

Marriage Envy, Marriage Shame

Damned if you do/don't

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My husband John and I got married on the night of the living dead, Halloween 1998. It was an aptly harrowing choice, because marriage has been a somewhat scary adventure for me, although I'm still married, twelve years later.

I'd just moved back to Baltimore from New Haven, where I'd gotten a Ph.D. at Yale. My girlfriends and I in graduate school were mostly marriage skeptics or agnostics, perhaps because we'd imbibed an intellectual cocktail of Marxist feminism and the post-structuralist musings of Judith Butler concerning the performative nature of sex difference (don't ask). Whatever the reason, few women among my friends wanted to be boring old heterosexuals who endeavored to "do" conventional femininity, or marriage.

Instead, some of us inhabited a cultural hothouse where one could feel almost self-conscious or embarrassed for not being erotically outré, bisexual, or sufficiently queer. I make no claims that this was representative of America, circa 1992, or that it made sense; still, it was only a more exaggerated case of a larger northeastern trend toward "lesbian chic" and "gender-bending." You could be with the other sex, certainly—but ideally in some eccentric, sophisticated, or at least troubled way that subverted the assumptions of true love. We had a nebulous apprehension (on some level, doubtless correct) that the world and its Structures and Systems were always trying to trick us into false consciousness and, from there, into subjugation.

Marriage struck me as an intellectually rustic idea. The rejection of "cloying domesticity"—whatever I meant by that phrase—ranked high among my personal-advice mantras.

Now we were marrying anyway. Apparently marriage believed in us, even if we didn't believe in it. "As I'm sure you're aware," remarked one of these friends from Yale (who had just gotten married herself), "Halloween is the one date in the year, according to Celtic tradition, when time is suspended, and the boundary between living

and dead is considered porous. So you're not really getting married at all. How clever of you!"

My wedding was a cocktail party with a marriage attached. With my "I Can't Believe It's a Wedding!" wedding, I did my best to obscure the usual iconography, the visual evidence that I was Getting Married. I wore a silver dress, and we didn't have formal bridesmaids or groomsmen, just readings. We eschewed flowers in favor of an exuberant number of votive candles. A few of them, placed in bags, caught fire outside the Quaker meetinghouse where we held the ceremony, and my sister Carolyn had to stomp them out. "Ah, the smell of paper burning," she says. "It always reminds me of your wedding." We got married at the meetinghouse because it seemed the most cozy and informal option (and the least Officially Getting Married in its design). But because we weren't members of the meeting or marrying according to Quaker spec, we had to add a disclaimer at the bottom of the program: "This Is Not an Official Quaker Wedding."

I gave a toast to our reception guests that our marriage was the most elaborate ruse ever to get out of opening the door for trick-or-treaters.

But all this calculated eccentricity was itself one example of a larger marital fashion. For the past two years I've been writing a book about the ways that marriage may be evolving. In my research I've often heard the phrase "wedding industry," or the "wedding-industrial complex," from engaged couples disgusted by the relentless consumerism, if often overcome by it nonetheless. But this isn't an industry at all. An industry mass-produces the same homogeneous product according to the same assembly-line mechanical processes. Weddings today tend to do the opposite. Couples aspire to display their personalities, quirks, and passions, and their singular view of marriage.

In my day and in my circle of friends, the fashion was to have a wedding disguised as a happy hour or a rodeo and smuggle some vows in. Marriages ranged eclectically in their particulars. In one

memorable year the weddings I attended ranged from a Catholic high mass to a luau and pig roast to a weekend adobe-cookout affair where the bride wore a lovely sea-green beaded and sequined cocktail dress to her desert ceremony. Another friend had the hardest time finding a rabbi to perform a ceremony because she told the candidates she was planning on a big sushi buffet and an open bar for several hours before the vows. One rabbi worried, "But ... then you might be *drunk* by the ceremony!"

It's my hunch, to paraphrase a rule from evolutionary science, that the marriage recapitulates the wedding: the wedding ceremony is the germinal expression of the marriage and the wedding's assumptions are often amplified, happily or tragically, as the marriage unfolds. That certainly seems true in my case, as my ambivalent, halfhearted feeling toward the estate of marriage was symbolically obvious in the design of my ambivalent, halfhearted ceremony.

