set definition or one set characteristic that defines love. I think in a sense it will change people's ideas of what that looks like in terms of the actual institution of marriage."

A few participants also pointed out the potential economic benefits more marriages could bring to the country. Laura Moore, whose wedding was just last October, thinks that allowing homosexuals to have weddings will boost the wedding industry and economy. Don Davidson thinks that giving the opportunity for more people to marry could also boost the legal business, as there may be more homosexual divorces to add to the heterosexual divorce market. Don's wife Clare also stated that there might be more mentally healthy people as a result of the wider societal acceptance of homosexuality. People may feel freer to be themselves rather than trying to hide.

Now that homosexual marriage has been legalized, there is no legal battle to fight. While the debate may rage on in individual communities and churches, from the national stage it's over. As I originally suspected, the main divide in support for homosexual marriage came between the older and younger groups. My findings showed that the millennial generation is in favor of the addition to the institution. While those of older generations accept the change, they do so begrudgingly, acquiescing to what will be the new definition of marriage in America.

Chapter 7

Dealing with Conflict and Other Issues

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Michelle Williams believes the microwave is the single biggest issue facing American marriage today.

I thought this odd when she first said it. How is an appliance the biggest threat to marital happiness? But for Michelle, it all comes down to the microwave, an appliance that has become a staple in probably every kitchen across the country. And that is the problem, because with the ease of the microwave meal comes the ease of instant gratification.

> "When it took an hour and a half to fix dinner, you enjoyed it more. When you had to think ahead and plan for something, it had better results. I really think that at least two generations have really been brought up to believe that if it's good it happens fast, that if it's not good it's probably because it wasn't fast. It's not a big deal, we'll just throw that away and get another one … It's not that the microwave dinner is bad, you just don't appreciate it as much. I believe the same thing with relationships. You can have a one night stand and it can be good, but you're not going to appreciate it in a year."

Michelle's microwave metaphor can equate to many issues. Not cooking and eating together loses out on time spent together in general. If the microwave breaks, instead of taking the time to fix what's wrong, just go out and buy a new one. If it takes two minutes to zap a frozen chicken breast, it probably won't taste as good as pan frying it by hand. There's less to appreciate when things are easily done and disposable.

Just as each individual marriage has its own issues, there are many issues brought up against the institution itself. As the prominence of love rose in importance in the early 19th

century, people feared that love would upset the foundation marriage was built upon. When the availability of contraceptives increased in the early 1920s, people worried that marriage would lose its sanctity. When women entered the workforce in the 1940s, people worried that gender roles would be upset and ruin marriage again. Then divorce rates began to increase again in the 1980s, causing more worries about whether marriage as we knew it was dying. (Coontz)

All of these concerns came to varying degrees of truth. People marrying for love instead of family obligation or money drastically changed the way marriage is viewed in American society. Having sex out of wedlock made the necessity of waiting until marriage unnecessary. As women became a more prominent force in the working world, they didn't need to stay at home while their husbands earned all the money. Divorce is more readily available today than ever before, thanks to no fault divorce laws. While we've grown accustomed to the changes brought to American marriage already, what are the current concerns? I asked my participants this same question so I could gain their perspective about what they see as the biggest issue facing marriage today.

The idea of instant gratification that Michelle Williams discussed came up in multiple answers. The idea goes beyond quality time lost with microwave dinners, touching on sex, divorce, and many other aspects of married life. I would have thought that this would be an issue older people would have with the younger crowd, but that wasn't so. In fact, instant gratification was something that came up more with my younger participants than with the older ones.

Like newlywed Laura Moore, who gave the instant gratification answer right off the bat, talking about how the instantaneousness of fast food and Amazon instant shipping won't bode well for millenials getting married today.

"Love is tough. Love is nitty gritty. It's in it for the long haul, and our generation has not really had to deal with nitty gritty. We've been coddled. I feel like when that first fight comes, when that first big earthshaking tough decision that you have to make comes up, or conflict, you kind of have to fight through it a little bit."

Brooke Holmes, married three years, thought the same thing, but her concerns were more that the millennial generation doesn't take sex as seriously as it once did. Brooke and her husband Leon waited to have sex until after they were married. They share the view that the current hook-up culture the millennial generation has developed is the biggest issue because the sexual connection is not as revered.

