

Marriage in America: Romance and Child Rearing

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A recent issue of Time Magazine has a cover article on Marriage by Caitlin Flanagan, "Why Marriage Matters." July 13, 2009, pp. 45-49. In this article Flanagan wails against the impermanence of modern marriage in America with its almost casual acceptance of divorce and the unfortunate effect this ease of exit has on the children. She cites several modern studies that reveal the negative impact of single parent families on the development of children, one of the more interesting being in the area of educational success where children of two parent families of lower economic class status do better than those of single parent families of middle class status.

Flanagan highlights the conflict between the expectations of romantic love and the social requirements of child rearing. Marriage based on romantic love creates the expectation that the romance will persist throughout the relationship - "Till death do us part." When this expectation is not fulfilled for either party, interest shifts elsewhere to achieve the benefits of romantic involvement, and divorce is often the result of the consequent infidelity. Child rearing to meet the stability and guidance needs of children and the surrounding society requires commitment for the long term, beyond the bounds of most commitments to romantic fidelity.

Flanagan has no answer for the dilemma except to suggest that greater attention and emphasis on the importance of child rearing needs to be part of the picture in committing to marriage in America. While Flanagan identifies the sociological basis of marriage in the need for society to assure the effective rearing of offspring, she does not take the next logical step. If she looked cross-culturally at the history of marriage and the family, she would discover that in most cultures marriage is not based on romantic love, at least not based on romantic love more or less exclusively. In most cultures, marriages are either arranged by families or highly influenced by factors other than the romantic attraction of the two prospective partners. Attraction may be a component, but it is most often not the most important consideration. As a result, the partners do not enter these marriages with expectations that romantic love will necessarily pervade, maybe not even be present. The primary commitment is to child rearing and the contribution the progeny make to the larger family unit, clan and community. Romantic attachment may arise or be present to some extent at the outset, but it does not drive expectations. In this setting, infidelity is often accepted or tolerated, at least for the male, and multiple wives may even be an

option. Divorce is rare in this societal set up, the rearing of children is much more secure, and apart from modern western civilization, this set up has been the norm through most of human existence.

So, if Flanagan wants to offer a resolution for the conflict she identifies in the marriage culture of modern American, she can appeal to human history and recommend arranged marriage where the potential partners at least have some input as to the attraction factor, but where romantic love and all the expectations that accompany it are assigned to secondary status and located in the periphery.

Of course, marriages based on romantic love that survive long-term can be the most satisfying, but such marriages are usually dependent for their longevity as much on quality communication, honesty, and growing together as they are on sex and “romance.” And effective communication, honesty and growing together may even be easier in the arranged marriage situation where romantic expectations do not necessarily “cloud” the relationship.