As I write this review, the unfortunate marital break-up of Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman is splashed all over the tabloids. Inside the Beltway, Washington's politicos and pundits are talking about strengthening welfare reform legislation to promote and support married, two-parent families. And on Valentine's Day, I hurt my wife's feelings when—well, I don't need to go into all the details, but I checked my pride and apologized, and she apologized back, and we kissed and made up.

Fortunately, the books I've read during the past few months have prepared me to analyze these disparate events with a little more skill. The year 2000 produced important books on marriage and divorce in our contemporary culture. I have benefited from reading three books that I enthusiastically recommend. The first book has been publicly discussed more than the other two: The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce by Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee. If you watch or listen to the talk shows, read the national newspapers or news magazines, or listen to the casual conversation around the water cooler, you have probably heard about this book. Wallerstein began studying children's experiences of divorce as a clinical psychologist in the wake of California's no-fault divorce revolution in the early 1970s. She has followed a small, clinical sample of these children for more than 25 years now. Unexpected Legacy is the culmination of her unique effort.

Wallerstein's conclusions are generating controversy. The effects of divorce on children are not as fleeting as their parents had hoped and been taught. Wallerstein and her co-authors claim that the effects are deeper, longer-term, and more troubling than most social scientists have suggested. Divorce rips apart a child's world and irrevocably changes its direction. Its most harmful and profound effects are not visible until early adulthood, when children of divorce are trying to form intimate relationships. The authors assert that without an inner model of a loving, committed, stable marriage, children of divorce struggle to choose mates, are shy of commitment, and are at a clear disadvantage in finding and maintaining true love. But as this shot across the bow of our divorce culture weren't enough, the authors go even further. When faced with the question of whether children are better off if their unhappy parents stick it out for the sake of the children, the authors offer an unflinching, politically incorrect "yes" (with appropriate asterisks for situations of violence, abuse, addiction, and severe pathology). They base their assertion on a quasi-scientific comparison of these children of divorce with a group of their childhood peers whose parents were reportedly unhappy but stayed together nonetheless. In many ways visible to a therapist's probing eye, these children of stable but supposedly unhappy marriages were better off as young adults than were their friends whose unhappy parents divorced.

As a researcher myself, I understand some of the critiques of Unexpected Legacy by those who have studied the effects of divorce in larger, nationally representative...
samples of children, and who find the negative effects less pronounced. There are inherent weaknesses in Wallerstein’s study that limit her ability to speak the final word on the effects of divorce on children. But Unexpected Legacy should not be read with that purpose in mind. It is better read, I believe, in a more personal way. That is how I found myself reading it. More and more, the objective researcher part of me sat back and the husband-of-a-child-of-divorce part of me came forward as I found myself better understanding things about my wife that have confused me over the life of our marriage. When I finished the book, I suggested she might be interested in reading a “biography about her life.” She read it, and more than once I saw her in tears, sad or angry about her experience of divorce. Not a book for the faint-hearted.

In many ways, the book was healing for my wife. I’m sure it will not feel quite that way for those readers who are struggling with the decision to divorce. As difficult as it may be, however, Unexpected Legacy, in its unflinching candor, is also the best advice book to date on the topic of divorce. Wallerstein understands how divorce affects children. Accordingly, she provides sensitive, child-centered advice on how to help children through this gut-wrenching change and the best list of “do’s” and “don’ts” for divorced parents I’ve seen. Her advice ranges from a caution about sending unaccompanied young children on airplanes to visit their non-custodial parent to a good, old-fashioned tongue lashing to divorced fathers who fail to help pay for their children’s college educations. By looking at divorce through a child’s perspective over the past quarter-century, I’m confident Wallerstein and her co-authors would first encourage Tom and Nicole, and others struggling in their marriages, to do the hard work of working things out.

And there is good news about that from another book I picked up right after I finished Unexpected Legacy. Although Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher’s The Case for Marriage won’t get quite as much talk-show time as Unexpected Legacy, I think it will ultimately have more lasting impact on revitalizing the institution of marriage in our society. Time after time it punches holes in the myths about marriage. When a social demographer looks at this question, she dissolves the dichotomy in data. When you look at a nationally representative sample of married people who say they are “very unhappy” in their marriages, and follow them over time, 60 percent of those who stick it out (about 15 percent do not) say they are “quite happy” or “very happy” in their marriages five years later. Another 25 percent of couples report improvement in their marital happiness. This is the kind of data into our society (see accompanying article, “Five Marriage Myths, Six Marriage Benefits”). For instance, it focuses a new light on the dilemma of staying married for the kids’ sake. We feel trapped by the question, “Should unhappily married spouses stay together for the sake of their children?” We don’t like the stark dichotomy of unhappy adults versus unhappy children. As it turns out, when a social demographer looks at this question, she dissolves the dichotomy in data. When you look at a nationally representative sample of married people who say they are “very unhappy” in their marriages, and follow them over time, 60 percent of those who stick it out (about 15 percent do not) say they are “quite happy” or “very happy” in their marriages five years later. Another 25 percent of couples report improvement in their marital happiness. This is the kind of data