Naturally, then, wedding styles interested me as I was working on my book. As part of my informal research, I attended the 2008 Wedding Merchants Business Academy, held in Phoenix, Arizona. Each year the Academy brings together vendors who produce weddings (sometimes wearing headphones, like a techie backstage at a Broadway musical) or sell wedding-related goods and services. The wedding merchants are a well-groomed, pretty bunch. All the women here look like brides, and all the men sound like FM radio. Many of them promoted other things—Jell-O, Wal-Mart, prescription medications, to name a few—before switching to weddings.

I glean from my time at the Academy (and from other sources) that the incipient trend in 1998, toward ever more personalized and unique weddings, has only grown stronger over the last decade. The most interesting exchange at the convention takes place after a presentation by the renowned wedding consultant Lovelynn Jensen. Her talk is called "Capturing the Bride *You Want*." Decidedly unromantic hunting and predatory metaphors like this are, discordantly, fairly common at the Academy, since the business is so competitive. Jensen confirms that brides are "jumping out of the box these days.

They want to make the wedding their *own*, they want to make it *different*.” To illustrate her point, she bounds energetically among three mannequins dressed in wedding gowns symbolizing the three major brands of bride: the “modern bride,” the “edgy bride,” and the “vintage bride.”

It’s been a long day, and most of the wedding merchants slouch obediently if listlessly in their seats, exhausted by speeches intended to rouse them. But Jensen inspires a philosophical meditation in the audience about what exactly a wedding merchant is in the business of doing.

A wedding consultant in the audience says that she thinks of herself as a “wedding author. I write the bride’s story” in the reception and the details.

“Brides today are personalized,” another agrees (were they ever anything *but* “personalized,” to themselves at least?).

Wedding merchants are in the “*service* business, not the product business,” the next audience member enthusiastically concurs. “We sell emotion. We’re selling how the guest feels when they walk in, how the guest feels when they get a key chain” as a favor. Another wedding planner chimes in: “You must find out where the bride is emotionally and where she wants to end up emotionally,” because ultimately it’s all about “making the bride feel comfortable with herself. She’s buying *herself*” in the wedding, her dream identity of herself as bride and wife.

As wedding styles go, so go marriage styles and marriage contract law. As a wife you can have the “modern contract,” a pre-nuptial or postnuptial agreement, perhaps (these have soared in popularity over the last two decades, although rejected by judges in the 1950s as contrary to the public good); the “vintage contract” (a religious “covenant marriage,” for example, as offered in Louisiana and other states, setting strict limits on and preconditions for divorce); or the “edgy contract” (a same-sex marriage contract,

perhaps, as offered in Iowa and some New England states, or a “heterosexual licensed domestic partnership,” as offered in 50 cities and eight counties, a phrase that jarringly calls to my mind handgun ownership laws: “I’m licensed to be a heterosexual domestic partner in 10 states”). The legal momentum, although uneven and contested, is, as in wedding fashions, toward marital choice and the customizing of marriage with private meanings, obligations, and incentives around money, property, children, divorce, and other issues. The trend is to offer what one legal scholar describes as a “menu of marriage options,” as is already the case in Scandinavia, France, and New Zealand.

The wedding merchants have a point. A strange one, perhaps, but a point. We’re “marriage authors” as much as we’re wedding authors. As marriage becomes less imperative and more optional, each marriage—by which I mean each spouse, and the two of them, combined into a third entity altogether—is able to imagine itself as an author of its own private story, not an actor in a shared, common script. The customized marriage achieves in marriage law what the bride wants in her wedding: It seeks to be, in a word, unique.

This flight from marital orthodoxy to heterodoxy, you’d think, might support greater marital happiness, at least insofar as we have more freedom than our parents did not to marry, to imagine marriage in new ways, or to choose other options. And nothing’s to stop us from customizing and tweaking, and being truly “personalized” to ourselves in matrimony, even within the shell of traditional marriage.

It hasn’t necessarily worked out that way. The “happy marriage” makes for interesting dinner conversation. Ask people in their thirties, forties, or early fifties if they know really happily married couples of their own age. I set a modestly ambitious bar for them. I’m not asking for the blatant mythology of the married couple with “no problems,” but I am asking for a marriage that is something more sparkly than “stable” or “reasonably contented.” I’m asking for a marriage of their generation that they might actually *envy*.

Once, a wife declared herself extremely happily married, which was a warm and memorable moment for me. Usually, however, my companions crinkled their faces, thought for a minute before shaking their heads, no, not *really*. In casual conversation on the train a single man in his early forties allowed that theoretically he liked marriage. *Finally! A non-religious marriage defender!* But, he elaborated sweetly, “I wouldn’t want any of the marriages I see around me. *They* all suck.” Some of the people I canvassed hazarded more freewheeling, feisty critiques. I heard that marriage was “over-rated,” “stupid,” and something that “doesn’t make any sense.” The anti-marriage stance is like an emerging collective pivot, a predictable overcorrection to the often smug, often morally sanctimonious, often saccharine Ain’t Marriage Grand sentiment of the influential family-values discourse, among others.

