

# 'But Why Are You Getting Married?'

By STEPHEN R. MORRIS

**W**hen I told my roommate that I was getting married, his reaction was, quite simply, stupefied disbelief. Reactions from other friends ran the gamut, from "Surely you jest!" to "You are insane!" My wife, Eden, encountered the same incredulity and ambivalence wherever she broke the news.

Apparently, we had hit a nerve.

It's not as if marriages in college are uncommon. Or, at least, unheard of. Indeed, we're told by parents that college once served uniquely—and almost indispensably—as conjugal catalyst, providing an ideal setting in which to test the ground of a prospective mating.

College still does provide that setting, and college students still marry each other. But judging by first reactions to my marital intentions, even if marriage is not unknown to students, it is yet something strange, and more than a little unsettling. It is strange, I think, because most students cannot—often until the very moment of assent to the proposal—even *imagine* themselves intending to marry; fewer still can think of any good reasons to. It is to many the ultimate irrational act. It is unsettling, as well, to people who harbor the suspicion that, irrationality notwithstanding, there's something right and whole about marriage. While violating the strong modern impulse of students to be independent, mobile and unencumbered, marriage holds an almost paradoxical appeal to their sense of tradition and continuity.

Students resolve this tension by envisioning marriage as an alternative firmly situated in the abstract future. In the meantime, when a fellow student is seen actually taking the fateful leap in the all-too-proximate present, the question is inevitably raised, "But why are you getting married?" The implication is that today marriage is just unnecessary (and perhaps, in view of its unsettling effects, unnecessarily provocative). You can "live together" (in sin, as it used to be so quaintly put) pretty much free of social censure and even, more often than not, of parental disapproval. Living together, it is thought, is an ideal arrangement. It's sensible and prudent—it can't end in divorce. More than that, it affords all the benefits of marriage—the shared dailiness that becomes the foundation of all mature love—with none of its drawbacks; it's not drastic and final.

**Limited options:** Marriage is drastic and final, or so it appears. To a student worrying about job prospects, it is anathema. It limits options and only complicates a postgraduate picture that is already complex enough. It can wait.

Of course, a desire to marry someone has a way of circumventing even the most elaborate barriers of resolve against the idea of marrying. Another of reality's devastating assaults on the abstractions by which we try to make sense of our lives.

Perhaps, in the course of a blooming romance or a solid and fulfilling relationship, a notion crosses the mutual minds of a couple that "this is it." What's an aspiring young career-bound college student to do if that moment suddenly comes?

Well, realize first that a desire to marry is not a desire to live together. Thus, is it just an irrational aberration—one of those desires that it is better to let pass (or, if necessary, to resist by all means available)? Maybe not, and most students realize this. There's a lurking suspicion that marriage is right—in some way most of us aren't willing, or able, to acknowledge.

**Discipline of love:** Not right for everyone, of course; but right for those who are inclined to think it's right for them. For such people marriage is more than the encumbrance, liability and restraining force that it unquestionably is. For such people marriage is what daily training is to the casual weekend jogger: the opportunity to develop and cultivate potential. Marriage, for those who would undertake it, fully aware of what they are undertaking, is the discipline of love (as art might be said to be the discipline of imagination).

"For a couple," writes American essayist and poet Wendell Berry, "marriage is an entrance into a timeless community." These are heady words. But there is a truth expressed in them. A marriage well practiced is timeless in the way that any excellence is. Well practiced, it replicates a form of human coexistence that is replicated in countless other human contexts.

That so many marriages fail, in so many ways, is not a special symptom of our society's moral degeneration. Marriages have always failed—though these failings have not always been registered so commonly as divorces, and they still are not always so registered today. Failure comes in part because marriage is a hard discipline and a demanding form. As in poetry, or scholarship, or athletics, marital excellence is

achieved only in the course of time and only by dint of hard work—work that may not always be worth investing.

It is this challenge and the real formal beauty of a well-practiced marriage that are the sources both of marriage's unsettling appeal to students and of their resistance to the idea of marrying. Excellence is appealing, but the idea of committing so much time to the pursuit of excellence, which might end in failure, is intimidating, at least. Think, after all, how disconsolate is the athlete who has trained four long years, yet who fails to win a place on the Olympic team. Was it worth all the pain?

I don't know the answer to that question. My marriage and life are young still. Following the hunch that "this is right" on to a full-bodied commitment to married life is taking a chance. Is it right to take chances? It seems to me that this is part of what it means to be alive. In matters of the heart, and in pursuit of the excellence of old forms, I think we have no choice.

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