



# MARRIED TO THE FUTURE

A healthy society depends on strengthening the modern family, says an opposition member of parliament

**KEVIN ANDREWS**

The most recent social science research reveals that couples whose marriages are established on intense levels of romantic bliss are likelier to divorce than those who have a more practical view of their relationship

IN *Man's Search for Meaning*, his 1959 reflection on survival in Nazi concentration camps, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl relates how one day, when stumbling along a muddy road with other prisoners, a chance comment from a fellow prisoner about their wives sparked a crucial insight.

"Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The sal-

vation of man is through love and in love."

The yearning in every human heart to be loved and accepted has been written about by philosophers and thinkers, and poets and balladeers throughout history. It is this love that brings many people to marriage; and, through marriage, that they hope to find happiness.

As Thomas Jefferson's memorable words in the American Declaration of Independence tell us, the "pursuit of happiness" is the aspiration of millions of people, including every person who enters into an intimate relationship.

In contemporary intimate relationships, however, it seems our understanding of happiness has been hollowed out by a reliance on romantic love and the quest for instant gratification. When the romance fades, or the gratification is insufficient, many become bored and restless for new pursuits. It is like we need a greater level of stimulation these days to be "happy".

Despite the allure of the novel, this has not resulted in greater



happiness for many people. For millions, including many children, the opposite has been the consequence. Survey after survey shows that faithfulness, commitment and companionship in sharing life together are the central aspirations of married couples. These things are at the very core of a vision for marriage as a state of unconditional love, forgiveness and reconciliation, and service between spouses.

Indeed, the most recent social science research reveals that couples whose marriages are established on intense levels of romantic bliss are more likely to divorce than those who have a more practical and realistic view of their relationship.

It is not that romance is not important. It is necessary, but insufficient, to hold together the long-lasting marriage to which individuals aspire.

According to American academic and psychologist Blaine Fowers, writing in his book *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness*, "the romantic approach to marriage" is one of the great tragedies of our time. It has been "in many ways, a noble and exciting experiment, but we now know that it has failed, and we must find another way to strengthen this vital institution".

He is not alone in questioning the dominant approach to marriage today. *The New York Times* writer Tara Parker-Pope observed in 2010: "While the early euphoria of a new marriage does drop, that doesn't mean we have become less happy with each other or less happy in life. It just means that as individuals, we aren't dependent on marriage as a main source of life happiness. And people who get married are typically happy people to start with, and marriage doesn't change that."

In the past, simple things like a walk in the park, or a Sunday drive, were considered pleasurable and

relationship building. In a world of instant communications and global connections through the internet, Facebook, Twitter, SMS and the like, we can at once "connect" to more people, yet remain distant from them.

The paradox of modern communication, as explored by Stephen Marche in his article "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?", in the May issue of *The Atlantic*, is that many people are living in isolation from each other at a time when connection has never been more accessible. Yet connection, which is celebrated in modern technology, and pursued in romantic love, is not the same thing as a bond.

Many observers have noted that as marriage has declined as an institution, its symbolic importance has increased. Says Fowers: "Our deep desire for a happy marriage leads to a strange situation in which marriage is both more valued and more fragile than ever before."

Engagement rituals, including the proposal, and seeking the permission of the bride's father for marriage, are still cherished by many modern couples. Ironically, while the marriage rate has declined over recent decades, the wedding has become an increasingly gala function, sometimes extending to a series of events over one or more days.

Prior to the global financial crisis, it was reported that the average cost of a wedding in the US was \$36,000, similar to the average of \$39,000 in Australia.

But affluence and the pursuit of individualistic goals do not necessarily bode well for marriage and family relationships. The 2001 study *Materialism and its Relationship to Life Satisfaction*, by scholars at Perth's Murdoch University, found a negative relationship between commitment to materialistic goals and the cultivation

of satisfactory domestic relationships: "High materialists place possession acquisition foremost in their value hierarchy, ahead of many other values such as family and interpersonal relationships."

In a 2007 study exploring the transition from cohabitation to marriage, *Some Reasons People Choose to Marry*, Annie Dennis observes that "the social achievement of attaining marriage has increased the significance of the wedding ceremony itself as an individual achievement".

