

## **Divorce, Family & Children: Some Perspectives from “The Trenches”**

The other day I drove past a billboard. It was advertising divorces for “The low price of \$200.00.” It was situated near billboards for alcohol, an injury attorney, and a popular television show, and didn’t exactly jump out in any special way. And it was similar to ones I have seen before. But for some reason it hit me this time, this idea that divorce is literally for sale. I had never before thought of it in that light. But there it was, a divorce, on sale, right next to beer, ambulance chasing and television. What a strange concept, I thought to myself, that we would make divorces a product. And it got me to thinking that many people, when looking at such a sign, must ask themselves, perhaps subconsciously: Does marriage really matter to Americans any more? Is divorce really a big deal? Does it really hurt kids that much if everyone seems to be doing it and it is so easy to get? Have we begun to simply see divorce as a right of passage, like graduating from high school or something? Are we ready as a society ready to get rid of marriage altogether, and just avoid all this drama?

The idea of marriage has always had its critics, and always will. However, seeing that divorce has become a cheap, easy thing to do, I had to wonder if the idea of marriage as a valuable social institution is falling out of favor. In other words, has marriage, like divorce, become...well, cheap? To some people, it would appear that is the case. But I think marriage deserves a lot of respect as an institution, especially when we are talking about children and parenting, so I wanted to take this opportunity to make the case for marriage in a way that I hope helps people see its value in a new light.

### **Why Marriage Needs to Be Defended**

In this country, we often hear public figures talk about marriage in very vague terms, describing it as the foundation of society, the backbone of our culture, and so on. But I think these types of unclear, lofty descriptions are not sufficient to make a case for marriage in modern America, especially to today’s youth, who are most skeptical of all. That is not a reflection on today’s youth; on the contrary, it is a reflection on those who have been trying to defend marriage, because clearly they are not connecting the way they need to. They are not selling marriage on its merits, but are often simply appealing to tradition, religious dogma, and fear of change, when they make their cases for marriage. This cannot continue - at least not if we want to see marriage remain a respected institution, which I for one do wish to see happen.

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Now, don't get me wrong; I am not saying that tradition, religion, or even fear are completely invalid per se. I am simply saying that appealing to such things so exclusively is not the best move, because doing so means we are basically telling people "because we said so" when they ask what is so great about marriage.

### **So...What Is So Great About Marriage?**

I suspect one of the reasons many of the more prominent marriage defenders run into problems is because they frankly don't have much to say that resonates outside of their own communities. But there are many reasons to support marriage beyond relatively weak claims to religion, tradition, and so on, all that deserve a fair hearing - many of which are vital to healthy children. I will share 3 big ones that I have learned along the way.

#### **Marriage (done right) creates vital family boundaries**

All relationships are defined by boundaries. Boundaries allow us to know who is in and who is out of a relationship. While that may sound elementary, the fact is that belonging to a family where you know who is in and who is out - otherwise known as stability - is vital to developing an understanding of social norms that ultimately we must understand if we wish to be a success in life. This is so because family is where we learn the rudiments of these social norms in an emotionally safe place, and the more stable that setting is, the more likely we are to learn these lessons deeply and meaningfully. Think of family as a sort of "socially laboratory" where we learn how to communicate with others, how to treat them, how to deal with the give and take of everyday life, how to manage differences of feeling and opinion with others, and so on. If founded upon a marriage with stability and a reasonable measure of unity, a family has clear lines of who is in and who is out, which helps that learning proceed effectively by letting kids know that relationships are best when we do not have the "option" of simply leaving when the going gets tough. If divorce occurs, many of those valuable lessons of life become subject to deep doubt, if not outright rejection, because those relationships begin to be seen as temporary. And naturally, if a relationship isn't going to last, one has to wonder if it is worth making it of a high quality.

Please know that I'm not saying that divorce is automatically going to "mess up" things for a child, but I will say it increases the risk dramatically. Like it or not, when divorce occurs that literally means splitting up a family, and when children are involved, they are forced to begin seeing relationships as temporary, subject

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to recall, and something not to be depended on. The ripple effects of those “lessons” can be enormous.