"Not only does it consummate your marriage, but it also brings that final piece of bringing you as close as you can possibly be to another person. And maybe it's not waiting until you get married, but waiting until you're in a relationship when you aren't just doing it for sex, or you're not just going out and getting drunk and having sex with random people. It's having that relation with someone who is special and means something to you."

But instant gratification goes beyond sex too. Like Michelle mentioned, it speeds up how we live our lives. All of this contributes to what Andrew Cherlin considers the deinstitutionalization of American marriage. Cherlin points out that marriage is "no longer the nearly universal setting for childbearing that it was a half century ago" (Cherlin, 849). Cohabitating couples are gaining many of the same rights once only afforded to married couples. Marriage has moved from an expression of love and affection to an expression of individualism, "the belief that 'each person has a unique core of feeling and institution that should unfold or be expressed if individualism is to be realized'" (Cherlin, 851). As much of a union as marriage is,

the experience of the individual is gaining importance in the grand scheme of the institution. Michelle's microwave metaphor applies here as well. Marriage has become a self-serving entity, an institution that people join in order to gain primarily personal satisfaction. A single-serving microwave dinner can't serve the pair.

But the young lovers I spoke with see this instant gratification issue as much as anyone. The Holmes and Moores recognize that the instant gratification so essential to their generation isn't helping marriage, it's hurting it. These couples were able to critique themselves and their generation for behaviors that they know could potentially pitfall them as well.

This ability to self-critique shows up again in the answers from the golden and silver age couples. When I asked them what they thought was the biggest issue facing married couples today, their most common answer was money. This, again, is not a surprising answer. Money is one of the hardships of adult life, and married life is no exception. Lucy Adams has been married for 62 years, and took no time to say that money was a huge issue in marriage today.

> "It always has been … You can't live with someone that doesn't respect money. Money is the root of all evil. Either you live too high on the hog or if you live moderately you get along. People wonder why we never lived a higher life, but I couldn't do it. I wasn't raised that way."

What most interests me about this answer is the era that most of these golden marriages started out in. Of the marriages that have lasted 50 years or more, those individuals grew up with parents who survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, and many of them had to live through part of that era themselves. Stephanie Coontz points out that marriage in this age was more about survival than anything else; people just wanted to make it through (Coontz, 218). So when the older couples thought about what was plaguing marriage, they thought first about the issues they

had seen their parents deal with, and perhaps what they had to deal with themselves. The same can even be said for Rick and Michelle Williams. When they got married in the eighties, the microwave was just gaining wide range popularity. They had to learn how to work with or around this new appliance that was revolutionizing the American kitchen. From looking into these answers, the time a marriage begins, and the issues most present at that time, greatly impact the issues the couple sees with it today.

While instant gratification and money were the two big topics, I think all of the answers I received also converge on one main point: a fear of divorce. In some way or another, almost every person I spoke with discussed how problematic the prominence of divorce is. They didn't exactly say that divorce was the issue, but the issues they brought up often ended with the hypothetical problem couples splitting up. My participants are afraid that people don't take marriage seriously enough to prevent divorce.

Andrew Cherlin also discusses that while marriage may have lost some of its significance as a dominant social norm, it has not lost its symbolic significance. "It has been transformed from a familial and community institution into an individualized, choice-based achievement. It is a marker of prestige and is still somewhat useful in creating enforceable trust" (Cherlin, 858). Marriage has changed from an institutional norm into a social achievement. People can still recognize the importance of what committing into a marriage means, they just may not be as willing to enter into it themselves.

Marriage will never be so idyllic that it won't have any issues at all. These issues are always changing because while marriage may have lost some of its social prominence, it is still an important construct in American relationships and society. And just as there will always be societal conflicts looking at marriage, there will always be varying conflicts within marriage.

When issues come up between Michelle Williams and her husband Rick, things usually end up unresolved. But this hasn't worked out poorly for them, according to Michelle.

> "That's probably one area we don't deal with well because I don't like conflict. I would rather just not talk about it until it just goes away, and I guess we've never had a conflict that was so bad that it didn't go away. I don't think we probably do a very good job of sitting there and talking in a calm manner so a lot of times we just don't talk about it."

Each of the couples I talked to had different ways of dealing with conflict. Instead of never going to bed angry, as many people advise married couples to do, the Moores have found the exact opposite works best for them.

