Marriage is popular in the United States. Over 90 percent of those in this country will marry at some time in their life, even a higher percentage in some of the subgroups my colleagues and I have studied over many years. This is common knowledge. In this examination of the process of traveling the road to marriage, my hope is that you may evaluate your own experiences and your own expectations about marriage and the road to marriage, wherever you might be on that road.

Marriage is risky, though. Many couples divorce, and, depending on the group being studied, the divorce rate is 35-45 percent. Even so, most who divorce remarry, and do so within two or three years.

The results of marriage are positive for both spouses, including benefits in both mental and physical health. There is also evidence indicating that in cities with a high marriage rate, there is significantly lower crime rate and less welfare dependency.

What is marriage?
We might ask, what is marriage? And we all have our own ideas. To some degree, it’s a personal commitment where people trust each other, enjoy one another’s company, and plan to be together for some time in that relationship. Marriage is certainly a personal bond that grows over time as a couple’s relationship changes and grows. It’s a sacred promise; in fact, for most people it is a religious ceremony performed in front of God, man, and witnesses. And many people take that to be a very serious part of their marriage relationship. Certainly, it is a financial partnership. It is a sexual union; and for those who believe in chastity before marriage and monogamy and fidelity after marriage, it is the chief sexual outlet for couples. It’s a family-making bond, not only in a legal sense, but in a psychological sense, and so a family is created with a marriage. And certainly a marriage is a legal contract where there are responsibilities as well as rights and privileges.

But beyond understanding the definitions of marriage, what do you know about your road to marriage? Is it a straight road, as my family would say, the kind of Wyoming road I love where you can look out and count antelope most anywhere you might be driving along that road? Or is it a beautiful springtime pastoral road that winds through the
countryside? And how is the ride, how was the ride, and how will the ride be?

A few years ago, my family and I were up in West Yellowstone, Montana, a city with lots of campers, and I happened to notice a camper with the sign on the back, “Just Married.” As I went up closer, I saw another sign in smaller lettering that said,

They donned their best duds and hoped for no hail.
They’ll say their “I do’s” and they’re hitting the trail.
It took him some time, though she never varied.
Having courted a decade, they’re finally just married.

As I kneeled down to take a picture of this sign, I saw the personalized license plate, “2 WLD 4 U,” and I wondered if this was his camper or hers? Did they change the license plate after the wedding took place? But the back of their camper gave some interesting insights into the road they were on.

Our Marital Script or Roadmap

Growing up, each one of us develops a script or ideas about who we are, which includes expectations about our lives and what marriage will be like. This script becomes the foundation for our marital roadmap, so to speak. During dating and courtship—with however many people you date and how many courtships you’re in—the road to marriage is somewhat visible and our journey is underway. During this time in our lives, a joint script, or a couple script, is also being written, consciously and unconsciously, as we date and court. This script is really the defining of our expectations, hopes, plans, and dreams for our marriage. The script is refined as we have real-life experiences during dating and courtship. By the time of the wedding ceremony, almost all of the dimensions of marriage are present in the relationship. Much of our joint marital script is in place and has been written, rehearsed, and rewritten time and time again. Our scripts are in fact the maps as we travel the road to marriage.

Our drive along the road to marriage begins with a couple’s first meeting and first impressions. It’s interesting to ask couples about that, and very often they don’t even recall when they first met, let alone what their first impressions were. There are those who travel long distances before there is a mutual interest, and then, as the saying goes, there are those who “just know” this is the person they are going to marry. Here is one example:

He was the head counselor at the boys’ camp, and I was the head counselor at the girls’ camp, and they had a social one night, and he walked across the room. I thought he was coming to talk to my friend, Maxine, because people will always cross the room to talk to Maxine. He was coming to talk to me, and he said, “I’m Ben Small of the Coney Island Smalls.” At that moment I knew. I knew the way you know about a good melon.