### **Marriage promotes micro- and macro-economic efficiency**

Simply put, economics is based on the idea that supply matches demand, which means that what people want and are willing to pay for drives the production of those goods by companies on a growing scale until everyone satisfies their demands. Generally speaking, supply and demand match one another pretty well. But there are ways to achieve the same level of satisfaction of demands with fewer goods, thus allowing people to get the same amount of comfort and enjoyment with more efficiency. This is called economies of scale. In essence, this is just a fancy phrase for sharing. But it has huge impacts, as any couple who gets married can attest to. By living together and sharing incomes, housing, and so on, couples help to decrease the supply being demanded while still enjoying the same level of satisfaction.

This may seem like simple common sense on the small scale, but on the large scale, this has enormous impacts that cannot be ignored. For example, some recent studies have found that the rise in divorce over the past generation or two has in fact contributed to environmental problems due to increased demand for and consumption of every day goods because of the simple fact that a divorced couple is no longer going to live in one home and must produce more income to achieve the same level of material satisfaction as a result. And while many divorce remarry, many do not, and many who do remarry end up again getting divorced. So the higher the divorce rate, the more money and goods are not being shared, the less efficient we are being, both on the micro and on the macro scale. In this day and age, anything that helps us conserve is worth looking into, and lowering our divorce rate is clearly something that can help.

### **Marriage facilitates healthy social development & learning**

Children are in a constant state of learning. They are like sponges, sucking up information around them with apparent ease. But this is not inevitable; learning requires a certain kind of environment, one characterized by support, love, safety, and happiness. Without these characteristics, a child cannot focus on learning and instead gets focused on emotional survival. Marriage is often the best way to avoid such problems and to provide an appropriate environment for learning. Can an unmarried couple provide all those things? Of course, but not in quite the same way and not with the same level of certainty. Though I have met unmarried couples who are deeply committed and who are able to provide for their children

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in every way just as well as a married couple, they are in the extreme minority. The fact is that being unmarried means most couples are living in a state of relationship limbo that affects a child's sense of security and safety, and thus their ability to learn and grow.

If you don't believe me that unmarried couples have a different level of commitment, I submit as evidence the interesting phenomenon that usually occurs when a couple who has been together unmarried for years decides to get married. Often their marriage creates tension and leads to a divorce shortly afterwards, despite years of cohabitation. This is usually because all along one of the partners liked the idea of having an "out," the feeling that since they weren't committed to one another officially, they could play by a different set of rules. There was always this feeling that sure, they're together, but if things get bad enough they could leave. Marriage caused them to be held to a higher standard of commitment, and not surprisingly, when "real" commitment and accountability entered the picture, they folded.

Like it or not, kids pick up on these subtleties; maybe not explicitly, but at least subconsciously. It's very subtle and nuanced, but still powerful. They may not be able to articulate it, but they know when a mother and father are not really committed. It's a feeling in the air; maybe it can't be pinpointed, but you metaphorically "breathe it in" all the same. And just imagine what it means to a child to know that one or both of their parents is holding onto a "get out of jail free card" in the form of a lack of real commitment. In such a situation, I have often found that children struggle more than one might suspect. It matters, knowing that your family is not a "done deal."

### **Marriage facilitates natural healthy bonding between parents and children**

Human beings are biologically created by a male and female, and their involvement in the child's development are demanded by nature itself. We know that this even holds for species beyond our own. And the more similar a species is to us, the more likely they are to have child-rearing habits and instincts like ours. So while marriage may not be in our DNA, the relationships that our DNA require for our natural development are supported by marriage in a way that no other social institution can match. All the philosophical arguing in the world cannot undo the simple reality that we are social animals with social needs, and that one of them is the need for nurturing by the parents who came together to create us. Denying a child of a strong bond between parents is to deny them of their most

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innate, fundamental needs. They'll survive, but not as easily. It is a disadvantage to them to be raised without a set of committed, loving parents.

### **The Bottom Line**

More can be said but only so much can be said in this forum. My goal is simply to try and connect the idea of marriage to the real needs of children, not just to amorphous religious and social ideals. I have no problem with those ideals, but until we begin really teaching ourselves and our children the value of long-term commitment, we will continue to find that people are opting out of participating in this important institution, either through divorce or through avoiding marriage in the first place. I think that trend needs to be reversed, and for good reasons. I am not saying we should tell people they have to get married nor that they cannot get divorced; I simply want us to see it for what it is, to take it very, very seriously, and to make sure we do not take the choice to marry lightly. Because in the end, we simply cannot keep doing what we are doing. We are only hurting ourselves, our children, and our communities. And I for one want the hurting to stop.

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