I’m an envious person, and nothing stirs envy in me like that rare bunch of gaudily happy marriages that I catch in the peripheral vision of my life (although it may well be that, like “normal people,” the only truly enviable marriages are those that we don’t know too well). I see these husbands and wives laughing and engaging in crackling repartee in hip restaurants. They must go home and have berserk, rollicking, hanging-from-the-rafters sex—with each other, I mean.

The latest embarrassment is that my Marriage Envy has attached to geriatric couples, whose ancient marriages are handled gingerly, like relics, in the features sections of local newspapers: “Centenarian Couple Dismiss the Fuss Over Their 82-year-old Marriage,” headlines the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, illustrating the genre. “Both use wheelchairs now, so he carries a mechanical grabber to pick up anything she drops.”

During the 2008 presidential campaign I watched John McCain’s mother being interviewed on C-Span. A still-stunning dowager, Roberta McCain recounted tales of dances and parties with her handsome, dashing husband, and of their whirlwind courtship and elopement to Mexico.

I had Marriage Envy for a Republican presidential candidate’s ninety-one-year-old mother!

“What’s going on down there?” John shouted to me from the second floor, as I laughed at Roberta’s account of giving birth in time to make that week’s fun-loving Friday happy hour at the naval officers’ club.

“John McCain’s mother. I *love* her.”

“Hmmm ... creepy.”

I never thought I’d end up with Marriage Envy for my parents, either, but I’m not alone in this. As one of my friends observes, there’s little more dispiriting than the realization that your 60-plus parents may well have a better sex life than you do.

My parents, in their early eighties, have a successful, even frisky marriage. As they get older, they look out for each other and tend to each other graciously and subtly. They’re enjoying the rich dividends of a marriage with its own private, epic history. They attend a beautiful historic church in the gay district of downtown Baltimore and now champion, among many other causes, the ordination of lesbians into the ministry. They occasionally brunch on Sundays at locales favored by Baltimore’s hip gay population. My parents are cooler and more politically au courant than many twenty-five-year-olds.

One Sunday, a new member of the church approaches my mother and asks her, “Who’s that grey-haired man that you sit with?”—as if my octogenarian mother were engaged in an illicit courtship in the pews.

“That’s my husband of fifty-six years,” she responds, amused by the misunderstanding. She and my father still exude “new relationship energy.”

There’s a survivorship bias in my geriatric-Marriage Envy: Older marriages have, by definition, survived to *become* older marriages. But I suspect that there are other generational and cultural factors that make them the object of envy. Here are some of my parents’ secrets. They never planned on living so long; they had no better alternative to marriage in the 1950s, and they had low expectations.

“In our day,” my mother tells me, “you made your bed and lay in it.” Occasionally she tried to edify me. Whenever I discarded another nice young future son-in-law with a safely bland personality, she would chide, “There are worse things in life than being bored and unfulfilled.” Sometimes she’d add, “Honestly, you’re so *extreme*.”

My parents and the McCains wed in the heyday of the marriage consensus, when marriage with children was the norm and “everyone was pregnant,” as the late John Updike recalled in a *New Yorker* essay. Unlike the “personalizing” wedding trends today, my parents and their cohort married in obedience to orthodoxy and script. They gave out Jordan almonds wrapped into tulle sachets as favors and the brides wore white gowns and hid their faces behind veils. Weddings in the ’50s proudly displayed a bride and groom’s willingness to be submerged in a social role, and that was the whole point. The bride didn’t have to write a wedding script, she just had to *perform* successfully the one she was given.

There wasn’t a contingency that the *Vogue* guide to etiquette hadn’t choreographed. Use “a large silver cake knife decorated with a white satin ribbon” to cut the wedding cake. “With the groom’s right hand placed over the bride’s, the couple makes the first cut together, in the *bottom* tier of the cake.” Or let’s say you’re “a girl from North Dakota who has a job as social secretary to the wife of the American ambassador in an important Asian country.” It could happen. And let’s say you get engaged to a man in that very same *important* Asian country. “Under the circumstances,” *Vogue* instructs, “if the ambassador and his wife should offer to give [you] a wedding, it would be perfectly good form for [you] to accept.” That’s good to know.

