

Alternatives to Marriage Update

Quarterly Newsletter of the Alternatives to Marriage Project

Winter 2006-2007

“FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR”

WE can all expect to have conversations with people who are thinking about marriage. What do we say to them? This issue of Update suggests three provocative conversation starters: Does getting married mean you'll live longer? What is the subtext of your wedding presents? Will your marriage be a financial partnership, or an eternal commitment?

This issue also recognizes the hundreds of people whose contributions made 2006 a banner year for AtMP. I am so grateful for what each of you has given! I envision a society where each person and family is fully and equally valued, regardless of being single, coupled, or married. You are essential to achieving this vision!

Meet an AtMP Board Member

MARK NEIL

MARK Neil became the first Midwesterner on AtMP's Board of Directors in 2005. Mark is an estate-planning attorney in Chicago - his interest in AtMP arises out of his legal practice.

Over the years, Mark has represented hundreds of couples in unmarried relationships. He has been struck by the disparate treatment afforded unmarried couples when contrasted to married couples. All unmarried relationships, whether same-sex or different-sex, are disadvantaged when it comes to estate and gift tax treatment.

When either partner in an unmarried couple relationship dies, an estate tax is payable if the assets exceed the exempt amount. But, no matter how much money is involved, no estate tax is due for married couples when the first spouse dies if a properly structured estate plan is in place. Transfers between married couples are never subject to gift tax; but transfers between unmarried couples can be subject to gift tax. In keeping with AtMP's mission, Mark advocates that all couples, married or unmarried, should be treated equally in terms of gift and estate taxation.

Mark's practice also focuses on cohabitation agreements. Like married couples, unmarried couples fall in love, move in together, commingle their financial affairs to some extent (which may even include working in the same busi-

ness together), and sometimes split up.

The law does not provide a default provision for an equitable division of assets when unmarried couples break up the way it does for married couples who divorce. Hence, a partner who has split up may have to litigate for years to enforce an equitable division of property. For that reason, Mark is a staunch advocate of cohabitation agreements for all unmarried couples who live together. Because of his interest and expertise in this area, Mark wrote *Planning for Unmarried Couples*, a book for lawyers published by the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education



Mark Neil

in 2006.

Mark lives in the culturally and sexually diverse Edgewater neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. His two adult children, David and Deanna, as well as his grandson, Elijah, live in New York City.

AtMP's Board of Directors is growing! If you are passionate about improving conditions for all unmarried people... if you can spare at least one hour per week... if you are good at "virtual" team work (a mix of independent efforts, two-way conversations, and group discussion via e-mail and phone) then we encourage you to apply! You can read more and download an application at www.unmarried.org/boardinfo.html.

OPINION

Single vs. Married – Who Really Lives Longer?

BY BELLA DEPAULO

“ATTENTION, single people: stay single and die!” Headlines around the nation trumpeted this “finding,” based on a study that appeared in the September 2006 issue of the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. The articles claimed that single people simply will not live as long as married people, or even divorced or widowed people. Reading the original research report, I discovered that the actual findings looked nothing like the publicized ones.

In fact, I've spent the last few years researching claims that people who dare to stay single will be doomed to lives that are nasty, brutish, and short. I always read the original research, and I rarely find that the results are as extreme as the reporting. Single people seem to be fair game these days, the targets of inaccurate media reports that promote hurtful stereotypes.

Good science can be the antidote to bad stereotypes. Here is the truth about the latest study.

The recent longevity study addressed this question: In a sample of Americans 19 and older, who was most likely to die between 1989 and 1997? Media stories reported the following: Compared to people who were married, divorced people were 27% more likely to die, widowed people were 39% more likely, and people who had always been single were 58% more likely. Those sound like meaningful differences among the varieties of unmarried people. They are not. The article in the epidemiology journal concedes that the differences are not statistically significant.

The study reported death rates from different causes, and one of those results truly was striking. People who were single had a 499% greater risk of death from infectious diseases than people who were married. That was for men and women of all ages. The finding was even more stunning for ever-single men between

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the ages of 19 and 44: They were 908% more likely to die of infectious diseases between 1989 and 1997 than were those who were married. What do you think is the more plausible explanation for this finding – that many men were dying because they stayed single or because they had AIDS?