Another part of the drive includes others’ impressions, as friends and family respond to who you are and how you are with this person. One of the things you can count on in a college culture such as BYU is that, after a date, there will be a real processing of this guy by her roommates, and the reactions of others become part of our script.

The relationship continues and becomes exclusive, as well as inclusive as a couple does things with other people. Steady dating emerges, and personal bonding develops. At the same time, the couple is developing trust, the ability to confide in one another, and the confidence to share secrets and expectations. Then there is the formal engagement, which is a wonderful time, and the planning of the wedding. There are those who, once they’re engaged, want to hurry up and get to the wedding. On the other hand, we find that many couples who, after the wedding, say they wish that they had had a longer engagement to really get to know one another and benefit from that experience. And the drive goes on.

Once the wedding day has
come and gone, the road of marriage can be smooth or bumpy just as it was before the wedding. It may have potholes and ruts, as personality issues come up. There will be compatibilities and incompatibilities, similarities and differences, some of which matter and some of which don’t matter at all. Communication, of course, is usually pretty good for most couples before they marry, or they wouldn’t have become engaged in the first place. Hopefully, married couples will talk to each other as they experience differences and will learn to deal with those. And conflicts arise not only over negative things, but over positive things as well. It may be an invitation to a relative’s house for Sunday dinner. Or what to do over the holidays, or which leisure activities to engage in, individually or as a couple. Planning how two people can really live as cheaply as one is something most couples talk about while they’re engaged, but most don’t discover until after the wedding that you can’t live on love alone.

Understanding and handling affection, being affectionate, and considering how affection was handled and displayed in families of origin are also issues people work on as they’re on the road to marriage. Couples learn that they haven’t just married an individual, they have married into an entire family; and they form relationships with parents and with siblings, with whom they likely will interact more in years to come.

Fun and humor are bonding aspects of the relationship that are introduced early. Usually the couple has had some fun together before their wedding, but now must develop their sense of humor within their marriage. In many marriages, religious issues, including fundamental beliefs, practices, and forms of worship, have an effect on molding behaviors.

Couples must also clarify roles and expectations as they write their joint marital script. As a matter of fact, clarifying role expectations is a lifelong task. Numerous studies point out the advantage of flexibility or adaptability—not being wishy-washy by any means, but being able to roll with the punches and changing our patterns when the terrain changes. Marriages need good shock absorbers, the same as good cars.

Psychological Marriage
Ask an engaged couple “When are you getting married?” and they will give you a calendar date of the upcoming wedding. Ask a married couple, “When were you married?” and they (unless memory fails) will tell you something like June 14th or December 21st. Isn’t it interesting that in our everyday language we consider the wedding date to be the beginning of our marriage? What we mean to say when we asked “When were you married?” is “When was your wedding?”

The wedding is the legal ceremony that celebrates and sanctions the marriage. The wedding is an event. The marriage license is evidence of this event. However, marriage is not an event. Marriage is a wonderfully complex, multidimensional process. Marriage is a relationship that is formed and functions in multiple dimensions and on many levels over time.

To say then that marriage begins with the wedding is inaccurate. It is more helpful to view the marriage as having begun before the wedding. The wedding announces that which has already begun on a more private and subtle plane during dating, courtship, and engagement. And so psychological marriage, if you will, precedes legal marriage—that is, the wedding—and continues long after the wedding, with an obviously wide range of successes and failures.

For those of you who are married, that is those who have had a wedding, it can be a fun and useful exercise to ask yourself and your spouse not only when was your wedding,
but also how has your marriage developed psychologically? And, what are the dimensions of your marriage now, and what were they during the early years? How has your marriage changed? What was the terrain of the road? How have you handled the journey? Can you modify the marriage vehicle and road map a bit so that things will be even better?