> "We've learned that if it's after midnight we both turn into a pumpkin like Cinderella, and that we get meaner and angrier because we're just tired. So we've learned that if it's later and we really find ourselves going at each other, we'll go to bed, talk about it in the morning. Then 99 percent of the time we wake up and say I'm so sorry, I was just tired, and then we can talk about what the real emotion or issue was."

The Holmes' who have been married for only three years, have taken to whispering when they are dealing with a particularly difficult topic. It stops them from raising their voices at each other.

> "We like to whisper a lot. It doesn't matter if we're at home alone in our car alone, if we're laying in bed alone we whisper to each other if we're talking about something serious. That's kind of our untold sign … You yell and it escalates and it just gets worse and you end up saying things that you don't mean."

But even though couples may have their own individual ways of dealing with conflict, every couple I spoke with had the same thing to say about how to resolve things in the end:

Talk about it.

In his book of *30 Lessons for Loving,* Karl Pillemer spends a good deal of time talking about how communication can improve conflict resolution. According to his study, "When asked about a particular problem in marriage, the experts were very likely to mention communication: lack of it as the source of the difficulty, and getting better at it as the solution" (Pillemer, 60). Pillemer goes on to remind readers that no one is a mind reader, and that minding your manners can make all the difference between resolving an issue and it persisting long the your discussion ends.

This advice on communication was consistent in my study as well. Through all of the age groups I spoke with, in some form or another couples agreed that communication was key to resolving marital disputes, and ultimately making a marriage last. Men and women may have had different opinions on whether or not they liked talking about it. Many women expressed more of a willingness to talk about issues; in contrast, men were more apt to try and think through a problem to resolve it. So even though there are gendered issues with communication style, communication is recognized for its importance.

While not all of my participants liked talking about conflict, they acknowledged that a problem needs to be talked about to be resolved. Conflict will always be a part of marriage, both within individual couples and in the institution as a whole. It seems that while the institutional issues may change with time, talking about problems is pretty much the best way to end things all together.

Chapter 8

Defining Love

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Love is a feeling that's been talked about for centuries, but only explicitly connected to marriage for the last few hundred years. Love has been talked about a lot in this project already, but its definition is more difficult to determine.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines love as "a feeling or disposition of deep affection or fondness for someone, typically arising from a recognition of attractive qualities, from natural affinity, or from sympathy and manifesting itself in concern for the other's welfare and pleasure in his or her presence" (OED). I asked my participants what they thought love should be defined as, and for almost everyone I spoke to, it was not an easy task.

Lewis Neilson and Anna Stevens are not yet married. When I asked Lewis about how he defines love, he had some difficulty answering at first, and took a few pauses as he reasoned though his answer.

> "Love is very ambiguous. I think that's the point of love. I feel that it's something that you can't really define until you feel it, and even when you do feel it you can't define it because it's not easy to put into words. But I just think … it's hard to articulate. It's kind of like that shock factor[5] that you were talking about. You feel it when you feel it, and you may think you know what it is earlier on but there's definitely a moment when you realize what it actually is."

His difficulty wasn't alone. Husband and father Brian Moore said that trying to define love is like "trying to describe a color." Love is not something that can be pointed at directly and

[5] "The shock factor" is the spark referenced in chapter 4, page 42.

defined, even though these participants have experienced it. While they know what love is to them as an individual, trying to give it a blanketed definition is not as easy.

Lewis' fiancée Anna had a difficult time answering the question as well. She said that her old definition of love was a verse form the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13 4:8:

> "4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.8 Love never fails…"

For my more religiously inclined participants, this verse in Corinthians came up often. They talked about love as if it is divinely inspired. Pete Tanner, the Methodist minister married for more than 60 years, mentioned it as his foundational definition for what love should be. His wife Evelyn says that "God is the author of love," and that all love comes divinely from God.

However Anna Stevens, who first brought this verse to my attention, also let on that her definition of love has somewhat changed since knowing Lewis.

> "I don't really think there is a set definition or something that you can point to because I think people are so different that relationships look differently for them … In that sense I don't think you can really define it, but if I had to I know … the same Olaf[6] quote about what is love, it's putting someone else's needs above your own. So if I had to really say what it is that's probably what I would say, but I don't necessarily think that's all encompassing."

