

Is Marriage Obsolete?

By [Heather Havrilesky](#)

I recently watched *Planet Earth II* with my family, and the footage of various animals waiting not so patiently for their mates to return to the proper rendezvous point in order to make sweet marital bird love or regurgitate a little fish smoothie into crying-baby throats was enough to send a chill down my spine. *This penguin dad is seriously inept at scaling wave-tossed rocks and at locating his lady in a million-strong crowd of other penguin ladies screeching at the moon together*, I found myself thinking. *Does her screeching have the faintest hint of burgeoning contempt to it, or am I just imagining that?* Later, as a seabird's baby mama took her sweet time showing up at their appointed meeting spot, I nervously wondered if she'd wandered off with a more dashing seabird and left her endearingly devoted mate in the dust. (Okay, he did have a bad habit of nodding and pecking in a faintly insecure, unattractive way.) You could see the enormous misunderstandings in play: "You do know that I almost got pulverized against the rocks diving for these fish?" the harried penguin seemed to say with his beady black eyes once he finally arrived.

Paragraph 1: Describe what this paragraph is doing (not saying). For example: In this rather long paragraph, the author tells us an anecdote about her own life. It is funny and it introduces us to the topic. Now do this for every paragraph in the article

- This paragraph is opening a door, like an introduction about herself.

My younger daughter often proclaims that she will never get married, no matter what. And why should she want to? As much as I prefer to believe that her father and I are setting a shining example of affectionate, radically open communication, the reality is that she's had a lifelong, all-access pass to our own version of a penguin marriage: the tedious diplomacy of marital negotiations, the low-key squabbling, the mutual suspensions of disbelief, the subtle undermining, the ever-increasing co-dependence. After ten years of this graceless ballet, it's not surprising that all my daughter wants when she grows up is a tiny house, a subcompact car, and a mini Australian Shepherd.

P2: Describe what this paragraph is doing (not saying):

- This paragraph seems like the author's painting a picture of her daughter and the things listed are the pieces that go in that picture.

And honestly, there are days when the prospect of growing old next to a mini Aussie doesn't sound so bad when compared to the slowly unfolding garden of horrors inherent to aging in sync with another human. My incredibly handsome and charming husband, who is a tenured professor and looks a solid ten years younger than his numerical age, also has a quick temper, zero depth perception, and a palsy that makes his right hand shake whenever he passes me, say, a porcelain creamer filled to the brim with liquid nitrogen. Even though he and I might've engaged in countless frank and illuminative discussions of our flaws, even though we might've laughed several times about both his palsy and the remarkable ability of liquid nitrogen to cause a searing burn when it comes into contact with living tissue, that doesn't make the ensuing spillage and pain any less real. To be married is to have the words *This is all your fault* eternally poised on the tip of your tongue.

- This paragraph is using things to describe other things to act as if some things can go together.

Marriage can feel like a moral litmus test in this way: Your challenge is to maintain your composure as the staggering deficits of the highly ineffectual human by your side come into sharper and sharper focus. Somehow you have to keep your sense of humor (which studies suggest is crucial to a healthy marriage), minimize your contempt (a major predictor of marital dissatisfaction), and increase your joint take-home pay (currently the most accurate predictor of how long a marriage will last, according to some studies).

- This paragraph is using an adjective like "humor" to keep a marriage. She is also using wit and predictions to determine a marriage.

In an upgradable, consumer-driven, instant-gratification world where the experiences of shopping for high-end cell phones, high-end mates, and high-end sperm cells are hauntingly similar to each other, isn't it reasonable to question the value of a legal contract, written in ink, on paper, that involves disastrously punitive terms of dissolution? What kind of an old-fashioned mutant could crave such a primitive trap, particularly when it's paired with an enormously expensive ceremony that often includes allusions to obedience and lifelong mutual suffering and death, of all things? And why do we arbitrarily marry one person instead of, say, two or three or 15? Doesn't that place an inordinate amount of pressure on a single mate?

- This paragraph is comparing old times to modern times when it comes to a significant.

These days, there are limited economic advantages to marriage, a planet's worth of mates more easily perused and accessed now than ever before in human history, and a host of inconveniences to being married, along with untold drudgery, monotony, frustration, and regret. Add to that that 40 to 50 percent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce anyway. Considering all that, what could possibly be the point of this outdated charade?

- This paragraph has statistics to determine economic rates and divorce if the marriage doesn't work out.

My daughter's lack of interest in marriage is not exactly an anomaly: Forty-five percent of all Americans 18 and older are now single, and more than half of Americans surveyed said that getting married wasn't an important part of becoming an adult, according to a 2017 Census Bureau report. Moreover, research suggests that single people are more involved in their communities than married people are, exercise more, are generally healthier, and have more friends than married people do. Even the idea that married people live longer than single people do has been thrown into question: It turns out married men live longer than single men, but married women don't live as long as single women.