If you are still not sure, consider this. Staying single did not bode ill for the men who had already made it to age 65 by 1989. They were no more likely to die by 1997 (regardless of the cause) than were the men who were married.

The 499% greater risk of death from infectious diseases for all ever-single adults (men and women) got averaged in with the death rates from all other causes to produce the widely touted “finding” of the early demise of people who stay single.

Infectious diseases, though, only accounted for about 3% of all deaths in the study. Cardiovascular disease was the biggest killer, but people who had always

been single were no more likely to die from it than were people who had been widowed. Cancer was the second most deadly disease; single people were no more likely than anyone to die from it. (If I were to ignore statistical significance, I would say that they were less likely than anyone, including married people, to die from cancer.)

So far, then, here’s what the study really did find. In the eight-year period, there were no meaningful differences in the death rates of Americans who were divorced, widowed, or had always been single. The people who were married in 1989 did have a slightly greater chance of making it to 1997, in part because so few of them died of infectious diseases.

But would those married people really end up living the long lives that the headlines suggested? The study ended in 1997, but their lives did not. Going forward, a sizable number of them would divorce. Then their death rate would be the same as that of the other divorced people. What about the married people who never do divorce? Setting aside those who die at the same instant as their spouse, half will become widowed. Then they, too, will have the about same odds of dying early as the other unmarried people. Getting married, then, does not seem to be the key to living a long life.

Studies that excerpt just a slice of people’s lives are not the best barometers of the likely length of those lives. More convincing evidence comes from investigations that follow people throughout the course of their lives. Probably the longest-running examination of longevity is the Terman Life-Cycle Study that began in 1921. It was a relatively small study, with 1,528 select eleven-year olds at the outset. That said, the results are noteworthy. Two groups were tied for first place in the longevity sweepstakes. One was composed of people who were consistently married. Did they live longer because they got married? No. People who got married and then divorced did not live as long, regardless of whether they remarried. Does that mean you need to get married and stay married to have the best chances of living a long life?

Time to introduce the other group who lived the longest: People who stayed single for life.

Bella DePaulo (Ph.D., Harvard) is a Visiting Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Bella is a contributor to the Huffington Post, and her op-ed essays have appeared in papers such as The New York Times and Newsday.

BOOK WATCH



BELLA DePaulo is an active member of AtMP’s e-mail listserv. Her new book, *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, explains many misrepresented findings about being single versus married. It gets high praise from our colleague at Unmarried America, Thomas F. Coleman: “It’s time for America to become acquainted with its new ‘unmarried majority.’ *Singled Out* debunks myths and stereotypes about single people and lays the groundwork for social, political, and economic change – change that is long overdue in government policies and business practices.”

OPINION

Wedding Gifts – Imagine the Alternatives!

BY JACLYN GELLER

Because I am a junior professor, you can typically find me in my office, staring at to-do lists and worrying about money.

Picture my office in West Hartford, Connecticut: there’s a computer, an overstuffed filing cabinet, and dozens of reference books. Two large bulletin boards display an assortment of personal and professional documents: my course syllabi, an academic calendar, pictures of my favorite authors: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Alexander Pope, Mary Wollstonecraft, Robert Frost. Next to a quote from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (“A lady’s Imagination is very rapid: it jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony, in a moment.”) is a list of names scribbled in black ink on lined white paper: Adam and Karen. Jimmy and Susan. Paul and Laura. David and Suzanne.

The Couples To Whom I Owe Wedding Gifts. I have attended their weddings and

should purchase gifts for them when I can afford to do so.

Today I am struck by a delightful, practical, subversive idea. It’s the logical conclusion of writing a book, getting an overwhelming response, making a great discovery, and attending lots of weddings. Let me share my thought process with you.