Putting another's needs before your own was something that many of my subjects considered to be an important part of the definition of love. The idea of caring for another person

[6] Olaf is a magical talking snowman from the 2013 Disney movie *Frozen*. Olaf tells Princess Anna his definition of love after her heart has been frozen (*Frozen*).

on a deeply intimate level makes up a part of love. It's doing something for another person even though you may not want to do it.

My participants were also careful to point out that there are different loves for many different kinds of people. Those with children, like the Williams' with their three boys, or the Moores pointed out that the love they have for their spouse differs from the love they have for their children. Clare Davidson also pointed out that the realest of loves is learning how to love yourself.

There was no great defining difference between the younger and older participants in my research when it came to defining what love meant to them. I hearken this idea back to what my participants said about the spark. These couples have been together for so long that their love for has relaxed from something intense into something more akin to comforting warmth. That's how Lucy Adams defined her feelings for her husband Mark.

> "I don't know how you define but I'll tell you one thing: when Mark went to have his pacemaker put in, I thought my life was going to come to an end. If something happened to him … you know when you live together this long, you kind of think alike. You start to think about something and they can almost finish the sentence. It's a warm feeling. Because of my [health] problems … I can't tell you what he's meant to me, and that has to be love."

This quote also brings up an interesting idea. How does love, specifically for a spouse, change over the course of a marriage? Does the initial love that creates a relationship and marriage change or die as a long-term relationship progresses? Researchers Bianca P. Acevedo and Arthur Aron performed their own study on this, asking, "Does a Long-Term Relationship Kill Romantic Love?" Romantic love for their purpose has two definitions. Passionate love is an

infatuation with another person characterized by "a state of intense longing for union with another," while companionate love is a combination of "attachment, containment, and intimacy," and typically less passionate than romantic love. (Acevedo, 60). Their study looked at 500 American middle-class marriages over ten years or more, distinguishing between intrinsic couples, who continued the passionate stage of their relationship over time, and utilitarian couples "who maintained their bond for reasons other than deep intrinsic involvement with their spouse" (Acevedo, 60).

Results of the study showed that "companionate love was moderately correlated with satisfaction in short term relationships and slightly more so in longer term relationships" (Acevedo, 62). In terms of passionate love, characterized as romantic love with an obsessive component, the pattern was reversed; short-term relationships thrived more on this obsessive love, but it was more important in the early stages rather then in long-term maintenance of the relationship.

The conclusion these researchers make is that long-term romantic love, complete with sexual attraction and engagement but lacking obsession, positively correlates to marital satisfaction and overall happiness. In fact, "a long term marriage does not necessarily kill the romance in one's relationship;" it may even challenge couples in a healthy way to explore new avenues and outlets for expressing their feelings and continuing that love apparently so essential to marital and individual happiness.

So while love may change over time, maintaining that romantic love so present in the beginning of a relationship doesn't hurt a marriage's long-term satisfaction. Love can be defined in a multitude of ways, and even those who are in love have a lot of difficulty defining it. This I find interesting. So much of our society is built around this idea of finding love, but when I asked

what it was they didn't quite know. They could point out distinctions, but the entire definition is ambiguous. Love, of course, is a feeling. It's part attraction, passion, and companionship, and it's different for every person and their relationship.

My participants can't define love, and I don't think I can either.

Chapter 9

Giving Advice

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Throughout the course of these interviews, my participants offered me a slew of marital advice. Many of the questions I asked were somewhat aimed at gleaning some nugget of marital wisdom from those who seem to have been successful in the institution thus far. But this project is not meant to be solely about marital advice. It's not my job to tell anyone how to create a successful marriage. My sample size is too limited and my experience too little to be able to offer any of fully relevant advice.

However, a lot of the answers I've discussed thus far have hinted at these nuggets I was so eager to uncover. The traits people have found beneficial to find in a partner, how easy it is to meet marital expectations, and how to deal with conflict effectively among others. Material like this can be used to inform a marital decision, but not to make it completely.

Karl Pillemer's *30 Lessons for Loving* is meant to be like an advice column. The project that led to his book is called the marriage advice project, and his goal when writing his book was "to collect that wisdom systematically and translate it into practical advice" (Pillemer, xiii). Pillemer's book was the basis for a lot of my own thinking in establishing my question list and project. The ideas he brought up, like the feeling of rightness and igniting the spark, were things I wanted to question as well.