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that warms the objective cockles of my researcher’s heart. Apparently, unhappy couples aren’t doomed to a life of personal misery in their stoic, chin-up choice to stay together for the kids’ sake, any more than people who choose not to drink alcohol at parties are consigned only to watch others have a good time. Similarly, Waite and Gallagher report research suggesting that only about one-third of divorces stem from high-conflict relationships. Two-thirds of divorces likely catch children by surprise because the conflict in the marriage is relatively low and not particularly visible to the children, more like the marriage portrayed by Michelle Pfeiffer and Bruce Willis in the recent movie, The Story of Us. These are the marriages that perhaps could remain healthy with more skill and care and could potentially be repaired with enough effort and help. By the way, Waite and Gallagher inform us that the divorce rate isn’t quite as high as demographers predicted it would become a generation ago. It turns out that probably less than 40 percent of first marriages will end in divorce, not the 50 percent-plus figure that we always hear, and the rate has been declining slightly for the past decade.

The Case for Marriage brings together in one place the best research on why marriage matters. Waite brings impeccable research credentials to the task. In addition to a considerable intellect, Gallagher brings the gift of translating sophisticated research into language non-researchers can understand and appreciate. Together they make a timely and critical contribution to revitalizing the institution of marriage. From the best research, we learn that married people are happier, healthier, and wealthier than their unmarried peers. They even have more satisfying sex lives than their unmarried friends. And these benefits of marriage are not primarily an artifact of happier, healthier, wealthier, and sexier people marrying; rather, there is good evidence that marrying and keeping the marriage healthy produce many of these benefits, and leaving or never marrying subtracts from personal well-being.

The Case for Marriage provides me and other pro-marriage advocates a needed scholarly foundation. But it will be useful to a much broader range of readers. I believe we all need to better understand how much marriage matters to individual, family, and community well-being. We need to understand that marriage, far from being on the endangered social-species list, is a strong and vital institution with tremendous power to improve our lives. Perhaps fewer couples would choose to cohabit if they knew how their choice appears to work against their happiness, health, and wealth, not to mention their sexual satisfaction. Moreover, cohabitation actually increases, not decreases, their risk of divorce if they later marry, according to Waite and Gallagher. Perhaps young adults would be
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More enthusiastic about marriage if they understood its benefits. Perhaps we would all be more likely to protect marriage in our culture and in our laws if we grasped its value to our prosperity (and posterity). I think one of the most significant obstacles we face to strengthening marriage in our society is our collective ignorance about how valuable it is to our personal and social lives. A happy, stable marriage continues to be the most important goal of almost every American adult. That heart's desire is not a nostalgic, indulgent dream of a simpler time that has now passed us by. Instead, it is an act of wisdom, and I applaud our politicians' efforts these days to promote it, especially in low-income communities where the obstacles to marriage can be so high.

How do we make this dream of a happy, stable marriage come true in our own lives? The divorce rate may be less than 50 percent and declining, but you still wouldn't get on an airplane with those odds of a crash. Fortunately, there have been some excellent books written lately by talented marriage scholars that are illuminating the path to the good marriage.* I just finished reading what I believe is the best one to date and the first one you should read. But the answer isn't quite what you would expect. Blaine Fowers' book, Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness, does not focus directly on happiness in marriage. And you can tell by the title that Fowers' book is not destined to be hyped on the talk shows. From front to back, Fowers challenges the prevailing cultural and professional position that marriage is about achieving mutual happiness. In fact, he calls our mythical inclination to define marriage as fundamentally an emotion-based, private love affair between two people as “one of the great tragedies of our time” (p. 219), one that makes achieving a happy marriage even harder. That's not a statement calculated to help the book compete with all the “five easy steps to a constant, everlasting, passionate marriage” books out there.

Nevertheless, I think Fowers makes a crucial point that marriage, to be successful over time, has to be about much more than romance. As such, Beyond the Myth works as a nice companion to Waite and Gallagher's book. A casual reading of The Case for Marriage could lead us to believe that marriage is all about achieving the pleasures of life happiness, health, wealth, and sex. Fowers would disagree. "The romantic approach to marriage has been, in many ways, a noble and exciting [historical] experiment, but we know now that it has failed, and we must find another way to strengthen this vital institution" (p. 219).

What other way does Fowers recommend? The virtues of friendship, loyalty, generosity, and justice. In contrast, the typical approach to achieving the good marriage taught by educators and therapists and believed by most people is to emphasize strong communication skills. These skills theoretically allow couples to work through their inevitable differences and synchronize their wishes and desires into one mutually satisfying unit. This is backward, according to Fowers. For communication to work and for problem solving to be effective, spouses need to develop the virtues that sustain a deeper, richer love. Romance and emotion are fragile and fleeting in the face of ordinary, everyday life. But the partnership a couple builds when they share a noble purpose in life and work together to bring it about, when they give loyalty and act generously and fairly with each other—these are the virtuous actions that make marriage strong and steady and ultimately more rewarding. Fowers' ability to help couples see the strengths they already have in their relationship and his wise suggestions for enhancing those strengths make this book a valuable read for all who want their marriages to endure.

So it turns out that I wasn't just swallowing my pride and engaging my wife in a positive problem-solving exercise when I apologized to her on Valentine's Day. We were acting with virtue to sustain the partnership marriage we have built over 24 years.

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