

CONSUMER MARRIAGE

and

Modern Covenant Marriage

by William J. Doherty

ADVERTISERS KNOW A CULTURAL TREND WHEN THEY SEE ONE. A recent magazine ad pictures a new Honda Civic with the headline, “The sad thing is, it’ll probably be the HEALTHIEST RELATIONSHIP of your adult life.” Honda explains: “You’ve tried the personals, blind dates, even one of those online chat rooms. Why? The Civic Sedan is smart, fun, reliable and good-looking. Not to mention, it’s ready to commit, today.” Then, lest the reader feel suddenly commitment-shy, the ad ends in the wink of a headlight: “Looking for a good time?”¹



Apparently we must seek “healthy adult relationships” with cars because, as an ad for Levi’s jeans has recognized, marriage can’t be counted on anymore. In a lavish six-page spread we see happy dating couples, with captions announcing how long they were together before breaking up. The final page shows two female roommates, one consoling the other about a recent breakup. Just behind the two roommates, on the kitchen wall, is an art poster with the Spanish words, *Mis padres se divorcian*: “My parents are divorced.” The caption underneath delivers the ad’s take-home message: “At least some things last forever—Levi’s: they go on.”

The message is that we can only count on what we buy, not on what we share or the people to whom we commit ourselves. And the only role that endures is that of consumer. Companies that want our business will do whatever it takes to meet our needs, unlike our spouses, who sometimes put their own needs, or the children’s needs, before ours. Levi’s will be there for us, even if our parents divorce and our lovers leave us. How comforting.

Listen to other forms of contemporary discourse about marriage. A *New York Times* journalist reported hearing a guest at a wedding reception, presumably a relative of the groom, say about the bride: “She will make a nice first wife for Jason.” One national expert endorses what she terms “starter marriages” for marriages that are good learning experiences but not likely to endure. Does this make you think of a “starter house” that you didn’t plan to live in for long? One California futurologist uses the term “ice-breaker” marriage to mean the same thing. Feminist social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, in a recent *Time* magazine piece on predicting the future of male-female relationships, supported “renew-

able marriages,” which “get re-evaluated every five to seven years, after which they can be revised, recelebrated, or dissolved

editorialized that this show, and the cautions the producers took (such as prenuptial agreements and veneral

THE MESSAGE IS THAT WE CAN ONLY COUNT ON WHAT WE BUY, NOT... THE PEOPLE TO WHOM WE COMMIT OURSELVES.

with no, or at least fewer, hard feelings.”²

What we used to think of as our first love—our first intense dating relationship when we were immature and not ready for a commitment—has now become our first marriage. And what we used to think of as a contract with a bank—or a five-year renewable mortgage—has become the metaphor for our marriages.

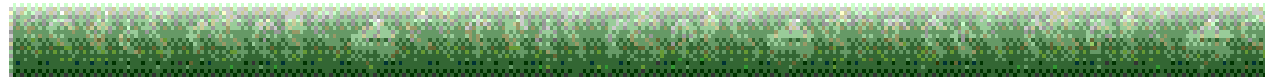
Listen also for our contemporary humor about marriage. A joke I heard when I visited the Boston area goes this way: “When choosing a husband, ask yourself if this is the man you want your children to visit every other weekend.” A character in a recent movie says that men should be like toilet paper: soft, strong, and disposable.

Beyond listening to contemporary discourse, just look at contemporary behavior. In August 1999, a Philadelphia couple who desired a more expensive wedding than they could afford got twenty-four companies to sponsor the wedding in exchange for having their names appear six times on everything from the invitations to the thank-you notes. And look at the blockbuster ratings in February 2000 for the television show “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire,” in which fifty women competed for selection by a rich man, followed by an immediate wedding on national television. Even the *Wall Street Journal*, no enemy of the marketplace,

disease checkups), represented “the dominant view of marriage in today’s America: less a partnership than a joint venture between two parties concerned with preserving their own autonomy.”³

At the level of individual justifications for ending a marriage, I have also seen a shift over twenty-three years of practice as a marriage and family therapist. I don’t mean to say that most people are not experiencing real emotional pain at the time they decide to end their marriages. It’s just that the reasons they give are far different from the hard, nasty problems that propelled spouses in previous generations to divorce: abuse, abandonment, chronic alcoholism, infidelity. Now people are more likely to give reasons that come down to being disappointed in what they are getting from the marriage. Here are contemporary reasons for divorce that I hear in my therapy practice and in my personal life: The relationship wasn’t working for me anymore.