But while all of his questions were advice driven, I only explicitly asked my participants for advice once as the last question in my list of 13. After reflecting on many aspects of their marriage, I wanted them to offer what they thought was the best piece of advice they could to people thinking about getting married. Based on their own experiences, what would they say to a

young someone thinking about getting married today? I asked this question of all eight couples, ranging from newlyweds to more than 60 years of marriage. The answers weren't all exactly the same, but some definite trends emerged.

The most common idea referenced was taking the time to fully consider the decision to get married. Both men and women of many ages talked about the idea in some variation. Newlywed Brian Moore's marital advice was simply not to rush it.

> "I think sometimes people get married to quickly, and I think what's been a big advantage for Laura and I that I don't think a lot of people experience. Since we had Lindsay so young, and we were both still in school there was a lot of hardship … you get to see all of the person, how they act under tremendous amounts of stress and worry and all of that … I think sometimes people just see the happy times, the good times, the easy times, and think it will be like this forever, but you don't see the other part. That's what causes problems."

Brooke Holmes' story experienced a different kind of pressure than Brian. While Brian felt pressure to marry his wife years before they tied the knot, Brooke was encouraged not to marry her husband Leon because people thought she was too young. When asked about her advice, she encouraged young lovers to create their own timeline for marriage.

> "Whatever you feel is the right time for you to get married, don't compromise that. Don't feel pressured … if you feel like it's right, and you feel like your partner thinks it's the right time, and you're doing it for the right reasons, and you feel like God is telling you, or you feel like your life is telling you it's the right time, then that's my biggest advice. Do it at your own pace."

Both the Holmes and Moores are young in the span of my sample. Both faced marital pressure at a young age. Neither of them listened to the pressures their families or society put upon them, and they both considered that to be the best advice they could offer.

Mark Adams' advice covered two other important ideas that participants discussed with me. He first mentioned that taking the time to think through the decision is essential, just as Brian Moore and many other subjects said. But he also encouraged people to think through the longevity of the decision.

> "Think it over several times, and make sure there's nothing hidden between you two. Respect each other, and plan on doing it forever. Stay married. Don't go at it as a temporary thing."

These two pieces of advice go hand in hand. When participants wanted young couples to really think though their decision to get married, the advice was aimed at preventing the potential for splitting up. They didn't want anyone to rush into a relationship that could cause potential hardships, and potentially lead to a break up.

Along with this comes choosing the partner to get married to. I've already discussed a lot of my participants' ideas on the subject. The biggest traits to look for were being able to trust that other person, knowing that they will bring out the best in their partner, and loving them. Clare Davidson reiterated a lot of these ideas when giving her advice.

> "I would say tell me what being what this other person is like … Does this person bring out the best in you? … Does this person encourage you, or do they say things to you like 'Oh you don't want to do that. Those friends aren't important.' Do they have your best interest in mind? … What have you talked to this person about? What kind of a life, what

do we hope for, what are our expectations? I think very few people really say that to one another."

Participants brought up a number of ideas in relation to this. Finding a partner willing to sacrifice is important, as is asking explicit questions about a person's life and potential future. These participants noted multiple times throughout multiple questions that a person couldn't change unless he or she wants to, and no one should expect change to occur within a person in marriage, ever. Their advice is to know a person so deeply, and to accept all their benefits and flaws, that there won't be any surprises as the marriage progresses.

Clare Davidson also brought up another interesting point, saying, "This is the most important decision you will make, and you need to be sure, but you'll never be totally sure." Though she was the only one to bring it up, she says that while you can be careful in your decision-making, one can never be totally sure if the decision is the right one.

Other pieces of advice popped up throughout the interviews. Engaged Anna Stevens said not to compare your relationship to other people. Don Davidson, married for almost 45 years, said that it's best to let there be spaces in a relationship. Michelle Williams said that relationships are work, and work should be expected if a marriage is to last a long time. Everyone had a different tale of caution to tell against marriage, which I guess is what advice is. It's meant to caution the asker against any potential screw-ups an action may or may not bring about. There were no answers about the overwhelming joy of marriage, but more of a focus on the potential hardships that may lay over the course of the relationship.

All of these lessons are reflected in Pillemer's book. He talks about choosing a partner, accepting them partner as is with no conditions, and making it last "as long as you both shall live" (Pillemer, viii). His results align with mine, although mine is on a much smaller scale.

