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TOO MUCH TOO LONG: THE STATE OF MODERN MARRIAGE

Written by Emily Hourican

***‘And the handsome prince and beautiful princess got married, and lived happily ever after.
The end.’***

Well, perhaps they did. Or didn't. Either way, the fairy stories were never keen to go there and find out. In stories, everything stops at the wedding ceremony, probably on the basis that the lives of married people are rather dull, and anyway, what could possibly go wrong now that the princess has bagged her man and been saved from whatever horrible fate awaited her as a single woman – dragon, ugly prince, shut up in tall tower, and so on?

And back when the stories were being written, the prince and princess were probably married for 10-15 years before death came along and did them part. Within the marriage, he had his role, she had hers and their expectations of each other were reassuringly limited, even transactional. Safety and status for heirs and housekeeping, basically.

Fast-forward to now, and you could be talking 40-60 years for a marriage, easily. On top of that, factor in the rather modern expectation that every day should be a magical journey of romance and discovery with your Significant Other, who is supposed to complete you in every way – friend, lover, confidant, provider, co-parent, companion – and it is clear that marriage is in a spot of trouble. This is the point at which ‘ever after’ becomes something ponderous, possibly problematic. Because how is it possible to stay in love for that long? Or to remain the same person one's beloved fell for? Why would you even want to? No one can be all things to one person, certainly not for 50 or 60 years, and embarking on a relationship expecting this is like wearing a big sign on your back saying ‘kick me’.

Yes, marriage is in trouble, again, and a whole raft of commentators are starting to describe it as bankrupt, irrelevant and undesirable. Everyone from Julie Burchill (obviously) to Alain de Botton (Sophistically), are questioning our favourite institution, even asking whether adultery is in fact the answer rather than the antagonist.

Now, this happens periodically – I mean, weren't we supposed to do away with the whole thing in the '60s, man? – and somehow marriage survives. No matter how many times the

last rites are read, the dust then settles and it remains by far the most popular arrangement for couples to live together and have children. The divorce rate – long lamented for its steady upwards creep – is declining in the UK and US, and will undoubtedly start to do so here once we all get used to the notion of having it but not using it, like an exercise bike or home solarium.

So is something actually different this time? Or is it just window-dressing? Will traditional marriage finally sink beneath the combined weight of too much expectancy and too long a run?

Bernadette Ryan, a relationships counsellor and psychotherapist who works with Relationships Ireland, has begun to see, in the last year or so, far more middle-aged couples coming to her for help. “They have been married for a long time. Now, the kids are gone, issues that were subdued in the years of raising children are coming to the surface, and they facing each other across this chasm.” In another age, they would either have died, or accepted their lot – the great empty space of a marriage where love has vanished and child-rearing is finished. These days, they are far more likely to consider the Al and Tipper Gore route, who recently divorced after 40 years. There was no affair, no specific moment of betrayal, no drama. Just two people who fell out of love and believed there was enough life ahead of them to search for better.

Looking around, they will see Baby Boomers everywhere making similar choices. Mick Jagger is 69, Charlotte Rampling and Helen Mirren are 67, Jane Birkin 66. Life, clearly, no longer ends at 50. Now, it’s all about empowerment and personal fulfillment, regardless of age. So what if they’re nearly 70, they still want Adventure. Excitement. And Hot Sex.

“We come to marriage with huge expectations,” Bernadette points out. “We project all this stuff onto the person we fall in love with – it’s a narcissistic sort of love, someone who will reflect back all the things we want in life – and to some degree we need to do that in order to fall in love. But then, come to mid-life, and those projections start to fall away. We see our partner more clearly, and maybe with feet of clay. That can put a strain on marriage.”

Adventure, excitement and hot sex may be the quest, but divorce is not necessarily the answer. We’ve seen enough of it by now to know that it is traumatic, particularly where children are involved, and expensive. It is also unnecessarily blunt – like taking a sledgehammer to a window catch that is a little stiff. So is there a better answer for couples who don’t hate each other, may still feel profound love, but are frankly bored. Stale. Daunted

by the prospect of 60-odd years of fidelity.

For Louise Van der Velde, aka the Pleasure Professor, the solution is an obvious one. “Everything else around us in life is changing and moving forward, but marriage, in the model we know it, isn’t. People don’t even know where they got the idea of one, monogamous marriage from, but they are sticking with it. And it’s making them unhappy. We are brain-washed from the earliest age to believe in happily-ever-after. Prince Charming on a big white horse. But it isn’t working. Marriage needs to change and move with the times.”