We just can’t communicate.
Our needs were just too different.
I wasn’t happy.
We just grew apart.
I grew and he didn’t.
She has changed too much.
I deserve more of a companion that she is willing to be.
We are not the same people we were when we got married.





After the children left home, there was nothing left.

The relationship became stale.

My husband was a nice guy, but boring.

We had no real intimacy.

I used to take many of these as valid reasons to end a marriage. If the marriage is not meeting your needs, especially if you have tried hard to change it, then it is reasonable to leave. In the last decade, however, I have developed doubts after seeing the ongoing ravages of divorce for both adults and children, and after seeing people end their second or third marriages for the same reasons. And as my own marriage has endured for more than twenty-eight years now, I have come to value this kind of permanent bond more than when I was younger. In my writings for therapists, I began to criticize the bias towards individual satisfaction as against family responsibilities and obligations.

Gradually I began to listen differently to people's justifications for ending their marriages. I came to hear them like customer complaints, like someone explaining why they want to trade in a car for a new model, sell a house, or get rid of an old coat. Again, I recognize that people can become genuinely distressed about personal dissatisfactions in their marriage. But these new reasons often come down to saying that my psychological needs are not getting met in my marital lifestyle or that my spouse is not meeting my needs.

As I began brooding more about this phenomenon of consumer culture and marriage, I saw a video of a couple reciting new marriage vows that are becoming popular around the country. The promise now is to be together "as long as we both shall love." Translation: as long as we feel happily in love. Can you imagine a more fragile basis for a life-long commitment?

Again, I want to stress that most

people who are considering ending their marriages for what I could term "soft" reasons are genuinely distressed and in pain. In the past, this was all I needed to support a spouse's decision to end a non-abusive marriage that had once made both people happy but was now a source of pain and disappointment. What I now see more clearly is that this pain and distress often come after years of dwelling on what one is not getting from the marriage, of complaining about the spouse's failings, of listening to the spouse defend and criticize back, of comparing one's marriage to other fantasy relationships, and of gradually becoming more distant and resentful. A sense of entitlement to a high-quality marriage leads to a focus on what is wrong with the other person, which leads to more things going wrong, and eventually to misery, which justifies leaving.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONSUMER CULTURE OF MARRIAGE

Let me put Consumer Marriage in a bigger context. Around 1880, the mass manufacture of consumer goods brought mass advertising and a new era in American history. The era of the consumer was born. Advertisers realized that the key to successful marketing was convincing potential customers that they couldn't do without the product. Sometimes this meant defining new problems, such as bad breath and hairy legs, that new products would fix. If a company's product was indistinguishable in quality from another's—say, with gasoline, soft drinks, or cigarettes—then advertisers learned to sell an image, a sense of belonging, of having made it, of being with it. We came to define ourselves by what we bought, and exposure to an estimated three thousand ads per day helps us to decide who we are.

Consumer culture has always been based on individuals pursuing their

personal desires. But in the late twentieth century, advertisers began to emphasize desire for desire's sake. An example is Nike's slogan: "Just do it!" Or Sprite's: "Obey your thirst." A Toyota ad campaign has a voiceover saying to a father, "Your kids always get what they want; now it's your turn." Consumer culture has always been one of self-gratification, but the entitlement dimension is more prominent now.

Lest I seem to be against markets and consumption, let me reassure you. There is no viable alternative to free-market democratic systems, no feasible way to eliminate advertising without wreaking havoc on the economy, throwing millions of people out of work, and creating unworkable government bureaucracies. Consumer spending is the primary fuel of a free-market economy, and consumer spending relies on advertising to potential customers. Mass advertising is the only way that new businesses and new products can get the attention of consumers. Advertising needs to be regulated for fairness, and should probably be banned for children, but it is here to stay, as is the consumer orientation it supports.



Photo Credit: Comstock, Inc.



book, *Passages*, by Gail Sheehy: “Though loved ones move in and out of our lives, the capacity to love remains.”⁵ You see, it is your ability to love, not the people you love, that counts as a permanent asset in the consumer culture of relationships.