These marriages enjoyed the humble consolation and perhaps, in fortunate circumstances, a sort of happiness, of being all in it together, following the same script.

Was that the source of my Marriage Envy for the pre-feminist era, then, the idea of having only one script to follow and not much choice? I mulled this question as I worked on my book, but concluded

that this was not really what I longed for. I don’t believe that the secret to an enviable marriage is to have no choice or freedom in the matter. The marriage consensus of my parents’ day could exact an unforgivable toll on the spirit, for women and men alike, and for those who resisted the heterosexual norms. “I hadn’t really wanted to marry at all,” remembers feminist writer Alix Kates Shulman of the early 1960s. “I wanted to make something of myself.... But I knew if I didn’t marry I would be sorry. Only freaks didn’t.” With the consolation of consensus often comes the oppression of conformity.

Although it’s not my view, some factions in marriage politics today would indeed favor a return to the marriage consensus that they attribute to a prelapsarian world before the 1960s. Marriages *were* better back then, they would tell me, when being single, living together, separating, or getting divorced weren’t so easily available. This “defense of marriage” is one part of the cultural milieu in which we do marriage today. For example, a loose confederation called the “marriage movement,” which first coalesced in 2000, wants to revive traditional marriage as a social consensus (many in the movement also want to combat same-sex marriage), and combat many of the attitudes evident from the Wedding Merchants Academy. Participants in the marriage movement question the trivializing, throw-away, consumer-choice mentality about it. They feel, as do many sociologists and historians, that marriage shifted from being primarily a social institution and obligation in the nineteenth century that fulfilled many roles, functions, and practical purposes, to becoming more of a romantic, sentimental pursuit of love and emotional fulfillment in the twentieth century.

In fact, the opposition to same-sex marriage should be contextualized, although it rarely is, within a broader campaign, anchored by the marriage movement, against what amount to liberal, secular, and humanist views of heterosexual, legally traditional marriage. These views include: a diminished distinction between “husbandly” and “wifely” roles in marriage, no-fault divorce law, cohabitation, non-procreative marriages, and the decline of spousal “interdependence,”

as one of the marriage movement's five goals describes it. In other words, as a matter of politics and policy, if you don't happen to be gay, but you are a liberal, then don't think that the same-sex marriage policy debate is irrelevant to you, or is relevant to your life only empathically as a matter of principle. They have something to say about your big, fat, straight marriage, too.

Around 2008, a decade into my marriage, I stared at a bit of the marriage movement's handiwork almost every day, for months. The billboard became visible about a mile up the road from the supermarket where I shop: *MARRIAGE WORKS*. The billboard featured a beaming, handsome African American couple in a tuxedo and a veiled white wedding gown. The couple was posed, and the billboard sited, so that they smirked down at me on their endless wedding day from sanctimonious heights. In the picture itself the husband hovered imperiously over his diminutive bride. The campaign was targeted at non-marrying, low-income Baltimoreans, but the newly-weds looked as if they should have been starring in a Viagra commercial set in South Beach. The billboard materialized overnight, jostling for roadside space with Burger King, Under Armour, and garishly tinted vitamin drinks. Use this product and you'll lose ten pounds; buy this shampoo and your scalp won't itch; get married and you'll look and live and dress like this, gorgeous and prosperous. The billboard's sponsors, apparently, didn't have too many qualms about promoting marriage as a sacred institution by advertising it on billboards, or on sooty city buses alongside ads for VD prevention and debt consolidation.

It wasn't long before graffiti artists vandalized the high sheen of the endless wedding day of the Couple from Central Casting. An anti-matrimonialist with a spray can scratched out *WORKS* and replaced it with *SUCKS*. Another slapped *GAY* across the chest of the beaming groom. The feisty emendations made me laugh, but the original message still peered through. I read it, almost every day, and it annoyed me but it pricked my conscience all the same. *MARRIAGE WORKS*.

By this time, I was living in a state of embarrassingly passive semi-happiness in marriage, and I am not the only spouse to find herself in this state. Semi-happy marriages became the more specific topic of my book. I'm not talking about the usual ups and downs of any long-term relationship, but a more brooding, ongoing shadow-box with the idea of marriage, and a more wrenching ambivalence about it. In semi-happy marriages, for example, the melancholy spouse spends an inordinate amount of time wondering if he or she should be married, and spends a large amount of energy reconstituting all the reasons and rationalizations for still being married, and arguing internally about whether or not this is good enough, even when the spouse has—as I do—a truly good and decent person as a spouse, who in no sense “deserves” to be divorced, and whom is still loved in many ways. Still, ambivalent spouses feel that important things are missing in these marriages, and it becomes harder over time for the ambivalent spouse to square the marriage with his or her own soulful yearnings.