As I said, this project is not meant to be an advice column on relationships and marriage, but I did think it pertinent to include the pieces of advice they shared with me. These participants have managed to make marriage work, to beat the divorce rate and stay married to one person for their entire lives thus far. That's not so easy a feat by today's standards. Though their advice was not perfectly consistent, they do show that the end goal of marriage is to have a successful, happy marriage by whatever means it takes.

Afterword

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This project began as a curiosity about the monogamous, lifelong relationship of marriage. I'd read about so many fairy tale endings in literature and watched them on television that I had become disillusioned with how realistic this kind of relationship was. I was becoming skeptical of why people got married, and whether making a marriage last forever, and stay happy forever, was really possible.

So I read some books, and a lot of articles. I developed a set of questions and talked to 15 men and women of varying ages about their marriages, hoping that their words and experiences would somehow enlighten my perspective on the institution. I wrote a bunch of pages trying to explicate what all of their answers mean, and now here I am at the end of a multi-month marathon project, and I have to draw some conclusions.

When I think back to the beginning, I'm not clear on what I was expecting to find. There was a feeling that I would find some kind of divide between the different age groups I was interviewing. Perhaps those of the golden age would be more conservative in their views on sex, religion, and martial longevity than their younger counterparts. I hoped that the answers I received would be somewhat along the same lines as those given to Karl Pillemer for his *30 Lessons for Loving*. But more than that, I kind of hoped to uncover some marital truth that would shake my conception of what marriage in America is and should be. I wanted to learn something, to break new ground.

But now that it's all over, I'm not sure that I did. At least I didn't find anything as earth shattering as what I had imagined in my head. When I look back through these chapters, I can't find anything that truly caught me off guard. Everyone spoke to the same ideas of marriage I had

in my head before I started questioning this institution in the earliest beginnings of the project. The older participants did have more traditional views on homosexuality, though they were accepting the recent change in legality. The younger participants were advocates for the change. Communication is healthy and the best way to handle a conflict. Love is an important component of marriage, but not the only things that should be considered when making that lifelong decision. These are all conclusions I've drawn throughout these pages, and again, nothing here is terribly surprising.

Of course, there were a few interesting points that came up. When I asked about a feeling of "rightness" when choosing their partner, for almost all participants there was no definite moment of knowing. It was a gradual evolution of feeling. The marital spark grew dimmer as couples aged together, but for the men in golden marriages the spark was still present, contrary to their wives. Also, the instant gratification that is such a part of 21st century culture is considered a threat to marriage by both the young and old, but the young lovers' awareness of this potential pitfall makes me think they may be able to escape it.

In addition, while divorce was not explicitly mentioned in many places throughout these interviews I felt an undercurrent running beneath these responses that divorce was on their minds. People, or at least these people, are afraid that the construct of marriage surviving today is on the outs. They fear separation, divorce, and that people aren't going to take seriously the institution which they have already committed to. My participants all talked about making sure your partner is one you can stay with 'til death do you part. They emphasized the importance of staying present and communicating with your partner so that the relationship doesn't crumble. While these participants may not have said that divorce is the biggest issue facing marriage

explicitly, it is clear to me that the commonality of divorce today has rocked the foundation marriage once stood upon.

These were the most interesting points of the 13 questions I asked. In the last 50 years, apparently little about the institution of marriage has changed. Individual ideas have, yes, but as a whole in the successful Caucasian marriages of the American Midwest, things have remained greatly the same.

But I'm not quite sure I believe my own conclusion.

The articles and books I read prior to asking these questions all agreed in some form that marriage is no longer the same as it once was, which in turn leads me to believe that even after all of this research I still haven't gotten the full picture of love and marriage in America.

Limitations

As has been discussed throughout this paper, choosing to marry is an immensely important decision. Partners must stand beside each other in good times and in bad. The answers I received to my list of questions all showed marriage in a fairly favorable light. My participants acknowledged the hardships of conflict and the general maintenance of a long-term relationship, but not one of these still in-tact marriages expressed any regret or concern at the decision they made so many years ago.

On one hand this is good, and makes a lot of sense. One would hope that if a relationship has managed to last more than 60 years, it was for a good reason; that the relationship was built on a solid foundation that allowed it to grow alongside the partners themselves.

