

# HOLY UNHAPPINESS

*God, Goodness, and the Myth of the Blessed Life*

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New York • Nashville

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## CHAPTER 2

# MARRIAGE

*(Marry the Love of Your Life)*

Five years after my wedding, I found myself sitting alone on a couch in the office of our marriage counselor. The room was chilly from the air conditioner, and I was covered in goosebumps. Pastel landscape paintings lined the walls and a little stuffed Winnie the Pooh toy sat on a bookshelf next to psychology textbooks and various publications on family systems theories and childhood trauma.

Pooh and the counselor stared at me, waiting for me to speak. I'd sought a private session with the counselor, dissatisfied with the progress we were making in the sessions where Tim was present. I thought I'd catch the counselor alone, give her the real scoop on what was happening between Tim and me, win her to my side, make her my ally.

I began to dish, telling her all of Tim's shortcomings, outlining with my very impressive vocabulary the various transgressions and offenses. I made my case, allowed the tears to trickle pitifully

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from my eyes. She nodded and blinked at me. Pooh grimaced. I waited for her impassioned affirmation of my righteous indignation at Tim.

“I see,” she said.

Ha! *She sees!*

“Well, Amanda, it seems like the solution here is for you to maybe...find some good girl friends? You know, develop relationships with other people who can help meet some of your relational and emotional needs.”

My face flushed. She couldn't be serious. “Oh, I *have friends*,” I retorted back. I looked to Pooh, who now seemed strangely ambivalent. The counselor smiled coolly back at me as if to say, “I bet you do.”

I broke out in a sweat despite the chill. In that moment, it sounded like she was giving up on Tim, abandoning any hope that my marriage could be happy. I was furious. I was paying her to fix my marriage, to fix Tim! What kind of solution was this? Make more friends? What good could friends possibly do when your relationship with the person who was supposed to be the love of your life was on the rocks?

I left her office in a huff and never went back. Breaking up with your marriage counselor when you are tempted to break up with your husband was a new low.

*Ce*

Scholars have struggled to determine the exact function and meaning of marriage throughout history. It is difficult to state with certainty how and why the practice of male and female unions first

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emerged in the prehistoric era. Was it primarily a way to organize the division of labor between men and women? Was it a system for regulating sexuality or “legitimizing” children? Did it serve as a mechanism for the redistribution of resources to dependents? Or was it all of the above?<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the case may be, throughout most of history, love or romance was rarely ever the primary reason a man and woman wed. Marriages have typically been arranged by parents or guardians. Social, political, and financial advantages were the main considerations, not the affection that existed—or did not exist—between the couple. For royal, aristocratic, and upper-class society, a favorable marriage was a way of gaining influence, consolidating power, and acquiring wealth. For peasants and the working class, a strategic match was a way of building a secure workforce within the home and community. Marriage was not the business of two people. It was the business of an entire web of social affiliations.

It’s not that people from the past did not enjoy a good love story. Passion and romance weave their way through ancient dramas, mythology, ballads, and folktales. Historian Stephanie Coontz writes, “People have always loved a love story. But for most of the past our ancestors did not try to live in one.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, couples were often warned against the dangers of love in marriage. Affection between husbands and wives was seen as a potential threat to the social order provided by the union. In ancient China, for example, it was believed that if a husband had too much fondness for his wife, he might choose her interests over the interests of his parents, who expected to maintain control over his time and labor. In ancient India, falling in love before marriage was seen as deeply disruptive. Agrarian and plebeian cultures

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throughout the ages have often scoffed at marital intimacy because an affectionate husband and wife might retreat inward and neglect the wider web of social support.<sup>3</sup>

So what happened? How did romantic love become the catalyst for marriage and the most revered form of love in society?

It was a slow process. Some trace the change back to the Protestant Reformation. Contesting the Catholic Church's exaltation of the priesthood and celibacy, Martin Luther declared that Christians in all stations of life and in every vocation could honor God as effectively as any minister or monastic. He and other Reformers began writing and preaching about the value of marriage, describing it not as an inferior calling but rather as God's best for both men and women.<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic Church, of course, pushed back. "If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema," declared the Council of Trent in 1563.<sup>5</sup>

But the Council could not stop the tide of history. Times were changing and there were other forces at work in favor of love. The growth of wage labor meant that young people were less dependent on the economic life force of the extended family structure. People could leave the farm, as it were, and venture out on their own. Individuals increasingly had the freedom and ability to make their own choice of marriage partner based on tastes and personal preference.

Popular novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries began exploring the domestic lives of ordinary people and the sweetness of love shared between husband and wife.<sup>6</sup> Leaders of the Enlightenment preached the value of "the pursuit of happiness."

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Why not seek happiness within marriage? These slow but steady changes in society eventually “shifted the basis of marriage from sharing tasks to sharing feelings,” writes Coontz. “The older view that wives and husbands were work mates gave way to [the] idea that they were soul mates.”<sup>7</sup>

Husbands and wives—particularly those in the middle and upper classes—continued to grow in independence from the network of neighbors and extended family. New couples would often move to a new community or new city, far away from relatives, and start fresh. The nuclear family—husband, wife, and children in a single household—gradually became the building block of society.<sup>8</sup>

As love, rather than politics and economics, became the basis for marriage, the tide of public opinion began to turn regarding divorce. If falling in love was a good enough reason to marry, then falling out of love was a good enough reason to divorce. Many people started thinking it was immoral to remain in a loveless marriage. Throughout the 1800s, divorce laws began to loosen, and by the mid-1900s most Western countries had passed laws that allowed divorce due simply to irreconcilable differences.<sup>9</sup>

These days many of our expectations surrounding marriage are derived less from the Bible and more from *Leave It to Beaver*. The postwar era of the 1950s and '60s was considered the golden age of marriage. The instability of the Great Depression and World War II likely drove people toward the stability of marriage. People were marrying at young ages and—with rising life expectancy—were staying married longer. Writes Coontz:

In this unique period in Western history, marriage provided the context for just about every piece of most people's

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lives. Marriage was how practically everyone embarked on his or her “real” life. It was the institution that moved you through life’s stages. And it was where you expected to be when your life ended.<sup>10</sup>

Singleness became an increasingly marginalized status. In a 1957 survey in the United States, four out of five respondents indicated that they believed people who preferred to remain single were “sick,” “neurotic,” or “immoral.”<sup>11</sup> Participation in monasteries and convents, which traditionally were establishments where celibates could experience lifelong communal commitment, has continued to decline, with the number of nuns in the United States dropping by 72.5 percent since the mid-1960s.<sup>12</sup> Today, as the definition of traditional marriage has been challenged and people increasingly opt to cohabitate before tying the knot, many people still believe that a romantic partner is the most important relationship in life.

These days, we still love a good love story, but we fancy ourselves the main characters. Our radical individualism has converged with our romantic idealism. Finding the love of your life is the linchpin of a happy life. Romantic partnership is the ultimate form of self-expression and self-actualization—the way we feel most seen and validated in this world. We build every expectation of a blessed future on the foundation of a contented nuclear family. Our spouse is our confidant, kindred spirit, lover, and soulmate. They are our happily ever after.



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