My past few years have been intense and gratifying. I completed my doctoral thesis on the subject of eighteenth-century British marriage satire. I began to question, privately, the ideals that underpin such cultural practices as bridal showers, bachelor parties, lavish wedding celebrations, and honeymoons. I met a like-minded editor at a pro-choice event, and we spent the evening sharing our dismay at our culture’s widespread and seemingly univocal celebration of heterosexual marriage. A book contract quickly followed. In 2001, I published *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Wed-*

dings, and the Marriage Mystique, a satiric commentary/feminist analysis of the big white wedding phenomenon in America.

The book enjoyed a small print run. My editor, Kathryn Belden, and I felt that the academic nature of the writing, as well as the book's critical position on marriage, would limit it to a small audience.

We were wrong. Although sales were modest, *Here Comes the Bride* was a Barnes and Noble selected nonfiction title for 2001 and was posted online by Dial-a-Book in its Publishers' Weekly Program. It was reviewed widely and featured in national magazines and periodicals. I was startled to be invited to speak on National Public Radio and to be interviewed on local radio and television programs. It seemed there was a hunger to hear someone take a shot at the seemingly invulnerable wedding industry and all that it stands for.

Among other things, the wedding industry mandates that we give gifts to marrying couples who are already swimming in stuff. I have watched many of the people in my life couple off and become engaged. Most say they are marrying to have children; others say that they have fallen in love or feel the need to make a commitment. All describe the decision in highly personal terms – terms that, I think, elide a significant political reality: when a couple marries, its members receive serious material rewards. A trapdoor opens and money and housewares fall through. For the accidentally or deliberately unmarried there is no trapdoor: no linens, cookware, china, and cash.

In Jane Austen's day – late eighteenth-century England – the financial rewards of wedlock were palpable. As her novels demonstrate, unmarried female poverty was a great incentive to wedlock: a woman's "imagination" could be engaged by the dual fantasy of a solvent home and the prince charming who provided that abode. In early twenty-first century America, when the cost of living is at an unprecedented high, marital entitlement is a powerful incentive to sexual conformity. And when we purchase bridal shower presents and wedding gifts on cue, often for those to whom we are not particularly close, we perpetuate this system of reward and punishment, supporting a recession-proof, \$70-billion-a-year industry.

Because of my book and media appearances, I received grateful letters and e-mails from around the country. Reading these missives, six years later, is still an emotional experience for me.



Jackyn Geller

A young married woman from Westerville, Ohio, wrote, sadly, "I wanted children and to be a teacher at a time when unmarried mothers still had difficulty in that field. And I had a wedding to please my mother." A male, Washington, DC-based nonprofit administrator wrote, "This pressure to couple and live happily ever after is no less noxious than racism or homophobia...but unlike those isms, it goes largely unchecked." A graduate of Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, wrote and characterized her alma mater as "more of a marriage factory than a school." She described the marriage-pressure as so intense that graduating female seniors who lack fiancés sometimes purchase their own cheap diamond rings and fabricate nonexistent engagements. She concluded, describing her own partner, "As much as I love him, I will not marry him."

It seemed that I had hit the tip of an enormous iceberg. There were myriad men and women throughout the country who were questioning, challenging, critiquing, opposing, or working to drastically reform, the institution of marriage.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

PEOPLE who are planning a wedding or commitment ceremony can encourage gift-givers to donate in honor of the event. They can even register for donations to AtMP at these Web sites:

<http://www.justgive.org/weddings/index.jsp>

<http://www.felicite.com>

<http://www.IDoFoundation.org>

But was there an organization that served as a clearinghouse for these efforts?

One of the most exciting responses to my book was an e-mail from Marshall Miller and Dorian Solot, introducing themselves and inviting me to become part of the Alternatives to Marriage Project.

I was thrilled to discover AtMP. Its very existence signals a change in the air.

While our present government seems determined to anesthetize Americans into a nostalgic stupor, the American household is diversifying. There are those who choose to live monogamously with a single partner but who do not want the government's seal of approval on their sexual activity with that partner. Others opt for rich, celibate lives, others for non-monogamous partnerships, others for the option of living communally with friends. With ever-increasing life expectancies, it is possible to desire different setups at different phases of one's life, without being locked into the "until death do us part" contract, and without suffering the stigmatization and financial penalties of breaking this contract. The Alternatives to Marriage Project represents all of these choices; it gives each of these individuals a voice.