But on the other hand, this favorable and happy impression that I was left with after completing these interviews leaves me with the same dissatisfied feeling that led me to begin this

project in the first place. As I continued these interviews, I began to worry that people were just telling me what they thought I wanted to hear; regurgitating the same marital advice that had steered their own lives, and was not completely authentic to their own experience.

The participants this project discusses have all signed up to be a part of the institution of marriage. They've made a commitment to law, God, and their partner to try to make their relationship last a lifetime. While I came in to this project hoping to break down the beliefs they prescribed to, they worked against me to build back my doubts on why marriage is still valid today. After all, when the person choosing to spend their life with you is sitting rooms away while I ask questions about the trials of married life, breaking down and admitting the extensive difficulties cannot be easy to do. Were my participants truthful, or were they just saying what they thought I wanted to hear?

Granted, this is all hypothetical. I could be reading too much into it. I don't think my participants were flat out lying to me when they answered my questions. These couples did not paint an entirely rosy picture of what marriage looks like. They did acknowledge the difficulties of sharing a life together, but none of what they said surprised me, which makes me think that there may be something bigger lurking beneath the surface.

Some of this is likely at my own fault. I hand selected each of these participants based on their age and demographic. Considering they are all from my intimate and extended social circle, there is likely a great deal of personal bias in both how my participants answered the questions, as well as how I looked at their individual responses. Had these subjects been more anonymous, there may have been a more unfiltered response. In addition, I could have expanded my question list to aim more directly at the more conflicts of married life I so sought to deconstruct.

My sample size is also incredibly limited. Had I had more time, I would have expanded my research to compare different demographics, including racial, interracial, and homosexual marriages. I could have sought out couples of differing cultural backgrounds, or different religions, or talked to people who have been divorced and chosen to remarry again, or even remained divorced. There is a multitude of demographics left untouched by my small survey that could have shed light on more interesting answers than those I received, but when cramming a project like this into the span of a few months, not all avenues can be explored.

Because my research ends here, I don't and won't know if these doubts hold any validity. I can acknowledge my own biases, but I can't go back and question these couples again. I feel compelled to believe my own results because the consistency within the answers does prove an interesting point in the spectrum of marital experience. The generations aren't as different as we think, and maybe things haven't changed. But the doubt still rests in my gut, which I can use to spur on my curiosity, and continue asking questions. This isn't, perhaps, the end of the road.

Final Thoughts

When people ask me what my thesis is about, I tell them it's a study of the sociological construct of marriage in America. I explain the research I conducted, the people I interviewed, and what continuities I was looking for in the answers.

Some people press further and ask me why I chose to study marriage. This question takes longer to answer, because it is more personal to me than just a research project for school. I didn't want my senior project to be something that just sits on a shelf with no real world implications. I didn't want to study something for so many months that I didn't think could hold

some kind of impact on my life or on those around me. I wanted to do something that people could learn from, and that could maybe even impact the life of someone else.

While the results may have ended up both exactly as I thought they would and simultaneously disappointing, I can say with honesty that I have very much enjoyed the process it took to write these pages. Having these conversations and reading over the answers has given me exactly what I wanted the project to have from the very beginning: a more informed perspective. Even though there were no earth-shattering results that came from my participants, I got to delve into their lives and relationships, which I consider an immense privilege. Learning about the joys and hardships of a person's life can only better inform what you want your life to be like. Learning about people inevitably helps you learn about yourself.

Yes, the answers I received and conclusions I came to only further solidified my preexisting assumption about marriage: it's tough, and should be carefully considered, but in the end the work is worth it. But that in itself gives me hope that while divorce rates exist, and infidelity occurs, marriage in America still works, and considering that the young lovers I talked to have as much faith in the institution as the elders did, there's hope that things may not be as rocky as I thought. And what's more, the fact that my results were somewhat dissatisfying leaves me with a still kindled interest in marriage. While I am tired of writing this paper, I'm still interested in discovering why marriage works, which I think goes to show that there is still work to be done.

Marriage in America is not broken. While the institution itself may be ancient, it has grown and evolved to the point that it can still be relevant in our lives today. The changing generations make it work with their beliefs, but the core of love and companionship remains.

This project confirmed that for me, and now that it's over, I'm back to where I started with a belief in the institution, and a curiosity about those within it.

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