What happens when we approach marriage and family life as entrepreneurs? When the initial glow fades and the tough times come, we are prepared to cut our losses, to take what we want from our old marriages in order to forge new, more perfect unions until they also must be dissolved. Where does it end? Even worse than the results of business layoffs, there are few soft landings after marital downsizing.

How did we get there? Until the twentieth century, marriage all over the world could be called “Institutional Marriage.” It was based on economic security, raising children, and men as the head of the household representing the couple in the world. Families were large and expectations for emotional intimacy between the spouses were low. Husband and wife roles were separate. Divorce

My concern is less with consumer culture in the marketplace, but with how it has invaded the family. Consumer culture teaches us that we never have enough of anything we want, that the new is always better than the old—unless something old becomes trendy again. It teaches us not be loyal to anything or anyone that does not continue to meet our needs at the right price. Customers are inherently disloyal. I want to support American workers, but have always bought Japanese cars because I see them as superior to American cars for the price. I eat Cheerios for breakfast every day, but if the price gets too much higher than Special K, my second choice, I will abandon Cheerios. Or if they change the recipe, I might jump ship. I owe nothing to those who sell to me except my money, which I can stop giving at any time.

We Americans are also less loyal to our neighborhoods and communities than in the past; we move where there are jobs and where we can afford to live. Who asks nowadays whether you should not move because the neighborhood needs

you? We are less loyal to particular religious denominations, churches, and other faith communities; we shop for the best religious experience.

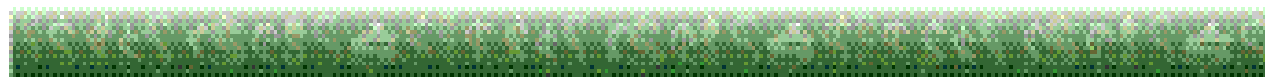
Is it surprising that in this new consumer world, we are less loyal to our spouses, to our marriages? And when a marriage breaks up, is it surprising that one of the parents, often the father, exits from the children’s lives to create a new life and a new family?

CONSUMER CULTURE TEACHES US THAT WE NEVER HAVE ENOUGH OF ANYTHING WE WANT, THAT THE NEW IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN THE OLD...[AND] NOT TO BE LOYAL TO ANYTHING OR ANYONE THAT DOES NOT CONTINUE TO MEET OUR NEEDS AT THE RIGHT PRICE.

The sociologist Arlie Hochschild observed that in the new American lifestyle, rootlessness occurs on a global scale. “We move not only from one job to another, but from one spouse—and sometimes one set of children—to the next. We are changing from a society that values employment and marriage to one that values employability and marriageability.”⁴ This reminds me of a line from the huge 1970s best-selling

was rare, and couples expected to stay together unless someone did quite awful things. The key value in the Institutional Marriage was responsibility. Marriage existed for the welfare of children and families, not primarily for the personal happiness of the spouses.

The social changes of the twentieth century in the United States and other Western nations brought on the “Psychological Marriage.”⁶ Here the emphasis





was on the emotional satisfactions of marriage relationships based on friendship, intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and gender equality. For the first time in history, families existed for individuals rather than vice versa. The key value of the Psychological Marriage was personal satisfaction. Commitment in marriage was a “given,” as seen by the low divorce rates at the high-water mark of the Psychological Marriage during the post-World War II era.

The social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s changed the face of marriage again by bringing in a powerful form of me-first individualism combined with a call for far more gender equality than the Psychological Family had delivered. Expectations for marital closeness and happiness skyrocketed along with the divorce rate. For the first time, the “soft” reasons for getting divorced became both acceptable and common, supported by legal changes to “no-fault” divorce. For the first time in human history, marriages could be ended by one of the spouses saying, “It’s not working for me anymore.” The era of Consumer Marriage was dawning.

During the go-go economic years of the 1980s and 1990s, when market economies triumphed over socialist

economies all over the world, the consumer culture captured the hearts—and marriages—of Americans in new ways. Psychological Marriage mutated into Consumer Marriage, marriage with high psychological expectations but now spiced with a sense of entitlement and

In some circumstances, we manage to convince ourselves that we need only provide money to keep the relationship intact, as when a noncustodial parent considers the payment of child support his only parental obligation. And when the price gets too high or the relation-

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impermanence. The chief value of the Consumer Marriage is making sure that one’s needs are being met and that one’s spouse is doing a good job.