In my work with the Marital Preparation Research Project at BYU, my colleagues and I have observed that there are two primary ways means through which we all seem to learn much of what we know about marriage. The first involves the learning of precepts about marriage. We learn these precepts directly through conversations, classes, life experiences, and the like from parents, church leaders, teachers, life experiences, counselors, and others. The second comes from patterning what we see in the examples of marriage that surround us. This patterning is usually subtle, coming from our conscious and unconscious observations of what to do in marriage, as well as what not to do when we marry. The process of precept guided patterning occurs throughout our premarital, and even marital, years.

Preparation for Marriage

In recent years, many churches, organizations, and government entities have offered an increasing number of premarital counseling services for couples who are approaching their wedding day. The good news is, prevention of marital problems is possible and realistic, and the risk factors for divorce can be reduced. Those preparing to marry or remarry are generally open to strengthening their relationships. National studies are showing that the majority of people, if they had known of premarital counseling and educational programs and resources, would have participated. This is not an assumption that people should participate in premarital counseling or education because they’re skill-deficit; in fact, most people have good skills. But everyone’s skills can be enhanced.

So how else can couples prepare themselves to travel down the road of marriage? While research indicates that there are many different issues couples face in their marriages, one at the top of almost all lists is enhanced communication skills, coupled with problem solving skills. Be clear about and work to clarify expectations. What are the expectations about being a husband or a wife, and what are your expectations about your spouse’s role as a wife or husband?

Our research has shown that counselors have identified the top five most frequent problems facing first marriages as being 1-unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse; 2-communication; 3-money management and finances; 4-decision making; 5-power struggles. Notice that four of these most frequent problems can be reduced or overcome by skill enhancement. The other problem, that of unrealistic expectations, can be overcome by knowing each other well and clarifying expectations before the wedding. That is to say, through clarification and the application of good communication skills.

So, develop means of handling finances, and discuss finances before and after the wedding. Deal with frustrations as they arise rather than burying them or having them build up and become resentments that can serve as a wedge in the relationship. Realize that you marry a family, not just an indi-
individual. In fact, as far as family members go, you will likely have more interaction over the years with brothers and sisters-in-law, than with your spouse’s parents.

Develop a shared spiritual core for your relationship. In the field of marriage and family therapy nationally, we’re finding that while spirituality used to be something that wasn’t talked about by counselors, now the climate is such that many counselors encourage couples to discuss spirituality, religious values and behaviors. Obtain information about sexuality before the wedding. Talk about your expectations in regard to the children that you may have. If you perceive more severe problems, seek professional counseling before the wedding.

Some states have legislated incentives for premarital education and counseling. For example, a reduction in the marriage license fee if the couple participated in premarital education or counseling. A number of years ago, a law was introduced in the Utah state legislature to implement some form of premarital education program throughout the state. During the debates that followed, a political cartoon appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune that distills some of the issues that swirl around this topic. (The bill ultimately failed to pass in the state senate.)

The debate over whether governments or churches should require such courses and programs will continue, but in the meantime, there are excellent marriage preparation resources available for those who would seek them. Often colleges and universities offer courses on preparing for marriage. There are many excellent books and articles. Browse through your library or bookstore. A new website that has excellent links to other websites dealing with marriage and preparation for marriages is www.foreverfamilies.net. There are premarital groups offered by professional counselors, which are not therapy groups but are educational groups. The online premarital site, RELATE, which stands for Relationship Evaluation, provides a 271-item inventory that couples can take online. They then receive a 19-page report that is designed to be self-interpretive (visit www.relate.byu.edu; there is a $10 fee).

More and more there are opportunities for those who value marriage to be involved in various ways. Almost 200 communities across the country have established community marriage policies advocating and providing premarital education as a means of increasing the mental and physical health for their citizens.

Mentor couples are involved, meeting with premarital and newlywed couples in discussions about marriage. Another website that can give you an idea of the many ways people can prepare for and enhance marriage is www.smartmarriages.com.

Now each couple, or each of you individually, has your story about the road to marriage or your hope for driving along that road. Get the best vehicle you can, with the accessories that you feel are important. Then read the map and enjoy the journey!

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**Required Marital Instruction?**

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