I glance, once again, at the list of names on my bulletin board: Adam and Karen. Jimmy and Susan. Paul and Laura. David and Suzanne. All of these people have well-outfitted homes: none needs a set of wine glasses or a food processor or a soup tureen. But if any of the children of these unions are non-monogamous, unconventionally partnered, or nonpartnered, they will need the Alternatives to Marriage Project to lobby for them.

Perhaps, instead of buying a pot, pan, or part of a place setting, the best way to honor today's weddings is to write a check to AtMP. That way I could extend a tangible gift while remaining true to my political principles.

I suggest this as a substitute to the familiar and timeworn custom of purchasing wedding gifts for friends, coworkers, and family members. Those who are more financially able might provide matching funds: a \$100 place setting for the bride and groom, and a \$100 check to the Alternatives to Marriage Project, in the couple's name. Diverting funds from the wedding industry to AtMP, we contribute to a better future.

Jackyn Geller teaches Restoration and eighteenth-century literature in the English department at Central Connecticut State University.

BOOK REVIEW

Eternity Commitment – Buy But Beware!

BY BARRY HALE

“WHEN the love is gone in a marriage – all that remains is the money and possessions.”

This bleak yet fitting description of marriage/divorce appears on page 65 of Todd I. Stephenson’s *Eternity Commitment: The 21st Century Alternative to Marriage*, which proposes a kind of legal “firewall” between the personal bond of marriage and the financial assets of the partners in order to avoid the more painful consequences of divorce. I’m using the term “marriage/divorce” to emphasize Stephenson’s best point: our culture is now saddled with a two-headed beast of a social arrangement that badly needs to be overhauled. I recommend *Eternity Commitment* for its useful factual information and valuable techniques. However, readers should be prepared to labor through these 142 pages, which I mentally divided into two parts: “The Reign of Terror” followed by “The Fine Print.”

Summarizing the first six chapters of Stephenson’s work – “The Reign of Terror”—was remarkably difficult. After a brief two-chapter warm up, the book launches into an intense, episodic, buffet of statistics, commentary, and anecdotes, painting a devastating portrait of a deeply troubled marriage/divorce system that I found a bit too effective. Just seven pages into the third chapter I felt that I was being assaulted by the intensity of the writing. For example, after relating the advice of a business professor that business partnerships should be avoided whenever possible and making a pretty decent analogy with marriage, Stephenson then feels compelled to add (pg. 27) “Ask yourself again, why is a business/financial partnership necessary for a marriage? The answer is—IT IS NOT NECESSARY! In fact it is detrimental,” to which I mentally responded “OK, OK, I get it!”

After working through two chapters of this, the concise, elegant quote beginning this review stood out vividly, immediately prompting the question “Where did the love go?” Knowing that the odds for marital success are slightly worse than the outcome of coin flips, the question “Why is the commitment ‘eternal’?” occurred, followed almost immediately by the question “Where did the love come from?”

I think that a nice initial exploration of my questions is given by the excerpt

“The Radical Idea of Marrying for Love” from the book *Marriage, A History*, by Stephanie Coontz of Evergreen State College (<http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/books/marriage/chapter1.htm>). Professor Coontz begins by quoting George Bernard Shaw’s description of marriage as “... an institution that brings together two people ‘under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions. They are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.’”

Coontz ends her chapter by observing “About two centuries ago Western Europe and North America developed a whole set of new values about the way to organize marriage and sexuality ... Individuals want marriage to meet most of their needs for intimacy and affection and all their needs for sex.

“Never before in history had societies thought that such a set of high expectations about marriage was either realistic or desirable. Although many Europeans and Americans found tremendous joy in building their relationships around these values, the adoption of these unprecedented goals for marriage had unanticipated and revolutionary consequences that have since come to threaten the stability of the entire institution.”