In practice, most couples embrace a variety of values for their marriage, including the values of responsibility and commitment emphasized by the Institutional Family. But these values are always in danger of being trumped by the consumer values of personal gain, low cost, entitlement, and keeping one’s options open. In consumer culture, the exit door is always available. Commitments are always provisional, as long as the other person is meeting our needs.

ship supplies little or nothing in return, even money may be withdrawn in favor of another “product.” The parent owes no loyalty beyond payment, as in the consumer relationship with breakfast cereal or a car.

Has the consumer culture brought some good things into contemporary marriage? Yes. The positive side of being a good consumer is the value of advocating for oneself in the marketplace. Good consumers in the marketplace are well-informed. They insist on high-quality goods and service. They are not patsies for misleading advertising or bad deals. They spend their resources wisely.

When it comes to marriage, good consumers choose their mates carefully rather than impulsively. They take time to get to know a person before making a commitment. They take premarital education classes. They learn what it takes to make a marriage work. And they expect to be treated lovingly and fairly by their spouses. Although these qualities are part of overall psychological well-being, they are supported by the best elements of a culture that emphasizes consumer rights and consumer information. Fewer women nowadays will stand for abuse from their husbands because it’s their “fate” as

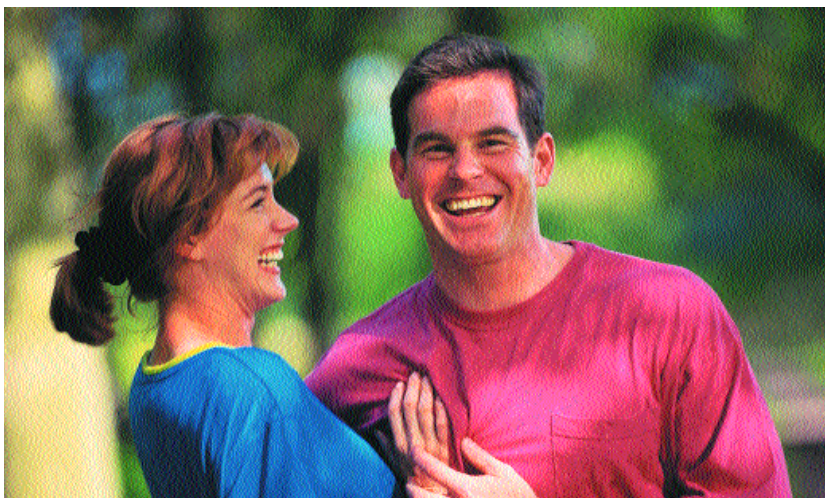


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wives. They will use consumer ideas such as “I deserve better” and “I have a right to expect something different.” The problem is not that we are constructive consumers in our marriages. The problem arises when that’s all we are.

As a culture, we have no new, coherent alternative to Consumer Marriage. The more stable Institutional Marriage is dead, and most contemporary men and women do not want to bring it back. The price in personal freedom and equality for women is too high. We will not turn the clock back to a pre-individualistic era; rather, we must learn to tame individualism. The Psychological Marriage, which assumed commitment but did not work on building it, was not sturdy enough to withstand the me-first consumer world. It’s not that most people go into marriage with a full-blown consumer attitude; indeed, most believe that they are fully committed for life. The consumer model kicks in when problems arise and gridlock occurs, as they do in almost every marriage. That’s when we begin to ask if what we are getting from the marriage is worth the price of dealing with its problems, whether the costs outweigh the benefits of being with this person.

TOWARDS A NEW CULTURAL IDEAL OF MARRIAGE

We need a new ideal of marriage that re-emphasizes the commitment and responsibility of the Institutional Marriage while embracing emotional satisfaction elements of the Psychological Marriage and the self-advocacy elements of the Consumer Marriage. We need an ideal of marriage that fosters commitment and individual well-being, both permanence and equality between men and women. An ideal that accepts divorce but sees it as the tragic exception and not the norm. I call this Modern Covenant Marriage—“covenant” to connote the reli-

gious sense that marriage is a powerful, sacred commitment, and “modern” to suggest that we need a new way to be in committed marriages in the twenty-first century. This form of marriage is similar to, but more than, Covenant Marriage legislation passed in Louisiana and Arizona and proposed in other states.