Happy spouses who occasionally have problems do not find themselves awake habitually at 3 a.m., staring out the window and contemplating divorce.

And in these contemplations I did wonder what had happened to that marital subversive streak or that “unique,” radical spirit of doing marriage my own way that was so evident a decade earlier in our wedding? It was roughly around this time, and the time of the Billboard, that my surprising Marriage Envy for geriatric couples really grew. True, I had all the choices and freedom in the world, unlike those suddenly-enviable marriages like Roberta McCain's, but what had I done with them? I'd been stubbornly persistent, but ambivalent, in marriage, and I hadn't tried hard enough to shake up the comfortable status quo to make it better. I had to wonder why that was so.

I was interested to learn during my work on marriage that new divorce patterns in the United States tell a much larger story,

in which I am one data point, of marital persistence in American subcultures where we might have least expected it. Several states in the Bible belt, where traditional marriage is fervently supported in both politics and values, have a divorce rate almost 50 percent higher than the rest of the country. The mother ship of liberalism, Massachusetts, has the lowest divorce rate in the country; Oklahoma has the highest. There is also an unprecedented class divide in the U.S. marriage rate today, with the more affluent and better-educated marrying more, and more successfully, than less affluent and educated peers.

There are many reasons for these divorce trends, but insofar as values play into any of them, it seems that the values of the most secular, affluent, and educated support marital endurance better than the others. I may fall more on the *SUCKS* than the *WORKS* side of the equation (more snark, less sanctimony toward marriage); not all of us in the marriage-persevering classes are enraptured with the state of our semi-happy marriages, and a few of us may even suffer Marriage Envy, for geriatric couples, but ironically we are, in the aggregate, the Stick-It-Out faction of the twenty-first century. Being “pro-traditional marriage” isn’t our political stance but it is apparently our reality.

Then again, I’m not so sure that the pro-marriage message hasn’t worn me down over the years, and set a perimeter around my thoughts and imagination when it comes to marriage, even though it’s a message that has metastasized from the other side of the marriage culture war into my liberal soul. In some ways, I’ve come to feel that the “family values” campaign really did work, on me at least, much as I oppose it politically. Like other Americans in their forties today, I grew up in a disorienting moment. We spent our childhoods in the “divorce culture” of the 1970s (although my own family was an intact one, I was breathing the cultural air) which placed a high value on what now feel like the quaint matters of “self-discovery” and “personal fulfillment,” and we spent our adolescences in the divorce

backlash and family-values smackdown of the 1980s, which placed a high value on personal responsibility, sucking it up and sticking it out, and aspiring toward a heavily mythologized pre-feminist marriage and family life.

In my own case, each time I might contemplate doing something differently and maritally eccentric, or separating, or divorcing, a Greek chorus, assembled over years of pro-marriage cant, frets, mocks, chants, and advises in my head like ambient ethical Muzak. Its unwanted but persistent backbeat is, essentially, *MARRIAGE WORKS. DON’T DIVORCE*. My chorus changes, but has included conservative James Dobson of Focus on the Family, my parents, a generic pudgy white Southern Baptist minister seen glancingly on a Christian cable channel, acquaintances, and neighbors. Occasionally I cast members from my son’s carpool line. “What will *people think*?” This Greek chorus—being a chorus, after all—isn’t the most important character in my marriage, but it is a pervasive and inescapable one.

To me, marriage culture today feels like a hybrid offspring of the 1970s and the 1980s, of unprecedented choice overlaid with shame about divorcing, rewriting the rules of marriage, being less than contentedly married, or not marrying at all. That shame can weigh heavily.

My friend Jane writes to me one day to muse on the theme. She’s intrigued by the gap between what she astutely calls the “public and private faces” of marriage, and the “cover stories” that marriages craft for themselves. Jane is divorced from her second husband, and has one child. A close friend of hers has just confessed things about her marriage that she’d never intimated before. Apparently, the friend had eliminated all potential confidants for one reason or another, and went through the crisis alone.

“She doesn’t feel comfortable confiding in married women friends in her social circles, for fear the wife would tell the husband; she doesn’t feel comfortable telling her unattached or divorced friends, because she feels her problems might call attention to their [single] status; she

doesn't feel comfortable telling her siblings because she doesn't want to hurt her husband's stature in the family. I think it's a common plight," Jane says.