- This paragraph uses more statistics to prove that marriage is fine but people can be single if they don't want to marry.

(get to at least this point by Thursday, March 11. You will complete annotating the article by March 16)

Pro-marriage traditionalists and alt-right pundits love to argue that human marriages were much simpler and more harmonious in the good old days — by which they seem to mean 1950s-style single-breadwinner marriages — skimming over the tiny matters of widespread patriarchal enslavement, indentured servitude, domestic violence, the legality of marital rape, and the inability of American women to own property in their own name until at least 1839. But those gold-standard marriages actually represent a historical anomaly. As Stephanie Coontz asserts in her book *Marriage, a History*, for thousands of years, most women and children shared the tasks of breadwinning with men.

The notion that love should be the main reason to marry began to take hold only in the late-18th century, according to Coontz. Before then, as Northwestern psychology professor Eli Finkel points out in his study of the

history of marital satisfaction and success in America, marriage was mostly a matter of survival. Having a spouse helped you harvest the crops and produced more workers to do the same. If Pa brought home a deer and Ma fried up some griddle cakes real nice, and then Pa played the fiddle while Ma cleaned up, what you had right there was a healthy marriage. Pa didn't need to confront his inability to properly tune his fiddle or sing in key, let alone address his recurring tendency to step on the punch lines of Ma's jokes when entertaining company. If the dirt floor was swept and the corn was high, all was well.

Starting in the mid-1960s, Finkel asserts, married couples began to expect not just emotional sustenance and sexual satisfaction from each other but also a kind of mutual empowerment. He suggests that this at least partially explains why the divorce rate started to climb around then: High expectations turned good marriages into great marriages, while those uneasy, imperfect pairings began to feel hopelessly inadequate. Whereas marriage was once seen as a joint effort to achieve the good life, these days marriage looks more like a joint attempt to live your best lives — together and separately.

Which is ... a lot. It's hard enough just to live peacefully with someone by your side making noises, emitting smells, undoing what you've just done, interrupting, undercutting, begging to differ. Once you throw in Tinder, internet porn, and our scrolling, tl;dr attention spans, marriage seems not just antiquated but utterly absurd. So why do I love this torturous state of affairs so much? The daily companionship, the shared household costs, and the tax breaks are not enough. Maybe I'm the sort of weak bird who would rather wait for her very flawed mate to come home than go out preening and showboating just to wind up with another flawed mate in the end.

And yet there's something distinctly reassuring about breaking down, falling into disrepair, losing your charms, misplacing your keys, when you have an equally inept and irritating human tolerating it all, in spite of a million and one very good reasons to put on his walking boots and take his love to town. If marriage is irrational, in other words, as with child-rearing and ambition and art, that's also part of its appeal. Even when my husband and I go through a rough time, bickering more than usual over how many tantrums a 12-year-old should throw per day or how long a particularly fussy loaf of bread should be left to rise, after we've spent a few weeks staring at our phones at night instead of enjoying each other's company, I can always trust that we'll enter an equal and opposite period of humble satisfaction and connection. The other day, in the wake of such a market correction, we began our morning walk with the dogs (who are too neurotic to be walked by one person alone), and my

husband announced, “The first thing I thought when I woke up this morning was, *You don’t have what it takes. You never did and you never will.*” This made us both laugh loudly for a solid block.

Marriage can’t simply be about living your best lives in sync. Because some of the peak moments of a marriage are when you share in your anxieties, your fears, your longing, and even your horrors. That commitment, the one that can withstand and even revel in the darkest corridors of a life, grows and evolves and eventually transcends a contract or a ceremony the way an ocean overflows and subsumes a thimble of water.

My husband is a good person who makes great bread and has a perfect golf swing (not that I know or even care what that means). He also wears golf shirts, which are perhaps the least-attractive article of clothing available to humankind. I myself am a wise guru type of writer who knows everything about everything, which makes me about as appealing a mate as Jabba the Hutt, if Jabba talked to his dogs more than his children and blamed his hormones every time he fed someone new to the rancor. We are both catastrophically flawed.

But by unearthing our most discouraged moments together without turning away, by screeching at the moon side by side, admitting “This is all our fault,” we don’t just reaffirm our love, we reaffirm our shared and separate ability to face the unknown from this point forward. That’s why sickness and death are key to marriage vows. Because there is nothing more divine than being able to say, out loud, “Today, I am really, truly at my worst,” knowing that it won’t make your spouse run for the hills. My husband has seen my worst before. We both know that our worst is likely to get worse from here. Somehow that feels like grace.