Every cultural trend, including consumer culture, has something to teach us. As I suggested before, Modern Covenant Marriage is like Consumer Marriage in one important way. It embraces the importance of spouses advocating their needs and rights in the relationship. It stresses that people should not sit still while being taken advantage of by their spouses. It promotes self-advocacy in marriage for both men and women.

But Modern Covenant Marriage goes beyond Consumer Marriage in most other ways. Covenant marriage involves a commitment not only to the other person but also to the marriage itself. In the consumer economics model, I am committed to a product or service as long as it meets my needs, but I am not committed to the relationship I have with the company that makes it. I eat Cheerios, but I am not committed to General Mills. In a covenant marriage, the spouses have an abiding commitment

to the “we” as well as to the other spouse, to the marriage along with the person. The marriage becomes the third party in their couple relationship.

This “third party” commitment is especially easy to see if you have children, because you realize how much your children rely on your marriage relationship, in addition to relying on each of you individually. Kids whose parents divorce may still have two parents to depend on, but not a marriage. It is a huge loss.

Modern Covenant Marriage requires the habits of the heart and mind to cultivate a lifelong relationship that is loving and fair to both partners, where the well-being of your spouse and your marriage is as important as your own well-being, where the soft reasons for divorce are off the table, and where efforts for continued improvement of the marriage are tempered with acceptance of human limitations.

I think that most of us dearly want what I am calling a Modern Covenant Marriage, but don’t know how to achieve it or hold onto it. It is not enough to start with a loving commitment, or even with a religiously grounded commitment. Most divorces occur to people who start with heartfelt commitment, backed by religious convictions. The battlefields



Photo Credit: Comstock, Inc.





of divorce are strewn with the carcasses of couples who started out with love, commitment, and good intentions. As stresses and dissatisfactions mount, and they inevitably do, the seductive forces of consumer culture are too strong to resist without an alternative model of marriage. I am offering Modern Covenant Marriage as an alternative.

Skills are needed to maintain a Modern Covenant. Modern Covenant Marriage puts high demands for self-awareness, empathetic understanding, and negotiation skills. Researchers have found that the ability to deal construc-

tively with conflict is a key factor in long-term successful marriage. But skills are not enough, as evidenced by the fact that male therapists, who presumably have good communication skills, have higher-than-average divorce rates. Knowing what to do to help your marriage, although necessary, is not enough to see you through the hardest of times. A covenantal commitment is needed, but with a modern sensibility that recognizes the dignity and worth of both spouses along with the abiding importance of the bond they have created.

Second, I propose that we form state and national associations of couples in covenant marriages, in order to provide mutual support and affirmation for one

us—no technological or medical breakthroughs—will offset the debilitating losses that failed marriages will inflict on our children and their world. We have to name the problem of consumer marriage before we can fight it. And we have to unleash the human capacity for sustained moral commitment from the tentacles of marketplace that is slowly choking it, generation by generation. The stakes could not be higher. *mf*

William J. Doherty is a professor of family social science and Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota. Among his books are Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times (Sorin Books, 2000) and The Intentional Family: How to Build Family Ties in Our Modern World (Avon Books, 1999). This article is adapted from a

longer talk presented at the conference on Revitalizing the Institution of Marriage for the 21st Century at Brigham Young University, March 2000.

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4. Arlie R. Hochschild, "How has 'the organization man' aged: A need to belong." *The New York Times* (January 17, 1999) 17.
5. Gail Sheehy, *Passages* (New York: Bantam, 1976) 513.
6. J. Stacey, *Brave New Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1990)
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SPECIFIC ACTIONS

I propose several courses of action based on the foregoing analysis. The most obvious implication of this proposal is to support Covenant Marriage laws in the United States. Covenant Marriage laws generally give couples, newly

another and to be a public force for promoting the ideal of Modern Covenant Marriage. We need a grassroots movement of couples, not led by professionals, to fight Consumer Marriage on behalf of higher ideals.

Third, I propose that we engage the professionals who practice psychotherapy and marriage therapy in a discussion of Consumer Marriage and Modern Covenant Marriage.⁸ Towards this end, I have drafted a values statement for therapists who wish to identify themselves as pro-commitment in today's complex world. It can also be used by consumers and referring professionals to seek out pro-commitment therapists.

We have to find the way together, as husbands and wives, as a community. We have to find a new way to be married in a new century, or else I fear that nothing we do for the generations that follow

