

Great expectations

By Stephanie Coontz

June 9, 2005

THE PROBLEM with modern marriage, according to conventional wisdom, is that today's couples don't make marriage their top priority and put their relationship above all else. As one of my students once wrote, "People nowadays don't respect the marriage vowels." Perhaps she meant IOU.

But my research on the history of marriage convinces me that people now place a higher value on marriage than ever before in history. In fact, that's a big part of the problem.

One reason marriage is fragile today is that we expect so much more of it than we used to, and many of our expectations are contradictory.

Most people recognize that marriage takes sacrifice, hard work and the ability to put up with the bad in your partner as well as the good.

But they also expect marriage to be the ultimate source of their happiness and the most fulfilling, passionate relationship in their lives.

When Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee "upgraded" his marriage vows on Valentine's Day before an audience of 5,000 enthusiastic marriage advocates, a banner reading "Passion Transformation Intimacy Oneness Covenant" summed up their case for marriage.

Unfortunately, people who expect to find passion, transformation, intimacy and oneness in their marriages often end up disappointed in their covenant, and the higher their expectations, the greater their disappointment.

Europeans and Americans used to view marriage as a work relationship in which passion took second place to practicality and intimacy never interfered with male authority. As that view of marriage has changed over the past 100 years, the divorce rate has risen steadily.

For most of history, people had modest expectations of marital happiness. The upper classes of Europe in the Middle Ages, who arranged their marriages for political and economic gain, believed that true love and passion could only exist outside marriage, in an adulterous affair.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, conventional wisdom among middle-class men was that the kind of woman you'd want for a wife was incapable of sexual passion. One marital advice expert even wrote that frigidity was a virtue to be cultivated in women. When wives wrote about their husbands in diaries, they were much less likely to describe intimate conversations than to record a persistent feeling of loneliness. A successful marriage was more often based on resigned acceptance than on transformation.

In the early 20th century, people came to expect marriage to be based on love, sexual attraction and personal fulfillment. But women often settled for less because of their economic dependence on men.

As late as the 1960s, polls found that nearly three-fourths of college women said they would marry a man they didn't love if he met their other criteria. In the 1970s, the working-class women interviewed by psychologist Lillian Rubin defined a good husband in terms that had little to do with intimacy or passion. "He's a steady worker; he doesn't drink; he doesn't hit me. That's a lot more than my mother had."

Today, by contrast, the desire for a "soul mate" is nearly universal. Eighty percent of women say it's more important to have a husband they can confide in than one who earns a good living. And more than two-thirds of men say they want a more rounded relationship with their wife than their father had with their mother, one marked by passion, intellectual equality, intimacy and shared interests.

Recognizing the potential for disillusion in such high hopes, some people counsel couples to tamp down their expectations of personal fulfillment and happiness. Certainly, anyone who expects each day with his or her spouse to be filled with passion, joy and transcendent oneness will be disappointed a lot of the time.

But having spent many years researching the low-expectation marriages of the past, I don't think high expectations are such a bad thing. True, they raise the risk of disappointment and disillusionment when one or both partners refuse to work on problems in the relationship. But they also motivate many people to put more energy into their relationships than couples did in centuries past.

When a marriage works well today, it works better than anyone in the past ever dared to dream. When it doesn't work well, people have more options to leave. And when people have doubts about their future, they have the option not to marry at all.

We may not always approve of the choices that people make and the relations they aspire to. But in marriage, as in politics, that is the price of democracy. People have the right to change their minds. We cannot foreclose people's choices and tamp down their aspirations without losing most of the things that make modern marriage so rewarding.

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