Louise, who is also ambassador for Ashley Madison, one of the largest extra-marital dating websites (tellingly, free for women), advocates having affairs as a positive way out of the possible **impasse** of an over-long married life. “In a traditional marriage you are limiting your options, but in life I believe you should never make choices that limit your options. Before, people weren’t ready to accept that anyone could fall in love twice, get married for a second time. We have adjusted to that in our beliefs, and we can do the same thing with the concept of affairs. In fact,” she insists, “some relationships are saved through having them.” The stats – as far as they go (and remember these are figures drawn from women who have actively sought an affair) – are 57 % of AshleyMadison.com's female UK members feel that their affair makes it easier for them to stay in their marriage, while 32 % say they have better sex with their spouse since having an affair.

Louise’s attitude is part sensible decency – “why should someone be guilty of one misdemeanor, of sharing their love with someone else, and everything has to end? Their relationship, their family life?” – and part slightly New Age idealism.

In Louise’s ideal world, marriage would begin with a vow of unconditional love – “I agree to love you unconditionally, to honour your choices. And if they want to be with someone else, you accept that.” As for how their being with someone else makes you feel? “You are responsible for your own emotions,” says Louise, with perhaps a little disingenuity. “They aren’t responsible for your emotions. Instead of saying ‘you cause me pain, jealousy,’ you need to realise that you are **choosing** to feel those things, and can choose not to.”

Now, Louise’s views aren’t generally popular – a piece she ran in a UK paper attracted some pretty vitriolic comment, everything from ‘How incredibly deluded!!’ through to some rather vile misogyny. However, in her defense, she has lived it as she tells it, and from the position that most of us instinctively identify with – that of ‘wronged’ wife. The widow of a GP, she had been married for five years when her husband told her he was seeing someone else. “I

was upset, hurt, I felt betrayed. But I cleared that, I used techniques I learned through modern psychology and holistic therapy to clear my emotions. I realised, ‘why should I chose to feel unworthy or inadequate?’” And so she accepted her husband’s affair, and made peace with it. “We got married with those unconditional vows, and had I five years of faithfulness with my husband. We ended up having an open marriage, and I didn’t have any fear of that. I recognised it for what it was. It is selfish to want to own somebody and posses them, forsaking all others.”

Louise is certain that “give it 20 years,” and her way – the way of the open, mindful, loving relationship – will be widely accepted. “You make your own choices, but you make them mindfully. I’m not willy-nilly jumping into bed with just anyone. I’ve slept with six people in ten years, but if someone comes along that you have a real attraction to, sex is very beautiful.”

As for children, and where they fit into the world of the open relationship, Louise rightly says that, “the most important thing is that you love them, that they feel loved and honoured, no matter what kind of relationship their parents are in.”

Unpopular her views may currently be, but Louise is far from alone. Catherine Hakim – she of the ***Erotic Capital*** controversy – is on the same bandwagon, although her perspective is more intellectual, less personal. “How can we still take the crushing old rules of fidelity, that turn marriage into a prison, for granted? Why should we not be able to recapture the heady thrills of youth, while protecting a secure home life?” she asks, calling for a redrawing of the rules of marriage for the 21st century. “Sex is no more a moral issue than eating a good meal. The fact that we eat most meals at home with spouses and partners does not preclude eating out in restaurants to sample different cuisines and ambiances, with friends or colleagues.”

Poor old fidelity, eh? No more, no less, than a choice of eating venue.

Now, there is every possibility that both Louise and Catherine are right – that the future of marriage is something less exclusive. After all, we have travelled a long way in 50-odd years – from heterosexual marriages, no divorce, virgin brides and the complete social disgrace of sex outside marriage – but can we go the extra few yards?

Certainly I’m not dismissing the open relationship out of hand. It worked for Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, and for Edna St. Vincent Millay, who had a long, open affair with poet George Dillon during her marriage to Eugen Boissevain. Angelina Jolie has said she doubts ‘fidelity is absolutely essential for a relationship ... Neither Brad nor I have ever claimed that

living together means to be chained together. We make sure that we never restrict each other.” While Will and Jada Smith seem to have accommodated the possibility of other attractions within their marriage. They may have broken up recently, but hey, they lasted longer than many Hollywood romances. Charlie Sheen, Mo’nique, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, have all refused to equate sexual exclusivity with love, finding ways to create relationships based on more than monogamy.

And plenty of ordinary people have managed it too. The idea is a good one – tolerant, enlightened, generous. However, most of us aren’t sufficiently tolerant, enlightened and generous to actually make it work. If we were, there would be more of it. After all, we’ve tried this before – back in the ‘70s – and it didn’t really catch on. The baby boomers, those who got married in the 1960s and 70s, are the generation with the highest divorce rate in history.

If anything, my generation, those hitting 40 and above, are a most conventional lot. Overwhelmingly involved in traditional, monogamous marriages, and determined to stick with them. We are more conservative, politically and socially, than our parents. We are also more materialistic – divorce is expensive, maintaining two households costs more than maintaining one. But, given that the average age for divorce in Ireland is 48, and for affairs is it 45 for women and 55 for men, we could just be standing on the edge of a giant precipice.