Stephenson almost does too good a job painting a despairing picture of marriage/divorce, making the system seem so hopeless that no solution can help. I think he might have made a better case for *Eternity Commitments* with a more considered examination of marriage. As they stand, the first six chapters are a double-barreled rhetorical shotgun fired point blank into the mind of the reader for the purpose of ... well ... selling *Eternity Commitments*.

Which brings us to the last three chapters of the book that I call “The Fine Print,” that outline the details of the *Eternity Commitment* concept and sounds good initially but then cautions (pp. 88, 90)

“The steps to having an *Eternity Commitment* are remarkably similar to those of marriage with a few notable exceptions ... Do not use the word ‘married’

or ‘marriage’ in any descriptions of the relationship or ceremony. ... After the *Eternity Commitment* ceremony and reception it remains important that you do not portray your relationship as ‘marriage.’ Use the term ‘engaged!’” making me think “Uh-oh ...” A more alarming prospect is that the safeguards of the *Eternity Commitment* plan could be undone by its being seen as a common law marriage. Page 94 advises “All fifty states are different and an attorney will advise you of the specific actions you must take to avoid the pitfalls of common law marriage or palimony.” Let the buyer of *Eternity Commitments* beware (*please see <http://unmarried.org/common.html> for AtMP’s fact sheet on common law marriage.*)

A more telling commentary came from a recently divorced friend who I asked to take a look at the *Eternity Commitment*

Web site (<http://www.eternitycommitment.com>). Her response was “It seems like a nice idea, but what’s the point?” because the concept doesn’t address methods for strengthening or sus-

taining the commitment in order to avoid breakups.

Despite of all the perceived shortcomings of this scheme, I was shocked to find myself recommending this book! In his drive to make his case Stephenson does an excellent job of providing loads of useful factual information, especially his citation (pg. 19) of the CDC’s very detailed divorce study (“First Marriage Dissolution, Divorce, and Remarriage: United States”, Matthew D. Bramlett, Ph.D., et al; CDC Advance Data; No. 323, May 31, 2001) and the use of Joint Tenants with Rights of Survivorship agreements to share home ownership (pg. 95). I particularly appreciate his heavy use of online citations that can be checked quickly. By taking the advice in *Eternity Commitments* with a very large grain of salt, readers may find valuable techniques for softening the blow of—in the words of the CDC study—“marriage disruption.”

Barry Hale lives in Hyattsville, MD. He is a fundraiser for Progressive Maryland, (advocates on economic issues for working families), and volunteers with Voices for Quality Care, (advocates for nursing home reform).



ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

In 2006, over 200 people donated nearly \$36,000 to the Alternatives to Marriage Project; AtMP also earned almost \$2,900 by selling books and merchandise. These revenues covered all of AtMP's operating expenses (salary, printing, postage, credit card processing fees, etc.) How do we accomplish so much on such a small budget? Over 100 people donated critical services including accounting, event planning, research, layout, speaking to the media, writing, and Web design. Our heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you!

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LOCAL ACTIVISTS STATE THE CASE

Arizona voters defeated a constitutional amendment that would have stripped rights from unmarried people while preventing same-sex couples from marrying. The outcome demonstrates that all unmarried people have shared interests and are potent political actors. AtMP sent weekly e-mail alerts to activists in AZ. Their feedback included: “It helped me talk to my friends.” “The

action alerts were useful and well-designed; I forwarded them to a friend who has more time and he wrote a letter to the editor.” To support our activists on the ground, five volunteers in New York telephoned AtMP members in six states, reminding them to get out and vote. One member said “Your call clued me in – I was so confused!”

ATMP IN THE MEDIA

TV: MSNBC, WABC-TV local San Francisco, WNBC-TV local NYC; radio: CNN, National Public Radio’s “Justice Talking”, WPHT (PA), 570 WKBN (Ohio Fox affiliate), KOPT (Washington Air America affiliate), Sirius’s “Wake up with Cosmo”: print: USA Today, Newsweek, Washington Times, Pittsburgh Tribune, Sacramento Bee, Roanoke Times, PortFolio Weekly (Virginia), Salt Lake Tribune, National Catholic Register, Columbia Journalism Service

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