This accords with the prediction of Andrew Cherlin, professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University in the US, that in future marriage will hold a highly valued, distinguished place rather than being just one relationship among many, but the process towards achievement of marriage will be a long one, often involving prior cohabitation and childbearing.

American demographer Charles Murray, in his groundbreaking book *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010*, released this year, proposes a simple definition of happiness: "Lasting and justified satisfaction with life as a whole."

This might stand in stark contrast to the cult of instant gratification that is celebrated in the entertainment industry and held up as an ideal, but it corresponds with the experience of most parents, who know the joys and challenges of raising children.

Marriage as an institution has an irreplaceable social dimension in the nurturing and socialising of children, by providing them with the economic resources and extended family networks of mutual support and protection. It is in marriage that children have the best chance to experience the domestic virtues, based on respect for human life and dignity, and learn to practise them in under-





standing, patience and mutual encouragement and forgiveness.

Aristotle observed more than 2000 years ago that if children do not love their parents and family members, they would love no one but themselves. The stability and love provided in families is central to the socialisation of individuals.

Martin Luther King, in a speech in New York in 1965, concurred: "The institution of the family is decisive in determining not only if a person has the capacity to love another individual but in the larger sense whether he is capable of loving . . . The whole of society rests on this foundation for stability, understanding and social peace."

There is much to celebrate about family life today. There is a renewed recognition that both mothers and fathers play an important role in the lives of their children. There is often a more equitable division of household labour, allowing both parents to contribute to family life and the wider community. There are more opportunities for marriage and parenting education and enrichment programs.

It also appears that marriage promotes engagement with society. According to a 2002 survey of civic contributions in the US,

married people vote in disproportionately higher numbers than their percentage of the adult population. Married adults "were 1.3 times more likely than unmarried adults to have volunteered, and married adults averaged 1.4 times more volunteer hours than unmarried individuals". Parents were also found to be almost twice as likely as childless adults to volunteer for charitable activities.

After controlling for economic circumstances, scholars from University of California, Los Angeles, and Tulane University in New Orleans found in 2002 that "children in single-parent families engage in fewer activities with their parents" and that "single-parent family structure is associated with fewer links between parents and social circles of children". According to the research, this also related to poorer school performance.

Conversely, "the disintegration of particular institutions (i.e. churches, families, and schools)" results in communities in which antisocial behaviour, including violence, are much more common. Using the British Crime Survey, criminologists from Northwestern University concluded in 2003 that family disruption predicted both the emergence of unsuper-

vised peer groups in neighbourhoods and a decline in civic involvement.

An Australian study of approximately 2500 residents of suburban Adelaide in 2005 noted that marital status was positively indirectly associated with informal networks. The married were more likely to socialise with friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues, and receive more practical, emotional and financial support from others. The advantages extended to quality of life and mental health.

There is a growing belief that marriage leads to happy, healthy and prosperous societies. How we preserve marriage — against the cultural and economic pressures that threaten to overwhelm it — as the foundation of healthy family life and the protective institution for children will determine the health and longevity of the critical institutions of the Western liberal experiment. The future of individuals, families, communities and nations is tied to the outcome.

*Edited extract from Maybe "I Do": Modern Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness, by Kevin Andrews, published today (Connor Court Publishing, \$34.95).*

## WHAT MAKES MARRIAGE WORK

♥ Create experiences in your life to replace intense passion, which naturally fades with time

♥ Create security for one another. Eliminate any sense of threat. We are inclined to stay in relationships when we feel understood, validated and cared for

♥ Spend time together. Intimate partners benefit from knowing what is going on in one another's lives

♥ Find ways to open rather than

close lines of communication. Be polite. Apologise when you make a mistake

♥ Think well of your partner. Give them the benefit of the doubt

♥ Learn how to talk about difficult issues. They will arise

♥ Disclose your thoughts and feelings to your partner. Listen

♥ Recognise that your partner is a unique and distinct person, trying to make a go of life just like you are

*Extracted from Maybe "I Do": Modern Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness, sourced from Intimate Relationships by Benjamin R. Karney and Thomas N. Bradbury*





Father of five and opposition spokesman for families Kevin Andrews, above, now the author of *Maybe 'I Do': Modern Marriage and the Pursuit of Happiness*; and with his wife, Margaret, and the couple's son Benjamin and daughter Emily earlier in the year