And we could also be having our cake and eating it. The enormous rise in numbers signing on to extra-marital dating websites would suggest as much.

And crucially, these are not advocating openness at all. Rather, they are promising secrecy. The secrecy of hooking up with someone else who has as much to lose as you do, and the protection that brings. So instead of getting it on with someone single, who might try and break up your marriage, make anonymous calls to your wife/ husband, insist on seeing you on Christmas Day, lurk outside your kids’ schools or any of the other possible complications, you are dealing with someone equally keen to stay out of sight. Extra-marital sex, yes, maybe, but open relationship, no.

And there is a big difference. A secret affair requires an awful lot of lying. And even if you can square the notion of seeking excitement outside marriage, on the basis that you will be a better wife/ husband for it, it is hard to make peace with the endless lies. Only a sociopath can compartmentalise so well that they can remain unmoved by the constant, small betrayals. The sex won’t kill you, but the secrecy might.

Another problem with the idea that having affairs actually saves marriages is, who gets to decide that? By definition, the one having the affairs. Otherwise it's not a secret, see? So that person makes a choice for their partner on the rather patronising basis that 'I will be a happier and more relaxed person if I'm getting my kicks with Sarah-from-down-the-road, or John-from-accounts. I would never do anything to threaten the stability of our marriage. This is a win-win situation.' It is not a decision I would care to have made for me. We all hope we could forgive one stupid mistake, a night of drunken ill-judgement, but an actual decision, a role-play in which your part has been written for you and read out by someone else? No thanks.

After all, 'Home is where the heart is.' But if the heart has been taken out of it, has been given to a hot 30-year-old with a taste for Portuguese wines and no stretch marks, what's left? A sterile house where two people share physical space and the burden of child-rearing, but no intimacy?

At this point, enter **les Français**! Sigh. You can't go for very long in a conversation about marriage and adultery, without have the French model flung in your face. This is another of the things they are apparently so good at – "In France an affair is dubbed an **aventure**, free of insinuations of betrayal. It is estimated that a quarter of men and women are enjoying casual flings and affairs at any one time," says Catherine Hakim excitedly. And the Japanese, and the Finns, and the Russians, and the Chinese. And so on. All living civilised lives whereby marriage is one thing, sex another, each treated with respect and accorded its rightful place. Where affairs are discreetly conducted and tolerated. Everyone gets to be married and have their bit on the side. Everyone is happy and no one gets divorced.

And there is some truth in it. These nations have lower divorce rates than the Anglo-Saxon world, which is so hung-up on the notion of fidelity that it becomes a deal-breaker, getting the baby chucked out with the bathwater.

Clearly, fidelity is cultural, like eating frogs legs or jumping into icy water. But love isn't. The French and Italians may be more cynical about love than we are, but they still believe in it. Everyone does. All the world's in love with love. There is something in the human psyche hard-wired to seek it out. According to Eithne Bacuzzi, a psychosexual therapist and relationships counsellor XXX for 20 years, "we have an in-built need to find that one other person who we can relate to, who gets who we are, who wants to be with us for all the bad and good that we are. We need to find that person, to share something with them." We don't just want love because we like the shiny glitter of the romantic ideal. We want it because, for

most of us, this is how we thrive, this is how the best of us comes to be, and the bringing up of children is best accomplished. There are other models, but this one works for most of us. We know this, and we want it.

On a professional level, Eithne is not buying the line about ‘affairs are harmless, can even help a marriage’ at all. “I’m a sex therapist as well, so it does often come into the room for me. I think affairs have such a devastating effect. I’ve seen the aftermath of relationships where an affair has happened. Rebuilding trust is very hard. An affair destroys some sort of a bond that people have with a person who is their friend first. Because even when the sex diminishes, there is intimacy. A full acceptance of who you are, somewhere that you can be you.”

Maybe more importantly, “the kicks are short-lived in my professional experience. I’ve talked to so many people who have said ‘what on earth was that for?’ A night of highs, the buzz of feeling desired, but what does it achieve?” Put like that, it sounds a bit like holing up in a hotel room with a bag of coke and a rolled-up twenty. “Affairs don’t solve anything. They are about filling a void. They are about someone saying, ‘I don’t feel at ease with myself. I’m not desired, appreciated, I was feeling lonely, pushed out.’ Often, the affair is masking something else.

A lot of affairs are about the fun, the excitement, the glamour. A relationship is about mortgage, children, shopping, bins. A person who has no responsibilities towards you, that is a very sexual attractive thing.

And so, even if it does work for the French, we should not be complacent about fidelity, or work from the assumption that only ‘wretched love rats’ stray and cheat. Staying faithful to one person for anything like the span of an average marriage is a remarkable achievement, a triumph of kindness and civilisation over raw instinct and short-term excitement.

If the time comes that we can all enter open relationships with a clear heart and head, we will know we have reached a state of enlightenment.

Til then, if we fail, we fail. But let us at least aspire.

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