I agree. It's a common plight. The shame of confessing that you have a queasy marriage, even to family and friends, came up when I talked to people for my book.

"When my marriage was imploding," Jane continues, "I didn't tell anyone my stories. I didn't think my friends would understand; I was embarrassed by the story, in-law conflict, and flimsy cover-up by my ex. Looking back, perhaps there was a sense of shame that I'd chosen someone who turned out not to have the character he'd represented he'd had. I mean, bagging a marriage one year after you have a child, with a sleep-deprived mother, is pretty harsh." Jane's husband had been the one to leave, but the shame of marital failure attached to her, and she was more concerned about her reputation and her ex-husband's reputation than she was eager to seek support from confidants.

We *choose* to marry, after all, in a moment when we *do* have choices in the matter, and when the old marriage imperatives have faded. People don't want to make the wrong choices, or have to admit to it. Jane concludes, "If people had open marriages—open in the narrative sense—then more people would know just how bad other people's marriages really were." Jane imagines that that sort of candor might help us arrive at new social norms for marriage, or at least usefully crack open the "public faces" that shroud marriage. But after many years, perhaps the Kabuki shadow of a happy marriage can become almost as deeply cherished as a happy marriage itself.

Indirectly, the sources of my marital shame illuminated the sources of my Marriage Envy. I might feel the shame of marital eccentricity or failure today—just as my parents would have in the marriage-consensus heyday of the 1950s. However, I don't have the offsetting consolations of communal nonchalance that they enjoyed. Marriage was nonchalant for my parents in that it was assumed.

They had the consolation of a consensus, *esprit de corps* culture, where everybody was in it together, in the same boat with their happiness or their travails. For example, William Whyte's influential work, *The Organization Man*, described suburban cultures of the 1950s that were sources of conformity, exclusion, social judgment, and homogeneity—but also sources of "warmth," densely woven community networks, and steadfast social support.

Eventually, I realized that my occasional, unexpected outbursts of Marriage Envy for the pre-Betty Friedan housewife weren't a longing for an era of no freedom, or what some anti-feminists rue as the demise of "chivalry." Nor was it envy for an era with one marriage script to follow passively, at whatever cost to health, spirit, or soul. Some might indeed want that orthodoxy, or oppression, back, but I am not one of them. Instead, I long for something, perhaps, like a marital community.

By marital community I mean a place where at least judgment would co-exist with a broad feeling of lifestyle camaraderie or support. (You can find that today, certainly, in orthodox Jewish communities or in some conservative Christian congregations or communities, but I don't know of a secular, liberal, feminist-friendly version of that sensibility.) I have in mind a place where you don't do marriage and parenthood in isolation, to say nothing of doing it, as we sometimes do today, in a tacit spirit of what is perhaps best named "lifestyle competition" with our peers.

For examples of this lifestyle competition, you need look only as far as the infamous "motherhood wars," between stay-at-home and wage-earning wives, or to the many books and memoirs—often quite engaging—from a range of lifestyles that make "cases" almost juridically for or against marriage (whereas, in the 1950s, you'd no sooner see a book making *The Case for Marriage*—Linda Waite's 2000 work—than you'd see *The Case for Being Gainfully Employed*, or, *The Case for Not Being a Murderer*). Other works make The Case for or against divorce, or for or against single motherhood, or they make the "case," as Lori Gottlieb recently did, for marrying

“Mr. Good Enough.” Or think about the perfect-parenting anxiety and competition that Judith Warner documents and captures so vividly in her important work *Perfect Madness*: parents jockeying for advantages, comparing themselves remorselessly to other parents. These marriages, and parents, are decidedly not comrades in arms with each other. They are rivals. To paraphrase wisdom from the dating world, you’re not your marriage, but ambassadors for your marriage, the official representatives and defenders of your lifestyle decision.

It seems to me that we live in a moment that has conflicting impulses around marriage, one pushing toward historically unprecedented latitude and the freedom to be unique and “personalized”; another pushing toward shame and judgment, a continuation of the family-values revival that began in my youth. One moves into the twenty-first century, the other back to the nineteenth. The combination of the two impulses can make us lonelier in marriage, more restless about being married, given all the other choices out there, but also more timid about changing our marriages or even confessing to our marital misgivings. It has made me feel all three of those things at the same time. A husband whom I interviewed put my feelings perfectly: “In marriage and family,” he said, “we’re all in it together, in the same ocean. But we’re not in the same boat. We’re alone, in our own private boats.”